

"TOMMYROTICS."

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A most excellent wag—quoted with approval by the grave and sedate 'Spectator'—recently described modern fiction as "erotic, neurotic, and Tommyrotic." Judging from certain signs of the times, he might have extended his description to the mental condition in our day of a considerable section of civilised mankind. Our restless, dissatisfied, sadly muddled, much-inquiring generation seems to be smitten with a new malady, which so far bids fair to baffle the doctors. Society, in the limited sense of the word, still dreads the influenza and shudders at the approach of typhoid, but its most dangerous and subtle foes are beyond question "neurotics" and hysteria in their manifold forms.

A wave of unrest is passing over the world. Humanity is beginning to sicken at the daily round, the common task, of ordinary humdrum existence, and is eagerly seeking for new forms of excitement. Hence it is kicking over the traces all round. Revolt is the order of the day. The shadow of an immeasurable, and by no means divine, discontent broods over us all. Everybody is talking and preaching: one is distressed because he cannot solve the riddle of the universe, the why and the wherefore of human existence; another racks his brains to invent brand-new social or political systems which shall make everybody rich, happy, and contented at a bound. It is an age of individual and collective—perhaps I should say, collectivist—fuss, and the last thing that anybody thinks of is settling down to do the work that lies nearest to him. Carlyle is out of fashion, for Israel has taken to

stoning her older prophets who exhorted to duty, submission, and suchlike antiquated virtues, and the social anarchist and the New Hedonist bid fair to take their place as teachers of mankind.

It is thought by many that the hour brings forth the man; and just as the world seems most in need of him, a new prophet has arisen to point out some of the dangers which lie in the path of modern civilisation. Like most prophets, he raves somewhat incoherently at times and is guilty of much exaggeration, but this is a fault common to nearly all men with a mission. And, when every allowance has been made on this score, we should still be grateful to Dr Max Nordau for his striking and powerful work, 'Degeneration.' The book has been violently assailed, and portions of it lend themselves readily to hostile criticism. It is certainly not a book *virginibus puerisque*, and it is exceedingly learned and long; but the wealth of epigram, the fecundity of illustration, and the brilliant incisiveness of its style, make it far from heavy reading. A perusal thereof forces one to "devour much abomination," as the Arabs say; but unsavoury topics are at any rate not handled sympathetically, as by decadent essayists and "yellow" lady novelists, but rather in the spirit of fierce hatred and horror which characterise a Juvenal.

And the sum of his matter is this—that ours may be an age of progress, but it is progress which, if left unchecked, will land us in the hospital or the lunatic asylum. Neurasthenia and brain-exhaustion are driving the upper classes

among mankind post-haste to Colney Hatch. The causes of our mental disease are the wear-and-tear and excitement of modern life, and its symptoms are to be found in the debased emotionalism apparent in so many of the leading writers and thinkers of our day, who, together with their numerous followers and admirers, are victims of a form of mania whereof the scientific name is "degeneration." Now all this is very sad, and happily only partially true, else the world were indeed in a bad way. If it be the fact that we are in the Dusk of the Nations, that the *Zeitgeist* is poisoned, and that the upper stratum of society in large towns is a sort of hospital of actual or potential epileptics, then are we all doubly and trebly cursed. The pity of it is that Dr Nordau should partially spoil an excellent case by such palpable overstatement. Indeed, an opponent might fairly retort that our learned Teuton's exaggeration and his overstrained pessimism are just as much evidence of a disordered intellect as are the eccentricities of the authors he condemns. Nevertheless, in spite of these faults and certain others of tone and temper, his book remains a memorable protest against the foulness and hysteria which deface modern literature, and the waywardness and maudlin sensibility which impair the intellectual "movement" of the latter half of the century.

I do not propose to follow Dr Nordau in his searching analysis of Continental authors belonging to the decadent or "degenerate" schools. Anybody desiring to acquaint himself with the morbid abominations with which they abound will have his curiosity abundantly satisfied in the pages of 'Degeneration.' He will find there eloquent expression given to

the feeling of loathing, usually inarticulate, with which their works inspire healthy-minded people—a feeling that is aroused less, as a rule, by their immorality than by their unnaturalness, morbidity, and general unwholesomeness. And our pale English imitations of Continental decadentism are almost as objectionable as their originals. They are less highly seasoned, no doubt, because the authors (or their publishers) have still some fear of Mrs Grundy before their eyes, while it is easy to see that they would say a great deal more than they do if they only dared. On the other hand, they display less talent, and they lack the saving merit of originality. Both their style and their matter are borrowed—so much so that our late apostle of æstheticism is said to have earned the admiration of a brother *précieux* because he had "the courage of other people's opinions." Decadentism is an exotic growth unsuited to British soil, and it may be hoped that it will never take permanent root here. Still, the popularity of debased and morbid literature, especially among women, is not an agreeable or healthy feature. It may be that it is only a passing fancy, a cloud on our social horizon that will soon blow over; but the enormous sale of hysterical and disgusting books is a sign of the times which ought not to be ignored.

Continental influence upon our literature is more apparent now than for many years past. The predilection for the foul and repulsive, the puling emotionalism, and the sickly sensuousness of the French decadents, are also the leading characteristics of the nascent English schools. The former, to take a single example, are the direct intellectual progenitors of

our æsthetes, whose doctrines Dr Nordau examines at quite unnecessary length. He takes far too seriously their intellectual clowning, their laboured absurdities and inane paradoxes which the vulgar mistake for wit, as well as the assiduous literary and artistic mountebankery with which they have advertised themselves into notoriety. For a while sensible and healthy-minded people regarded with half-amused contempt their antics, and their absurd claim to form a species of artistic aristocracy apart from the common herd, but the contempt has since deepened into disgust. Recent events, which shall be nameless, must surely have opened the eyes even of those who have hitherto been blind to the true inwardness of modern æsthetic Hellenism, and perhaps the less said on this subject now the better.

A somewhat similar, and scarcely less unlovely, offspring of hysteria and foreign "degenerate" influence is the neurotic and repulsive fiction which so justly incensed the "Philistine" in the 'Westminster Gazette.' Its hysterical origin shows itself chiefly in its morbid spirit of analysis. Judging from their works, the authors must be vivified notes of interrogation. Their characters are so dreadfully introspective. When they are not talking of psychology, they are discussing physiology. They search for new thrills and sensations, and they possess a maddening faculty of dissecting and probing their "primary impulses"—especially the sexual ones. Being convinced, like the ancient sage, that "there is nothing so dreadful in its nakedness as the heart of man," they endeavour to explore its innermost recesses. They are oppressed with a dismal sense that everything is an enigma, that they themselves

are "playthings of the inexplicable"; or else they try to "compass the whole physiological gamut of their being"—whatever that may be. I am quoting from Miss George Egerton's 'Discords,' a fair type of English neurotic fiction, which some critics are trying to make us believe is very high-class literature. I must confess that I find the characters in these books more agreeable when they are indulging in nebulous cackle like the above than when they are describing their sexual emotions. The cackle means nothing, and at any rate serves—as Balzac said of his unintelligible sentence—"mystifier le bourgeois."

It is noticeable that most of these profound psychological creations belong to that sex in which, according to Mrs Sarah Grand, "the true spirit of God dwells," and which, we are assured by another authority, "constitutes the angelic portion of humanity." "To be a woman is to be mad," says the notorious and neurotic Mrs Ebbsmith. Possibly, but the woman of the new Ibsenite neuropathic school is not only mad herself, but she does her best to drive those around her crazed also. As far as the husband is concerned, he is seldom deserving of much sympathy. In morbid novels and problem plays he is usually an imbecile, a bully, or a libertine. An even worse charge has recently been preferred against him: he is apt to snore horribly, thereby inducing insomnia—a disease to which our neuropaths are naturally subject. Indeed, the horrors of matrimony from the feminine point of view are so much insisted upon nowadays, and the Husband-Fiend is trotted out so often both in fiction and in drama, that one wonders how the demon manages still to command a premium in

the marriage market. "What brutes men are!" is the never-ceasing burden of the new woman's song, yet the "choked up, seething pit" of matrimony (*vide* the 'Notorious Mrs Ebb-smith') is still tolerably full. The latest phase in the discussion of the eternal sex-problem, or marriage question, is a cry of revolt recently sounded in an American magazine by Lady Henry Somerset concerning "the unwelcome child." I do not propose to trench on this very delicate subject further than to mention that a very new woman, a German unit of the angelic portion of humanity, has suggested a highly effective method of dealing with the intrusive little stranger—chloroform. Let us hope, however, that this lady is somewhat in advance even of the "intellectual movement" of the end of the nineteenth century.

The physiological excursions of our writers of neuropathic fiction are usually confined to one field—that of sex. Their chief delight seems to be in making their characters discuss matters which would not have been tolerated in the novels of a decade or so ago. Emancipated woman in particular loves to show her independence by dealing freely with the relations of the sexes. Hence all the prating of passion, animalism, "the natural workings of sex," and so forth, with which we are nauseated. Most of the characters in these books seem to be erotomaniacs. Some are "amorous sensitives"; others are apparently sexless, and are at pains to explain this to the reader. Here and there a girl indulges in what would be styled, in another sphere, "straight talks to young men." Those nice heroines of "Iota's" and other writers

of the physiologico-pornographic school consort by choice with "unfortunates," or else describe at length their sensations in various interesting phases of their lives. The charming Gallia, in the novel of that name, studies letters on the State Regulation of Vice, and selects her husband on principles which are decidedly startling to the old-fashioned reader. Now this sort of thing may be very high art and wonderful psychology to some people, but to me it is garbage pure and simple, and such dull garbage too. If anybody objects that I have picked out some of the extreme cases, I reply that these are just the books that sell. That morbid and nasty books are written is nothing: their popularity is what is disquieting. I have no wish to pose as a moralist. A book may be shameless and disgusting without being precisely immoral—like the fetid realism of Zola and Mr George Moore—and the novels I allude to are at any rate thoroughly unhealthy. I would much rather see a boy or girl reading 'Tom Jones' or 'Roderick Random' than some of our "modern" works of fiction. Their authors, who write as a rule under a sense of moral compulsion, as martyrs, so to speak, to up-to-date indecency, seem to be following the principles laid down by Tennyson in the lines:—

"Author, atheist, essayist, novelist,
realist, rhymester, play your part;
Paint the mortal shame of Nature with
the living hues of art.
Rip your brother's vices open; strip
your own foul passions bare;
Down with reticence, down with rever-
ence—forward, naked, let them
stare.
Feed the budding rose of boyhood with
the drainage of your sewer;

Send the drain into the fountain, lest
the stream should issue pure.
Set the maiden fancies wallowing in
the troughs of Zolaism—
Forward, forward, aye to backward,
downward too into Abyssm."

If this be an accurate description of contemporary literature when "Locksley Hall—Sixty Years After" was written, one shudders to think what it will be like a few years hence! Perhaps, however, the tide will have turned by then, and the British public will be in the middle of one of those periodical fits of morality which Macaulay found so supremely ridiculous. They may be so, but at any rate John Bull the moralist is a less incongruous figure than John Bull masquerading, as of late years, in anarchical rags tricked out with the peacock feathers of æsthetic culture.

Some critics are fond of complaining of the lack of humour in the "new" fiction. But what in heaven's name do they expect? In this age of sciolism, or half-knowledge, of smattering and chattering, we are too much occupied in improving our minds to be mirthful. In particular the *New Woman*, or "the desexualised half-man," as a character in 'Discords' unkindly calls her, is a victim of the universal passion for learning and "culture," which, when ill-digested, are apt to cause intellectual dyspepsia. With her head full of all the 'ologies and 'isms, with sex-problems and heredity, and other gleanings from the surgery and the lecture-room, there is no space left for humour, and her novels are for the most part merely pamphlets, sermons, or treatises in disguise. The lady novelist of to-day resembles the "literary bicyclist" so delightfully satirised

by the late Lord Justice Bowen. She covers a vast extent of ground, and sometimes her machine takes her along some sadly muddy roads, where her petticoats—or her knickerbockers—are apt to get soiled. As Lord Justice Bowen puts it, "cheap thought, like cheap claret, can be produced on an extensive scale. Instruction grows apace; knowledge comes, as the poet says, but wisdom lingers; intellectual modesty and reserve, the sense of proportion and wholesome mental habits of discrimination, all have yet to be acquired."

The pathological novel is beyond question a symptom of the mental disease from which civilised mankind is suffering. And if the nerves of humanity at large were in the same state as those of the characters in erotomaniac fiction, ours would be a decaying race indeed. These "subtle confidences of the neuropath" are all thoroughly morbid, and remind one of a decadent writer's¹ description of the language of the falling Roman empire, "already mottled with the greenness of decomposition, and, as it were, gamy (*faisandée*)" with incipient decay. And if the idioms a nation uses are in any sense an indication of its state of mental health, surely some of our modern jargon gives us occasion for anxiety. As far as our decadent lady novelists are concerned, we may console ourselves with the reflection that there is one failing which they certainly do not share with their foreign originals—over-refinement of style. Whatever else may be said of them, they are, as a rule, robustly ungrammatical.

Along with its diseased imaginings—its passion for the abnormal, the morbid, and the unnatural—the anarchical spirit

¹ Frau von Troll-Borostyani. See the 'Quarterly Review' for October 1894.

¹ Théophile Gautier, quoted in 'Degeneration,' p. 299.

broods over all literature of the decadent and "revolting" type. It is rebellion all along the line. Everybody is to be a law unto himself. The restraints and conventions which civilised mankind have set over their appetites are absurd, and should be dispensed with. Art and morality have nothing to do with one another (twaddle borrowed from the French Parnassians¹); there is nothing clean but the unclean; wickedness is a myth, and morbid impressionability is the one cardinal virtue. Following their French masters, our English "degenerates" are victims of what Dr Nordau calls ego-mania. They are cultivators of the "I"—moral and social rebels, like Ibsen, whose popularity rests far less on his merits as a writer than on the new evangel of revolt which he preaches, or like Ola Hansson, whose aim is to go one better than Ibsen.² By the way, the "triumphant doctrine of the ego," which Miss-George Egerton finds so comforting, appears to be the theory of a German imbecile who, after several temporary detentions, was permanently confined in a lunatic asylum. His writings being thoroughly hysterical and abnormal, he naturally had a crowd of foolish disciples who considered him a very great philosopher. Indeed, 'Degeneration' is worth reading if only to learn of what very inferior clay are fashioned the idols whom modern "culture" worships. Some of them are mentally diseased beyond question; others

rhapsodise over, or have even been convicted of, abominable crimes, while their writings are often crazy and disgusting beyond belief. "The only reality is the 'I,'" cries one of them, "a poor shattered ego-maniac," and his English imitators echo him by proclaiming the development of one's personality to be the sole rational aim of life. "I am responsible before but one tribunal, which is myself," cried the Parisian dynamiter Henry, and this is the keynote of all modern egotism.

According to most canons of philosophy, the ego should be the first to acknowledge his own utter unimportance in the scheme of the universe. In practice this is the last thing he will do. He is forever seeking his exact place among the infinities, asserting his claims to attention, and bemoaning how badly he is used. Miserable himself, the ego-maniac tries to infect others with his misery. The world is not good enough for him. His Paradise is Ola Hansson's enchanted isle, where "former virtues hobbled on crutches, as senile oldings at the point of death, whilst sins stood in full flower; whose fruits provided me with a fare of rare sweetness." Can it be, as this choice fragment seems to show, that our hyperborean egoist has been drinking at the well of British æstheticism?

It would appear, then, that we are approaching an era of what somebody has called "holy, awful, individual freedom." Life is henceforth to be ordered on the go-

as-you-please principle. Novelists and essayists denounce the "disgusting slavery" of wedlock, and minor poets may be heard twittering about free-love and the blessedness of "group-marrriages." "Why," asks Mr Esmé Amaranth in the 'Green Carnation,' "are minor poets so artless, and why do they fancy they are so wicked?" And Mr Le Gallienne, one of our best minor poets, who began his literary career as an apologist for Christian doctrine—desirous, apparently, of showing the world that he is not quite such a good young man as it thought—has recently declared himself in favour of the free-lovers. His friend, Mr Grant Allen, as every modern schoolboy knows, is ranged on the same side. This accomplished gentleman, now that the star of æstheticism is fading, certainly deserves to be recognised as the leading luminary of English cultured anarchism. He is also the inventor of the phrase "New Hedonism." Where the newness comes in, by the way, I have never been able to see. That the realisation of oneself through pleasure ought to be the chief aim of life, was said by the Greeks more than two thousand years ago. Of late years the doctrine has been consistently preached and practised by our late prophet of the æsthetes, who are beyond question the real modern representatives of Hedonism. Nevertheless, Mr Grant Allen is of opinion that "the New Hedonist should take high ground and speak with authority." He should uphold "the moral dignity of his creed" against the "low ideals of narrow and vulgar morality." And his creed is, of course, the old anarchical one which teaches that asceticism and self-sacrifice are not only a bore, but positively disgusting. The one

duty of the ego is to itself, and its mission on this sinful earth is to enjoy itself to its utmost capacity. Let us, then, follow Mr Grant Allen and the erotomaniac authors, and take our appetites for sign-posts, and follow where the passions lead. If they land mankind, as they have in the past, in moral abysses and abnormalities that cannot be named, what matter if only we find our pleasure? Let us cease to worship the beauty of holiness, and glorify the sexual instinct in its stead. "Everything high and ennobling in our nature," says Mr Grant Allen, "springs from the sexual instinct." "Its subtle aroma pervades all literature." It does, indeed, and a very unpleasant aroma it is becoming. Let us, therefore, make love as soon and as often as possible, for did not Catullus and Sappho, among others of the ancients, and in these degenerate days good grey Walt Whitman (so Mr Allen styles that obscene old American twaddler), glorify the gentle passion? "Religion," he says, "is the shadow of which culture is the substance," Christianity in particular being "a religion of Oriental fanatics"; and, like his masters the æsthetes, he bids us look to Hellas for our ideals.

Concerning marriage, Mr Allen considers the desire of a man to keep to himself a wife whose affection has cooled "the vilest, the deepest-seated, the most barbaric" of all the hateful monopolist instincts. "She is not yours: she is her own. Unhand her!" he melodramatically exclaims. *La propriété c'est le vol*, and in the good times that are coming no doubt we shall have a community of all things—free land, free love, free spoons and forks, free everything. The sacredness of the mar-

¹ 'Degeneration,' p. 274.

² 'Young Ofeg's Ditties,' translated by George Egerton. I have just been reading these "beautiful prose poems," as Miss Egerton calls them, together with Mr Punch's excellent skit thereon, and I am not sure whether the original or the travesty is the more absurd. The author's confused and idiotic babblings mark him out as a worthy disciple and expositor of the mad Nietzsche, whose works Dr Nordau analyses at length. If this is to be the literature of the future, heaven help poor humanity!

riage-tie is apparently mere old-fashioned Tory twaddle in the eyes of our *révoltés*, and the grasping dotard of a husband who fondly and selfishly hopes to retain the "monopoly" of the wife of his bosom must learn sounder, because newer, doctrine. Our wives henceforth are to be the partners, of our joys possibly, but of our sorrows only if they so desire it. The lady will take her husband, like her sewing-machine, on approval or on the three-years-hire system. If he turns out vicious or a bore—or perhaps if he snores unduly—like Ibsen's Nora, she will bang the door and develop her personality apart. "No Mrs Robinson will be the wife of a single Robinson," and group-marriages will take the place of the present "lifelong Siamese twinning." By the way, I never can find any provision made for the case of a virtuous husband who finds himself saddled with a bad wife; but then in "revolting" literature there are no such things as virtuous husbands or bad wives.

Here we have the social *vox Tommyrotica* pitched in its loudest key, and sensible people will not be greatly moved by the din. Least of all need it vex the soul of the unregenerate male, for, if the new Ibsenite anarchism is to prevail, not he, but women and children, will assuredly be the losers. Fortunately the influence of Messrs Grant Allen and Le Gallienne is not proportioned to the extravagance of their views. Of the latter, if he perseveres in his present courses, it may safely be predicted that "unstable as water, he shall not excel"; while his friend and mentor bids fair to emulate Ephraim by abiding "a wild ass alone by himself" in the arid desert of the New Hedonism.

Already, if I mistake not, there

are signs of a reaction in the public mind in favour of moderate views. People are growing sick of æsthetic Hellenism, Hedonism, and such-like "gracious and Greek" revivals, which, along with other similarly precious gifts, we have received from the French decadents. Ordinary men and women do not express themselves freely on these topics, but, like the parrot, they think a deal, and their notions are likely to prevail in the end. And they have others besides old fogies and out-of-date Tories on their side. Mr Labouchere is not the possessor of a Nonconformist conscience, yet 'Truth' gleefully proclaims the doom of morbid literature. The 'Speaker,' a sober Radical weekly, denounces the "new" prophets and all that pertains to them in language which I, for one, should not venture to use. "For many years past," it says, "Mr Wilde has been the real leader in this country of the 'new school' in literature—the revolutionary and anarchical school which has forced itself into such prominence in every domain of art." The new criticism, the new fiction, even the new woman, "are all merely creatures of Oscar Wilde's." He is "the father of the whole flock." Surely this is rather strong, the truth being, as I have shown, that they are all the offspring together of hysteria and Continental decadentism. Nevertheless, the influence of the æsthetic school has been undeniably great during the last decade, and the fact affords much food for melancholy reflection.

What we lack nowadays is a school of sound, fearless, and vigorous criticism. The public, who in things literary and artistic largely resemble a flock of sheep, know not where to look for guidance. "The hungry sheep look

up, and are not fed"—unless it be with the shrill piping of rival log-rollers. Scribblers and poetasters strut and peacock across the literary stage, and each one tells the other what a fine fellow he is. Brown, who is himself a writer of verse, thinks that Robinson's poetry unites the majesty of Milton, the myriad-mindedness of Shakespeare, the music and idealism of Shelley—all within the covers of a single diminutive volume. Are these critics victims of "megalomania," or are they simply engaging in the good old-fashioned business of "scratching each other's backs"? There is nothing new or remarkable in extravagant or wrong-headed laudation. Not one among the unclean brood of Continental decadents but has his clique of idiotic or debased admirers, who extol his works to the skies. When, however, sober, high-class English reviews take to praising such a book as the 'Yellow Aster,' where the subject-matter is objectionable, and the style is an affront to our poor, ill-used mother tongue, one begins to despair of the future of criticism. Of course the pay is necessarily small, and the work to be got through is so enormous that it cannot all be done thoroughly; but if critics would only indulge now and then in a little plain speaking, it would be something gained. There are always a few who have the courage to say that a book is disgusting or unwholesome, but the majority seem to prefer to swim with the stream, fearing the imputation of out-of-date foggyism. Personally, I have no wish to be thought "modern." I am quite content with commonplace and old-fashioned notions on these subjects, but the temptation to appear in advance of the time is always strong in some natures.

Especially is this so in dealing with social and political questions, where the enervating influence of hysteria and hypersensitiveness is hardly less apparent than in literature. They express themselves in flabby sentiment and an unreasoning passion of pity, and they furnish us with the bulk of our political faddists, cranks, and nostrum-mongers. I sometimes wish that Dr Nordau would extend his method of investigation to some of our latter-day revolutionaries, founders of Utopias, and builders of socialistic castles in the air. It might furnish us with some interesting reading. The connection between revolutionary principles in ethics and politics is obvious. The æsthetic sensualist and the communist are, in a sense, nearly related. Both have a common hatred of and contempt for whatever is established or held sacred by the majority, and both have a common parentage in exaggerated emotionalism. Everybody knows that among the Jacobins of the French Revolution filthiness of life, ferocity, and maudlin compassion went hand in hand. In these days the unbridled licentiousness of your literary decadent has its counterpart in the violence of the political anarchist. Each is the *alter ego*-maniac of the other. The one works with the quill, the other with the bomb; and the quill is the more dangerous weapon of the two. Continental degenerates rave as impotently against the social order under which we live as against those moral restraints which distinguish man from the brute beasts. To take a single instance, M. Paul Verlaine, most "precious" and puling of French decadents, is a fervent admirer of Louise Michel. English examples are afforded us by Mr Le Gallienne,

the apostle of free-love, and Mr Grant Allen the Hedonist, who both figure as contributors to 'Vox Clamantium,' the latest up-lifting of the political *vox Tommyrotica* in this country, where Rousseauism is raising its head and Utopian visions are once more being regarded as capable of realisation.

Hysteria, whether in politics or art, has the same inevitable effect of sapping manliness and making people flabby. To the aesthete and decadent, who worship inaction, all strenuousness is naturally repugnant. The sturdy Radical of former years, whose ideal was independence and a disdain of Governmental petting, is being superseded by the political "degenerate," who preaches the doctrine that all men are equal, when experience proves precisely the opposite, and dislikes the notion of the best man winning in the struggle to live. Individual effort is to be discouraged, while the weak and worthless are to be pampered at the expense of the capable and industrious. State aid is to dispense with the necessity of thrift and self-reliance, for men will be saved from the natural consequences of their own acts. Hence it is that your anarchist or communist is usually an ineffective person who, finding himself worsted in the battle of life, would plunge society into chaos in the hope of bettering himself. Already in this country, where altruism has become a hobby, an amusement, or a profession, much mischief is done even with the best intentions. To take the opinion of an expert, Mr C. S. Loch, "the wave of sentiment that has dominated the country during the last few years marks its line of advance in an increasing pauperism." A flaccid philanthropy may be more disastrous

in its consequences than the most brutal policy of *laissez-faire*.

Opinions will always differ as to the proper relative influence upon human conduct of the reason and emotions, but surely the latter are now usurping more than their fair share of authority. Everybody, be he old Tory or new democrat, is genuinely sorry for the poor and the suffering, only they differ as to the best means of improving their lot. And it seems to me that our judgment is weakened, and the clearness of our perceptions dimmed, by the tearful apostrophes and never-ceasing appeals to the emotions, especially the emotion of pity. In the twilight of the new learning men see but dimly the ultimate consequences of measures which may temporarily alleviate suffering. Strange political monstrosities pass muster as the fruit of wisdom, for in purely democratic communities the authority of the wind-bag is apt for a while to be supreme. We can only trust that, if Demos is capable of being really educated, sane counsels will prevail when instruction is deepened as well as widened.

Is it the fact that, as many believe, we have fallen on a temporarily sterile time, an age of "mental anemia" and intellectual exhaustion? The world seems growing weary after the mighty work it has accomplished during this most marvellous of centuries. Perhaps the great Titan, finding his back bending under the too vast orb of his fate, would fain lie down and sleep a while. Be that as it may, in politics we seem to be losing faith in ourselves, and leaning more and more on the State for aid. In literature the effects of brain-exhaustion are certainly apparent. A generation that nourished its early youth on

Shakespeare and Scott seems likely to solace its declining years with Ibsen and Sarah Grand, and an epidemic of suicide is to be feared as the result! In no previous age has such a torrent of crazy and offensive drivel been poured forth over Europe—drivel which is not only written, but widely read and admired, and which the new woman and her male coadjutors are now trying to popularise in England. We may hope, however, that the present reaction will only be temporary, and that humanity will recover itself before it is ripe for Dr Nordau's hospital or lunatic asylum. If the world is going backward now, it is only *reculer pour mieux sauter*. For the moment, if it knew the things that pertain to its peace, it would cease to fume and fret; it would seek to calm, instead of further exciting, its agitated nerve-centres, and to regain, if possible, some measure of its lost repose.

To sum up, Dr Nordau has admirably diagnosed the prevailing disease, but he has monstrously exaggerated its universality. The *Zeitgeist* may be poisoned, but not to any great extent, and the *Zeitgeist* can be trusted to find its own antidote before long. In this country, at any rate, amid much flabbiness and effeminacy, there is plenty of good sense and manliness left, and I never can see the evidence of the moral or material degeneration (in the ordinary sense of the word) of the mass of the population. Luxury may be increasing, but athleticism redresses the balance, and if our young barbarians are all at play, why, so much the better. In artistic and ethical matters most people are still what Mr Grant Allen contemptuously calls "average Philistines"—and long may they remain so. In other words, they adhere

to the old-fashioned ideas of social order and decency. At the same time, our age, like every other, has its ugly features and its special dangers that threaten it. I know that each generation is apt to think that its own vices and crazes are peculiar to itself. We forget that there were literary fops in the days of Molière, and that fashionable fops, snobs, and money-grubbers there have always been and always will be. Nasty plays and books are nothing new, and the faults and follies of to-day are pretty much those that Juvenal satirised. All this is perfectly true, yet I cannot help thinking that Dr Nordau's charge of "degeneration" (in the specialist's sense) as a malady peculiar to our time is justified by the facts. Never was there an age that worked so hard or lived at such high pressure, and it would be strange indeed if the strain upon our nerves were not beginning to tell. In fact, excessive nervous sensibility is regarded by some as a thing to be admired and cultivated. It is a bad sign when people grow proud of their diseases, especially if the disease is one which, if left unchecked, will poison the springs of national life. That there is a moral cancer in our midst is not to be denied, and that it has its roots deep down in morbid hysteria seems equally clear. That such morbidity is directly fed and fostered by the "new" art and the "new" literature—themselves symptoms of the disease—is a (to me) self-evident proposition. So far our fiction is only "gamy": let us see to it that we do not acquire a taste for the carrion of the French literary vulture.

It is time that a stand were made by sane and healthy-minded people against the "gilded and perfumed putrescence" which is creeping

over every branch of art. Concerning fiction enough has been said, but what of the problem play with its medley of social faddists, sots, harlots, and crazy neuropaths who discuss the "workings of sex," or, more unpleasant still, the gospel of sexlessness as preached by Tolstoi and his disciples? No doubt the bulk of the manhood and womanhood of this country are sound enough, but it has been well said that "nations perish from the top downwards." And if the leaders of the intellectual movement of the day, as it expresses itself in contemporary art—those who mould the thoughts and shape the tendencies of future generations—if these are in a sense mentally diseased, is not the whole body politic likely to be soon infected? The remedy is a very simple one, if people would only enforce it. The so-called Philistines are still the large majority of the population, and if only these would resolutely boycott morbid and nasty books and plays, they would soon be swept, for a time at least, into the limbo of extinct crazes. The matter rests largely in the hands of women. I do not wish to say anything unfair, but I think it cannot be denied that women are chiefly responsible for the "booming" of books that are "close to life"—life, that is to say, as viewed through sex-maniacal glasses. They are greater novel-readers than men, to begin with, and their curiosity is piqued by the subjects dealt with in the new fiction and drama, and not a few of them regard the authors as champions of their rights. In all matters relating to decency and good taste men gladly acknowledge the supremacy of women, and we may surely ask them to give us a lead in discouraging books which are a degradation

of English literature. Frankly, isn't the whole thing getting slightly ridiculous as well as sickening?

If public opinion should prove powerless to check the growing nuisance, all the poor Philistine can do is to stop his ears and hold his nose until perhaps finally the policeman is called in to his aid. It is always well to dispense with that useful functionary as far as possible, but, if matters go on at the present rate, it may soon become a question whether his services will not again be required. They have proved highly effectual before now, and an occasional prosecution has an amazing moral effect upon the weak-kneed. Above all, it is to be hoped that that much-abused but most necessary official, the Licensor of Plays, will harden his heart and do his duty undeterred by the ridicule heaped upon him by interested persons. Ours is a free country, no doubt, but the claim for liberty to disseminate morbid abomination among the public ought not to be entertained for a moment.

Much of the modern spirit of revolt has its origin in the craving for novelty and notoriety that is such a prominent feature of our day. A contempt for conventionalities and a feverish desire to be abreast of the times may be reckoned among the first-fruits of decadentism. Its subtle and all-pervading influence is observable nowadays in the affectations and semi-indecency of fashionable conversation. The social atmosphere is becoming slightly *faisandée*, as Gautier has it. Effeminacy and artificiality of manner are so common that they have almost ceased to appear ridiculous. Table-talk is garnished with the choice flowers of new woman's speech or the jargon of our shoddy end-of-the-

century Renaissance. In certain sections of society it requires some courage to be merely straightforward and natural. Personally, I esteem it rather a distinction to be commonplace. Affectation is not a mark of wit, nor does the preaching of a novel theory or crack-brained social fad argue the possession of a great intellect. Whence, then, sprang the foolish fear of being natural, the craving to attitudinise in everything? The answer is plain. It was Oscar Wilde who infected us with our dread of the conventional, with the silly straining after originality characteristic of a society that desires above all things to be thought intellectually smart. "To be natural is to be obvious, and to be obvious is to be inartistic;" and the buffoonery of a worldly-wise and cynical charlatan was accepted by many as inspired

gospel truth. Truly, they be strange gods before whom modern culture bows down! But let the Philistine take heart of grace. He is not alone in his fight for common-sense and common decency. That large number of really cultivated people whose instincts are still sound and healthy, who disbelieve in "moral autonomy," but cling to the old ideals of discipline and duty, of manliness and self-reliance in men, and womanliness in women; who sicken at Ibsenism and the problem play, at the putrid eroticism of a literature that is at once hysterical and foul; who, despising the apes and mountebanks of the new culture, refuse to believe that to be "modern" and up-to-date is to have attained to the acme of enlightenment,—all these will be on his side.

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