

A man who has done such good work as the German Hebrew, Max Nordau, in his volumes, "Conventional Lies" and "Paradoxes," is perhaps entitled to more serious consideration than has been accorded him by certain critics who have lost all patience with the glaring inconsistencies, the intemperance and the abusiveness which are too often present in his latest work. But it must be admitted that the fatal defects of "Degeneration" as a volume of criticism, no less than the lofty assumption of monopoly of wisdom on the part of Nordau, are well calculated to provoke the criticism which has been meted out to him on all hands. While I have always deplored the mediæval ideas which this writer has advanced in regard to woman and his total lack of sympathy with much that I regard as most vital in the new thought of our day in his earlier works, I had so admired his brave, strong and vigorous unmasking of conventional hypocrisy, that it was with the most painful disappointment that I finished a perusal of his last and most pretentious volume; because this book, while possessing the vigor, and, at times, the brilliancy and lucidity of expression which are characteristic of "Conventional Lies," impresses me as lacking every element which must distinguish any work of literary criticism that in the nature of the case can possess real value.

A critical treatise conspicuously wanting in discriminating judgment, in all sense of proportion, in a temperate or judicial spirit, and which is glaringly inconsistent, as well as frequently abusive, even descending at times to coarseness and vulgarity, cannot be expected to add lustre to the fame of the author. Nor can it prove helpful to thoughtful and discriminating people, although it is liable to prove exceedingly injurious to that large class of readers who do little thinking for themselves, and who are more influenced by brilliant rhetoric than by a logical or critical examination of a subject. I do not wish to be unfair to Max Nordau, and yet I cannot understand how any candid reader can escape the conviction that all of the defects I have mentioned are present in a fatal degree in this work. In his diagnosis he reminds me far more of a pretentious charlatan, than a truly scientific physician. Like a quack who has made a vital mistake in regard to the disorder of the patient, and who seeks to

* "Degeneration," by Max Nordau. Cloth; pp. 560; price \$3. D. Appleton & Co., New York City.

exaggerate unduly and to magnify all symptoms which might support his erroneous conclusions, while resolutely closing his eyes to the major symptoms which prove the falsity of his position, our author has arrived at certain conclusions which are open to serious criticism, and maintains his false premises by magnifying the unquestioned evils which are ever present in a great transition period like ours. But he does something even more indefensible, in manufacturing capital by assailing and abusing many of the noblest and sanest brains of this or any other age.

His work, while at times unquestionably brilliant, lacks every element of sound criticism, and is painfully wanting in the application of scientific methods at almost every point. That it contains some philosophy, I gladly concede; that many of his strictures on the tendencies of certain gross and materialistic writers are excellent, I freely grant, while I must admit that those who are conversant with his writings will be surprised at many of the strictures coming from Max Nordau. These excellences in his work, which we readily admit, are, however, so hopelessly mixed with scurrilous criticism of the finest and loftiest thinkers of the age that the result is painful to those who have admired Nordau in the past. An indiscriminate and often inaccurate attack upon writers and thinkers who are manifestly far less amenable to the criticisms made than is the critic, naturally offends the sense of justice in sober and sane men and women. All that he says which is true and just in criticism of our age might be said of any great transition period, or any era of great growth, of any time when the race has been engaged in a tremendous struggle for the realization of higher ideals and nobler truths. Such periods are always trying to sensitive natures, for the ocean of human thought is lashed by its own conflicting ideas like the sea in a furious tempest.

Moreover, as new lights dawn there are always some minds who abuse the higher trust vouchsafed to the expanding mental hunger, mistaking a wider liberty which should serve to impel man more rapidly upward for a permission for license which degrades. This is unfortunate; something always to be deplored and condemned. But to mistake these exceptional instances for a tendency of civilization is one of those fatal errors of our critic; and after arriving at this false conclusion to seek to sustain it by denouncing as "degenerates" such noble characters as Ruskin and Tolstoi is as unphilosophic as it is absurd. We naturally expect that Nordau would show no quarter to mystics, idealists, or symbolists. A Sadducee of the Sadducees; a man who has been the idol of the realists, who is nothing if he is not blunt, and in the eyes of many, gross; a thinker whose ideas are not only materialistic, but whose conceptions in many respects, certainly in regard to woman, are cast in an ancient mould, is not to be expected to show much consideration toward those persons who have

heard the "still small voice"; who are conscious of "the inner light"; who see and hear much which men and women on a different plane cannot comprehend. Nordau in this respect is precisely like one who is color-blind and who is also afflicted with egomania. He is disgusted and indignant that any one should see what he does not see, and at once relegates such persons to the realm of the mentally unsound and labels them "degenerates." The possibility of his being mistaken never enters his mind. The mystics are "degenerates," and that settles it, for Nordau has spoken.

One would scarcely expect to find a critic thus afflicted with egomania denouncing Ibsen as an egomaniac. The admirers of the great Norwegian poet, however, will be pleased to learn that, after denouncing him at length in the most vigorous manner, ridiculing what he terms "his absurdities," and sneering at his defence of wider freedom for women, Nordau relents slightly, and gravely tells us that "Ibsen is not wholly diseased in mind, but only a dweller on the borderland—a mattoid." But having admitted this much our critic seems to be oppressed with a guilty fear lest he has conceded too much, especially when he remembers "his imbecile tendency toward allegory and symbolism." This form of "mental stigma of Ibsen," his "mysticism," throws Nordau into a paroxysm, as anything relating to idealism, mysticism, or symbolism is liable to exert a very unwholesome influence upon him; and he tells us that Ibsen might "be numbered among the mystic 'degenerates.'"

In this fashion he rambles on until a new idea seems to rush in upon his frenzied brain, when he exclaims "this egomania assumes the form of anarchism." Poor Nordau! What is the form which characterizes your egomania? For surely there never was a clearer case of egomania than that exemplified in your latest work.

On reading this book one is reminded of the little boy who sallies forth with his hatchet, bent on chopping down every flower and shrub which age has not rendered impervious to his attacks. One trembles at times for Nordau's own brain children, for they are far more vulnerable than many of the works which he assails most savagely in order to establish the fact that the authors against whom he inveighs are "degenerates." But our anxiety on this point is unnecessary; he mercifully spares his own works. That he lacks all sense of proportion and constantly displays an absence of intellectual poise is seen in his assault upon almost all the great thinkers of our time, urging that they are insane or "degenerate." The mystic and the realist, the idealist and the veritist, John Ruskin and Tolstoi, together with Ibsen and Wagner no less than Zola and writers of still more questionable morals, are all indiscriminately assailed. He shrewdly saw that by attacking the noblest and most luminous geniuses of the century, as well as men of grosser fibre, he would call down the indignation and contempt of thoughtful people. Therefore

in his preface he predicts that he will be assailed, and in an ingeniously written advertisement of his book in the August *Century Magazine* we find him posing as a prophet and martyr. He gravely informs us that people have been distressed at the rumors of his insanity, and have written him to know whether or not there is insanity in his family, after which he soberly states that his ancestors have been rabbis, where the only sign of insanity he knows of is found in their not being thrifty enough to amass money. I am free to confess, after reading his shrewd advertisement of his book in the *Century* and a recent number of the *Forum*, that I think we can fairly absolve him from any suspicion of insanity on the ground of lack of thriftiness. Any reasonably sane man would know that a work which assails as "degenerate" the noblest constructive thinkers, as well as the grosser writers of our times, would call forth general condemnation from thoughtful people, so it needed not the keen vision of a prophet to foresee this; and it is equally clear that if our author expected that a person who assailed so lofty and inspiring an author as John Ruskin as a "degenerate" would retain the esteem of well-balanced men and women, he could not, to say the least, have formed a very high opinion of the discriminating power of men and women of our time. His criticisms of the pre-Raphaelites, who we are gravely informed "got their leading principles from Ruskin," display such ignorance of the facts involved that the reader is at once placed on his guard against accepting as facts various statements on which much of Nordau's reasoning is based. The necessity for this becomes more and more apparent as one peruses this volume, which as I have observed is at once brilliant, erratic, reckless, and not seldom violently abusive. Those acquainted with Ruskin's "Modern Painters" will be amused to hear this critic of critics referring to the great English thinker's work as "*feverish studies in art.*" Nor will sane persons agree with him when he adds that "*Ruskin's theory is in itself delirious.*"

Whenever the gross materialism of Nordau runs against the finer conceptions of idealists or mystics, which he is wholly unable to comprehend, not only is he satisfied that he has found a "degenerate," but he becomes so furious that he is liable to resort to scurrilous epithets. The mystics among painters of an earlier day, such artists, for example, as Giotto and Fra Angelico, were unlike Ruskin and the modern painters of whom he writes, in that the former were "mystics through ignorance," whereas the latter's *mysticism arose from mental degeneration!*

When our critic comes to Wagner he at times appears to lose all control of his mental powers; sometimes becoming absurd, at other times abusive, and so palpably unjust in his strictures and so devoid of the critical spirit as to make one feel mingled pity and disgust for the critic. Nordau has a case to make against Wagner, who he

informs us is a "mystic," a "sensualist," and an "anarchist." And being both prosecutor and judge he proceeds without interruption, ignoring almost every essential of sound criticism. I have space for only a few of the extreme utterances which illustrate the lack of discriminating power and the incoherence of our author. And I wish to preface these extracts with one in which our critic characterizes one kind of "degenerate" which I think most persons who wade through this bulky volume will agree is far more applicable to Max Nordau than to Richard Wagner: "His fundamental frame of mind is persistent rage against everything and everyone, which he displays in vicious phrases, savage threats, and the destructive mania of wild beasts. Wagner is a specimen of this species."

In the chapter entitled "The Richard Wagner Cult," we are told that "Richard Wagner is himself alone charged with a greater abundance of degeneration than all the 'degenerates' put together with whom we have hitherto become acquainted. The stigmata of this morbid condition are united in him in the most complete and most luxurious development. He displays in the general constitution of his mind the persecution mania—megalomania, a mysticism; in his instincts vague philanthropy, anarchism, a craving for revolt and contradiction; in his writings all the signs of graphomania, namely, incoherence, bugitive ideation, and a tendency to idiotic punning, and in the groundwork of his being the characteristic emotionalism of a color at once erotic and religiously enthusiastic. . . . His system calls for criticism in every part. . . . The incoherence of Wagner's thought, determined as it is by the excitation of the moment, manifests itself in his constant contradictions. . . . Wagner is a desperate anarchist." (This is a favorite expression with Nordau, when he wishes to arouse the prejudice of his readers against some great genius.) Again he tells us that "shameless sensuality prevails in his dramatic poems. . . . The irresistible propensity to play on words and other peculiarities of graphomania and maniacs is developed to a high degree in Wagner. Like all 'degenerates,' Wagner is wholly sterile as a poet, although he has written a long series of dramatic works. . . . Wagner swaggers about the art work of the future, and his partisans hail him as the artist of the future. He the artist of the future! He is a bleating ego of the far-away past. His path leads back to deserts long since abandoned by all life. Wagner is the last mushroom on the dunghill of romanticism. . . .

"Of Wagner the musician I treat lastly, because this task will give us a clear proof of his degeneracy. . . . To the end of his life Wagner's existence was conflict and bitterness, and his boastings had no other echo than the laughter not only of rational beings, but, alas, of fools also. It was not until he had long passed his fiftieth year that he began to know the intoxication of universal fame. And in the last decade of his life he was installed among the demigods.

It had come to this; that the world in the interval had become ripe for him—and for the madhouse. He had the good fortune to endure until the general degeneration and hysteria were sufficiently advanced to supply rich and nutritious soil for his theories of art." In one place Nordau tells us that with Wagner amorous excitement assumes the form of mad deliriums.

In his shrewd advertisement of his book in the *Century*, to which I have alluded, Nordau complains of the abusive character of the criticisms which have been heaped upon him. In this connection let me quote the following compliment paid by Nordau to the tens of thousands of the most intellectual and cultured men and women of modern civilization who admire Wagner:

"The lovers of his pieces behave like tom-cats gone mad, rolling in contortions and convulsions over a root of valerian. They reflect a state of mind in the poet which is well known to the professional expert. It is a form of Sadism. It is the love of those 'degenerates' who in sexual transports become like wild beasts. Wagner suffered from erotic madness, which leads gross natures to murder from lust and inspires higher natures with works like *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried* and *Tristan und Isolde*."

Would it not be difficult to conceive of anything more coarse, vulgar, abusive, or insulting to be hurled in the face of refined, highly organized and truly civilized men and women? And yet Nordau poses as a martyr and complains against the abuse of his critics!

There is one other point I wish to notice about this book, which emphasizes the inconsistency of the author. In his chapters on Realism he makes several very excellent observations as to the influence of gross and sensual literature on certain minds. He holds that such realistic pictures, even though true, are poisonous, and severely denounces them; and then, as we near the close of the volume, he draws a picture of the twentieth century as it might be if conditions as he imagines they exist continued to run riot, and in this imaginary sketch he completely out-Zolas Zola, but assures us at length that such conditions will not obtain. Now if it is poisonous to have these pictures or delineations given to the world in literature, even though they be true, what can be said of the man who draws an imaginary sketch at once revolting and disgusting, while he admits that such a condition of things will never be realized!

I have seldom read a book so thoroughly disappointing as this; a book which I regard as exceedingly pernicious, because of the confusing of the ignoble with the noble, chiefly due, I think, to the absence of any fine spiritual discernment in the author and to a mental state which has rendered him entirely unable to discuss matters temperately, judiciously, consistently, or with any sense of proportion in regard to their merits and demerits.

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