

Mr. Kidd has our cordial sympathy when he lays stress on the fact that our evolution cannot be called primarily intellectual. Of course there must be an intellectual evolution, too, and Mr. Kidd perhaps fails in not making this sufficiently plain. A perfectly stupid race can never rise to a very high plane; the negro, for instance, has been kept down as much by lack of intellectual development as by anything else; but the prime factor in the preservation of a race is its power to attain a high degree of social efficiency. Love of order, ability to fight well and breed well, capacity to subordinate the interests of the individual to the interests of the community, these and similar rather humdrum qualities go to make up the sum of social efficiency. The race that has them is sure to overturn the race whose members have brilliant intellects, but who are cold and selfish and timid, who do not breed well or fight well, and who are not capable of disinterested love of the community. In other words, character is far more important than intellect to the race as to the individual. We need intellect, and there is no reason why we should not have it together with character; but if we must choose between the two we choose character without a moment's hesitation.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

III.—THE DECAY OF LITERARY TASTE.

BY EDMUND GOSSE.

TO WRITE about the "decay" of a quality should presuppose that the writer is convinced of its decadence, and I suppose that when the editor of this REVIEW asked me to diagnose this disease he did not for a moment expect me to pronounce the patient in excellent health. But the fact is (or so it seems to me) that a man must in these complex days of ours be very rash who pronounces broadly about the conditions of his age. There is no general trend upwards or downwards, but a vast spreading out laterally in all directions, with here a rise and there a fall in the swelling surface. I am not Mrs. Lynn Linton, to scatter ashes on my head, and cry "Woe, woe!" It would always be easier to me, as well as much pleasanter, to dwell on what is hopeful and delightful in the attitude of the public towards literature. One may, however, be on the whole an optimist, and yet not entirely

pleased with every phase of what is going on around us. Little inclined as I am to grumble or to scold, I cannot think all the phenomena of public appreciation favorable to the best literature, or leading in a wholesome direction. My allotted task, then, shall be fulfilled by some brief indication of what appear to me to be growing dangers, indications, so far as they go, of decadence.

The greatest of these dangers, and the one with which it seems most difficult to deal, is that which I have just indicated, namely, the vast area now covered by a sort of literary appreciation. Want of all intellectual relish, which we have been taught to regard as disastrous, does not seem to be nearly so baneful in its results as what is called "a spread of intellectual interest." I never sympathized with Mr. Matthew Arnold in his lamentation over the barbarous indifference of our upper classes to the claims of literature. It has been ludicrous, of course, and in certain sections complete. That indifference has been irritating in individual cases; it justly incensed Mr. Arnold to meet a county magnate who had never heard of Heine. But it was, at least, a sterile barbarism; it did not propagate intellectual conceit. It was like George I., it hated "boetry and bainting," but by its side painting and poetry could flourish in their appointed places. Better to my mind, King Log, who knows nothing and does not want to know anything, than King Stork, who has ideas of his own, and wants to interfere with every council of the frogs.

The late Master of Trinity was asked by a lady whether a certain florid divine had not "a great deal of taste." "Yes, indeed, Madam," he replied, "and all of it so bad." At the present day the general public has a great deal of taste, and it requires a critic to be a thorough-going truckler to democracy to say that he thinks all of it very good. In former days, whether taste was good or bad, and of course in many cases it was execrably bad, the exercise of it was concentrated in a narrow circle. In the age of Shakespeare, a little knot of Italianated nobles in London regulated taste without the slightest reference to the excellent and God-fearing multitudes spread from Berwick to Penzance. Had there been university extension in the days of Elizabeth, and Grindelwald conferences, and popular educational newspapers, and "literary" sermons from a thousand Dissenting pulpits, there would have been produced no impious comedies and no incestuous tragedies. The tone of Jacobean drama would have been ex-

tremely proper, but would there have been an "Othello" or a "Hamlet?" We may doubt it.

The distribution of literary knowledge, although we may well question the depth and soundness of it, cannot in itself be regarded as anything but a social benefit to the race. We dare not resist the appeal of those who wish to learn. Where the danger comes in is where the half-taught turn round and proclaim themselves teachers. The tendency of "the man in the street" to pronounce opinions on questions of literary appreciation—that is the phenomenon which fills me with alarm. An agricultural laborer is as well qualified to criticise the rigging of a ship, or a coal-heaver to review the conduct of a pack of fox-hounds, as the ordinary person, untrained in the history and technique of literature, is to decide whether a book is good or bad. Not to admit this is simply to bow the knee to the individual voter. The untrained reader can tell, of course, whether the book is agreeable to himself or not. He should presume no further; he has no authority, on the mere score of being a reader of that particular work, to set himself up as a censor of taste.

We are still behind the United States, however, in this respect. There has never, to my knowledge, been displayed on this side of the Atlantic such flagrant evidence of anarchy in literary taste as, for instance, was discovered by the *New York Herald* when it opened its columns to fugitive correspondence with regard to the *Lourdes* of M. Zola. I doubt not that we possess, in England, persons quite as devoid of the power to judge a literary product and quite as ready to oblige the world with their views, as those wonders of ignorant assurance who wrote to the *Herald*. But, at present, our editors throw their letters into the waste-paper basket. Yet every year, in this country, the weight of professional opinion seems to grow less, the standards of tradition and reason are more frivolously disregarded. There is more and more "taste" among us, but the greater part of it is bad, because it is based on no recognition of the principles of composition, and no respect for the traditions of harmony and beauty.

It is not to be questioned that the immense public which is becoming accustomed to regard itself as the patron of literature, demands from the producer several things which it is highly desirable that he should not supply. If, against his better judg-

ment, he does supply them, a decay of taste is inevitable. We are fond of congratulating ourselves on the abolition of the personal patron. It is true that he had his disadvantages. Dr. Johnson found him a native of the rocks. Through obsequious regard for him, a poem by Dr. Young was "addressed to the Deity and humbly inscribed to His Grace, the Duke of Newcastle." But, at all events, there were many patrons in those early days, and the independent bard could pass from one to another. Nowadays, there is only one patron—a world of patrons rolled into one—the vast, coarse, insatiable public; and if an author, from conscientiousness or fastidiousness, does not choose to consider the foibles of this patron, there is no other door for him to knock at.

One thing for which this great, outer public has no sort of appetite is delicacy of workmanship, attention to form, what we call pre-occupation with style. The only hope for literature is that in spite of the indifference to, nay, the positive dislike of careful writing on the part of the public, those who write, being themselves artists or artizans, shall continue to give to their production this technical finish which alone invests it with dignity and value. It is only fair to say that in our own age there has been no lack of those who have honorably and unselfishly turned out work, not slovenly finished, as the public preferred, but fashioned and polished in accordance with the laws and traditions of the art. But I am bound to confess that I see, and I deeply deplore, a relaxation of this noble zeal in some of our youngest fellow-craftsmen. I fear that something of the laxity of public taste has invaded their private workshops, and that they are apt to say to themselves that second-rate writing is "good enough" for the publishers. Whenever I see it boldly put forth that "the matter" is everything and the "manner" nothing, that to write with care is an "affectation" or an "artifice," that style may take care of itself, and that "an unchartered freedom" is the best badge of a writer, there seems to rise before me the lean and hungry scholar, scraping and cringing before the great vulgar patron with "What you wish, my lord! I don't presume to decide." And from this sort of obsequiousness to public "taste" no return to self-respect is possible.

Against any general tendency to obliterate the forms of literature the cultivation of verse is probably the most effective safe-

guard. It is the poets who save the language from decay, and who keep high the standard of literary excellence. My eminent friend, the Master of the Temple, is forever denouncing the art of modern verse, and discouraging its practice. "Confectionery," he calls it, and a hundred newspapers applaud the infelicity. I grieve when I hear men of the accomplishment and knowledge of Dr. Ainger speaking with this harshness of what is called "minor poetry." These distinctions of "minor" and "major" are very arbitrary and invidious. We do not talk of "minor prose writers," and yet the average of prose authorship is more contemptible than the average of verse. Inept and imitative poetry is, of course, a very ridiculous product, but it is no worse than vulgar, slipshod prose, and there is always the effort behind it to construct, to select, to preserve the noble forms of traditional writing, an effort which starts it from a distinctly higher standpoint. And the verse of a far better class, the poetry that is accomplished and refined without being positively epoch-making—such verse, I make bold to say, is the very salt which keeps the mass of our common style from decay. The bad prose-writer is content to stammer forth his sentences in obedience to no tradition whatever; the bad poet is always conscious of the great masters in the background.

The immense breadth of the area over which a sort of literary taste is nowadays exercised has the very unfortunate effect of flattening out the public impression of merit. In the hurry and the superfluity of book-production, indifferent authors get praised too much and excellent authors get appreciated too little. The "opinions of the press," which fill the advertising columns of our literary papers, would move Alceste himself to mirth and Célimène to blushes. Not a handbook to the classics is compiled but somebody is found to pronounce it "far more comprehensive than any that has yet been given to the world;" not a sketch in comic fiction but is "a definite contribution to English literature;" not a sickly collection of unconnected essays but "scintillate with genius of the first water." In the decay of taste everything seems a masterpiece for a moment, except a work of genuine and independent talent. But the books so hastily praised are not less hastily forgotten, and immortals cross the field and disappear for ever as continuously as figures cross the disk of the magic lantern.

There seems to be an increasing tendency to swamp what is really distinguished in the flood of universal good nature. If we call Miss Blank's foolish little novel a masterpiece, and discover the results of long experience and profound research in Mr. Swish's vamped-up edition of *Cornelius Nepos*, what epithets have we left for Porson and Thackeray? The effect of squandering superlatives is to lose all power of making a just comparison. If Primrose Hill is a mountain of magnificent altitude, what is Monte Rosa? It is another mountain of magnificent altitude, and, so far as language can do it, our idea of Monte Rosa is reduced to our recollection of Primrose Hill. After all, to us as to Caliban, words mean ideas, and if we are always misapplying our words we cannot but be befogging and distorting our ideas. By dint of praising a thousand things equally, and giving real attention to none, we gain of things good and bad but the impression of a moment. Literature of every quality is made to gallop in front of us, and all we see is the waving of a cloak or the gleam of a spur. The cavalcade passes, and we reflect on what we have seen, but we find we have retained no definite recollections. The figures all looked alike.

It will be a disastrous thing for literature if the ideal of good work comes to be confined to the production of a momentary impression. Is the author, like the actor and the singer, to be content for the future with a fugitive notoriety? Is his to be an apparition lost for ever, directly the curtain falls and the lights go out? Hitherto it has been the hope which has sustained him that he might not wholly die, that if he was so lucky as to deserve it, the rare boon of immortality was not to be denied him. But now, so rapid is the passage of the phantasmagoria, so swift and so complete the ingratitude of the public, that the memory of a Walter Pater or a Théodore de Banville can scarcely hope to outlive that of a favorite ballet-girl. And this is the more hard, because the ballet-girl had infinitely the better time of it so long as her popularity lasted.

A very singular change in this respect has come over popular taste in England during the last two or three years. It is worthy of some attention, since its results may be of far-reaching importance. The complaint has, till lately, been that the distinctions and successes of literature were all in the hands of a limited number of persons of advanced reputation. It was said that

there were young men knocking at the door, and that no one would open to them. But the death of Rossetti, Matthew Arnold, Browning, Tennyson, and of a dozen men only less influential than these, has completely changed the face of current literary history. Of the old dominant race only one survives, Mr. Ruskin, who, in the dignity of his retirement in the Lakes, sits as the unquestioned monarch of our realm of living letters. But all the rest are gone, the door has been flung open, and the young men and women (especially the young women) are rushing in in crowds.

It used to be said, and this but a very few years ago, that a young writer could not expect to win general recognition in England until he was approaching forty. It used to be a matter of jest what white beards our "promising young poets" had. Now, there has come a violent crisis, and the middle-aged writers will have to dye their hair, as we are told that shopmen and omnibus-conductors have to do, before they can hope for employment. A change was inevitable, and indeed much to be desired. We were developing a gerontocracy, a tyranny by old men, which was becoming intolerable. But the revolution has set in with amazing violence, and has presented, as it seems to me, some grotesque features. It used to be the question, "What has he (or she) already published?" Now, the best possible recommendation is to have printed nothing, and veterans approach the publishers' offices by night, in a disguise, offering a manuscript under a false name, with an assurance that it is their first effort at composition.

The public asks for "new writers," every day a batch of brand-new authors, male and female. A book can hardly fail to be accepted, if a pledge is given that it is by "a new writer." Before the volumes are published we are treated to paragraphs about the author, "whose first work will appear in a few days, and is expected to create a sensation." It appears, and it does create a sensation, and the very next day another "first work by a new writer" creates a still louder sensation. The town is thronged by these celebrities of a moment, their portraits appear in journals especially devoted to "the new authorship," their biographies are published (their biographies, poor callow creatures!) and they are eminent for the greater portion of a week. Then the tide of their successors sweeps them on. They think

to return, with a second book, but that is no part of the public's scheme of pleasure. The first book was received with extravagant laudation, a false enthusiasm, a complete indulgence to its faults. A second book by the same hand, put forth in an innocent certitude of triumph, is received with contempt and inattention, its oddities ridiculed, its errors sharply criticised. The public does not want a second book; it wants to be gorged with a full incessant supply of "guaranteed first works by absolutely new writers." This craze will pass, of course, but it is a proof, while it lasts, of a very sickly condition of taste.

The books of which I have been speaking, these virgin-blossoms of the bowers of Paternoster Row, are mainly novels. It is surely a matter for very grave consideration whether the extraordinary domination of the novel to-day is a healthy sign. There has never been seen anything like it before in the whole course of our history. Fiction has long taken a prominent place in the book-sales of the country; romances have long formed the staple of the book shops. But never before has the rage for stories stifled all other sorts and conditions of literature as it is doing now. Things have come to a pretty pass when the combined prestige of the best poets, historians, critics and philosophers of the country does not weigh in the balance against a single novel by the New Woman. Mr. Swinburne and Mr. Herbert Spencer, Mr. Leslie Stephen and Professor Huxley—their combined "sales" might be dropped into the ocean of "The Heavenly Twins" and scarcely cause a splash in that enormous flood. Such successes as we read of in the history of literature—the successes of Gibbon and of Macaulay, of Boswell's "Life of Johnson," and of Ruskin's "Modern Painters,"—would be impossible nowadays. The public taste has all gone mad for story books, and nothing but fiction has a chance of real popularity. It seemed to me that the cheerful arrogance of the successful novelist had reached its climax the other day when, at the Banquet of the Society of Authors—with one of the most eminent critics of the age in the chair, and with poets, historians, essayists, divines sitting at the tables—Dr. Conan Doyle (selected to give thanks for literature) described fiction as Cinderella and the other branches of letters as her decayed and spiteful sisters. That the author of "Sherlock Holmes" should enjoy the exclusive attentions of that fairy prince, the Public, is natural enough, but what an occasion for a shout of triumph!

We can hardly be wrong, I think, in detecting in the features of public taste to which I have drawn attention, symptoms of an increasing tendency to nervous malady, and the withdrawal of self-restraint. Without going to the extravagant lengths of Dr. Max Nordau, we may acknowledge that the intellectual signs of the times point to a sort of rising neurosis. This inability to fix the attention on any serious subject of thought, this incessant demand to be "told a story," this craving for new purveyors of amusement, this impatience of the very presence of the old, what are they but indications of ill-health? The time has passed when the people were content to sit in the shade of the fresh laurel tree, and to celebrate the immortal gods with cheerfulness. The direct and simple pleasures of literature, of the sane literary tradition, seem to have lost their charm, and unless there is a spice of disease and hysteria about a book the multitude of readers finds it insipid.

An intelligent foreigner, I suppose, visiting our country in this year of grace, would be more struck with the ebullition of chatter about the New Woman than with anything else. As I write, I find that astute and accomplished lady, Madame Arvède Barine, describing to her fellow Parisians what she saw and read in London in the summer of 1894. She is no prude, she is no satirist, she has been a deep and sympathetic observer of men and books in many countries, and this is how she sums up her description of the latest batch of English novels by women.

"I cannot say to what a degree all this recent literature of the English novel seems to me to be indecent and immoral. It is a very grave symptom, in a nation so jealous of appearances as the English, that women and girls of repute should be able to write such things without exciting censure. The novels on the Woman Question (*les romans féministes*) are devoured by hundreds of thousands of readers, even when, as is usually the case, they have no literary value, no merit of thought or of style. The public does not ask that they should be works of art. It takes them for what they are, polemical treatises and instruments of propaganda, and what it is interested in is the thesis and not the form. England may say what she likes, she has not escaped from the decomposition of ideas which is the disgrace of the close of our century, and it is high time that she should say no more about French immorality. Our novels may be the more crude, but hers are the more unwholesome, and she has no longer the right to look down upon us with an air of scandalized virtue."

Such words, written not by a jealous middle-aged Englishman, but by a brilliant Frenchwoman, full of modern ideas, and greatly interested in our institutions, may well make us pause. But even

here, to my mind, Mme. Barine is unduly alarmed. I cannot consider the error to be one of morals so much as of taste, and I therefore hold it proper to the subject of this paper. We do not,—we conservative lovers of what is harmonious and decent, supported on this occasion so bravely by Madame Barine,—we do not object to the intentions of these revolting women, with their dreams of woman emancipated, man subdued, and all the rest of the nonsense. We judge them to be honest enough, in their hysterical desire to whack the heads of all decent persons with the ferules of their umbrellas. But what we do take the liberty of saying is that their writings are tiresome and ugly, that they give us the discomfort which we feel in the presence of loud ill-bred people, and that, in short, they err grievously against taste. But what is the use of saying that, when a public as hysterical and vulgar as themselves buys their silly books in thousands and tens of thousands? There is nothing to be done but to sit with folded hands, and to read the *Pensées* of Pascal until the scourge be overpast.

It will pass over, and that soon. The world is on the very point of saying to the New Woman, “Hie thee to a nunnery!” and then Nora Helmer will come quietly back to eat macaroons again and be a squirrel. But some fresh folly will seize the vast and Tartar horde of readers that now devastate the plains of literature, and in their numbers, we may be quite sure, there will not be strength. So we come back again to our old complaint, the hopeless complaint of the breadth of the world to which an author nowadays has to appeal. Well might Keats deem the poet fortunate who could “make great music to a little clan.” It is not the absence of literary taste which alarms us for the future. It is not that the public has no taste. What distresses us is that it has so much, and most of it so indifferent.

EDMUND GOSSE.

NOTES AND COMMENTS.

NEW LIGHT ON ENGLISH HISTORY.

THE recent publication of the Kenyon Manuscripts serves to recall the fact that the Historical Manuscripts Commission has now been at work for twenty-five years. Between forty and fifty volumes have been issued. More are to come, and when the great work undertaken at the expense of the English Government is completed, it will form what may not inaptly be described as a history of England in the rough.

There is hardly a family of any standing in England possessing even a handful of deeds and papers, which has not opened its chests and its muniment rooms to the Commission. Some great families have not only done this, but have permitted the representatives of the Commission to ransack their homes from cellar to garret in search of papers, believed by historical experts to be in their possession, but not found in the usual places of custody for such documents. The old municipal corporations have acted in the same spirit. Scores of these old boroughs have dropped out of sight since the Reform Act of 1832 took away their political importance by depriving them of their representatives in the House of Commons. But all of them have their places in English history, and the overhauling of their archives will enable historians to estimate the importance of each in national life and development.

A large number of the manuscripts go back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a whole, they become of increasing fullness and of more vivid interest as they deal with the centuries nearer our own time. No phase of English life is untouched. It is difficult to say which are of more interest and value to historical students, the manuscripts which have been contained in the muniment rooms of the great governing families, and of the House of Lords; or the records of the old municipal corporations. Both classes are rich almost beyond description in material illustrating imperial as well as national development.

The papers from the great families throw most light on national and imperial affairs, on the beginnings and developments of England as a colonial power, and also on religious, judicial, educational and social concerns at home. On the other hand, the thousands of documents from the archives of the old corporations, while valuable in corroborating the other manuscripts on some of the points named, throw most light on the development of municipal institutions and industrial life. They enable one to measure with some accuracy, from first hand sources, the extent to which mediæval municipal institutions were developed. In going over these corporation records one is most impressed with the fact that there is little new in the more recent de-