

**DECADENCE AND  
OTHER ESSAYS ON THE  
CULTURE OF IDEAS**

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Decadence and other essays on the culture of ideas by Remy De Gourmont

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**REMY DE GOURMONT**

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CULTURE OF IDEAS**





REMY DE GOURMONT

From a hitherto unpublished portrait by HÉLÈNE DUFAU in  
the possession of Miss Barney.

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# DECADENCE

AND OTHER ESSAYS ON  
THE CULTURE OF IDEAS

BY  
REMY DE GOURMONT

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY  
WILLIAM ASPENWALL BRADLEY

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NOTE.—The first, sixth, seventh, and eighth essays are translated from *La Culture des Idées*; the ninth is from the *Promenades Philosophiques*; and the remaining essays are from *Le Chemin de Velours*.





## INTRODUCTION

When, more than ten years ago, I wrote the first article on Remy de Gourmont which, so far as I know, appeared in America—North America, *bien entendu*, for the author of *La Culture des Idées* and *Le Chemin de Velours* was already well known and admired in such South American literary capitals as Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and La Plata—it was refused by one editor on the ground that he could not assume the responsibility of presenting a writer of Gourmont's dangerous, subversive, and immoral tendencies to the readers of his conservative and highly respectable journal. Gourmont's revenge—and mine—came a few years later when, at the time of his death, in 1915, the same paper paid him editorial tribute, recognizing the importance of the place he had occupied in the intellectual life of France for a quarter of a century.

What was this place precisely? An attempt has been made to define it by a recent French writer, M. Jules Sageret, who speaks of Gourmont as having represented in our time the *encyclopédiste honnête homme* of the eighteenth century, and this is sufficiently accurate, in spite of the fact that Gourmont was no deist, and that he made a much more extended application of that *esprit critique* which he inherited

from Diderot and Voltaire. He himself notes the paradox presented by the latter, who, while combating the principle of authority so violently in one field—that of dogmatic theology—accepted it so absolutely and unquestioningly in another—that of poetic art, as stated once and for all by Boileau. Gourmont recognized no such limits of the critic's function. He was, in fact, a fearless, uncompromising, and universal free-thinker—*libertin*—who, endowed with a restless scientific curiosity, a profound irrespect, and an extraordinarily sharp and supple analytical intelligence, confronted all affirmations, all dogmas, in the fixed intent of liberating the life imprisoned in them. "I dislike prisons of any sort," he declared in the preface to *Le Problème du Style*, and he scouted the claims of those who, having constructed a cell, claimed to cabin the truth.

Even the pursuit of truth seemed, to this convinced sceptic of the race of Montaigne, an idle undertaking, unworthy of any truly philosophic intelligence. "It is as absurd to seek the truth—and to find it—once we have reached the age of reason, as to put our shoes on the hearth Christmas Eve." And he cites "one of the creators of a new science," who said to him, "At the present moment we can establish no theory, but we are in a position to demolish any theory that may be established." He adds, summing up: "We must seek to rest always at this stage; the only fruitful quest is the quest