

**REGENERATION: A
REPLY TO
MAX NORDAU**

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Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau by Nicholas Murray Butler

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NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER

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WITH INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

MAX NORDAU is perhaps the most daring toreador of recent years. He challenged Modern Civilization to mortal combat in the presence of assembled thousands. Had the customs of the Roman arena prevailed, the thumbs of the interested spectators would doubtless have been extended or pressed down in about equal numbers, when the huge beast lay momentarily stunned by his blow. That Nordau had ingeniously tormented the monster was apparent ; had he earned the right to put an end to its existence? The shrill cries of the excitable and easily moved predominated for a moment, but they were soon drowned by the insistent demands of the sober-minded for a calm consideration of the fairness of the blows that had been struck, as well as of the permissibility of the weapons that had been used. Yet the contest, whether fair or unfair, had been exciting ; and it was not without its uses.

It stimulated thought among the habitually unthinking. The habit of reflective analysis, like letter-writing and other accomplishments that require much leisure, is slipping away from us under the

pressure of our complex modern life. The newspaper, with its surges of insensate passion and unreasoned opinion, thinks for large portions of the community; and its thinking, like the amusements of the nursery, expresses itself in ways that appeal chiefly to the eye and to the ear. Information about things is too often mistaken for knowledge of things. Highly specialized activities on the one hand, and the task of adjusting our part in the struggle for existence to economic conditions wholly new in the world's history, on the other, mark off our civilization from any that have preceded it. The activities of modern men are so numerous, so varied, and so interesting, that we often omit to ask on what principles they are based and whither they are tending. Apparent success has led us to forget sometimes that all sound practice has a reason behind it, and reasons are seldom asked for or given.

To say the least, then, it is somewhat surprising to be stopped on the street corner and assured, with due emphasis and the appearance of authority, that nineteenth-century men and women are absorbed in interests that mark a diseased type of mind, and are given over to a literature, an art, and a music that, themselves produced by madmen, are rapidly reducing us all to the mad-house level; in other words, that we and our boasted civilization are degenerates.

There is, as I have said, a certain use in this

brutal proceeding, for it causes us to stop and think. It shatters our conceit and shakes our confidence. If we pause only for a moment, yet pause we must. The mere daring of the attack forces this. So it has come about that Nordau's *Degeneration*, quite apart from its intrinsic merits or demerits, has been widely read and much talked of throughout the civilized world. It has provoked some anger, not a little amusement, and a fair measure of contempt. Yet in a certain subtle way it has set us to examining the reasons that lead most of us to deny the essential viciousness and abnormality of some of the most salient and striking characteristics of contemporary culture.

If Nordau's indictment be classed as pessimism, it at least has the merit of novelty of statement. From Homer's time to the present poets and philosophers have not forgotten, even in moments of highest exaltation, to remind man that his life has a dark and hopeless side. Our own century has listened to Leopardi, who envied only the dead, and to Schopenhauer, who called man both the priest and the victim of nature. And yet we have not been altogether unhappy.

But Nordau is no ordinary pessimist. He does not lead us to despair through the by-paths of metaphysical subtlety, nor does he take advantage of the awful mystery of pain to perplex and distract us.

Rather he drags us into the laboratory and, stretching us on a table of definitions made for the purpose, proceeds to measure our faces and our skulls, our teeth, the lobes of our ears, and our palates; we pay the penalty of our individuality in being found to be "morbid deviations from an original type," and are therefore degenerate. Next comes an examination of a selected group of man's newer interests. The music of Wagner, the dramas of Ibsen, the romances of Zola, the art of the pre-Raphaelites, the mystics, the symbolists, the Parnassians—who but a "decadent" would treat all these alike?—are passed in review and pronounced to be proofs of the decadence of mankind even more conclusive than those based upon physical measurements. All this is done in the name of Science, which, reversing the procedure of Saturn, thus hastens to devour the parent that begot it, Modern Civilization.

A long chapter might be written on the credulity of men of science. The hypotheses that they have chased out of the door complacently fly in at the window. Many scientists, fresh from apparently important discoveries in narrow fields, need to be reminded of the lesson contained in the legend of St. Augustine, who when walking on the shore one day, absorbed in meditation, suddenly perceived a child that with a shell was ladling the sea into a hole in the sand. "What are you doing, my child?" asked St. Augus-

tine. "I am emptying the ocean," was the reply, "into this hole."—"That is impossible." "Not more impossible than for you to empty the universe into your intellect," said the child, and vanished. Nordau is particularly prone to regard the small achievements of a certain school of alienists as having supplied him with a conclusive test of all excellence. Indeed, no part of his diatribe is more open to criticism than the use he makes of Science. If modern science is demonstrating any one thing more clearly than another, it is that the insights of the seers of our race as to the highest human aspirations and the deepest needs of the human spirit, meet not with contradiction but with support as knowledge of the cosmos becomes more extensive and more accurate. Nordau has neglected to reckon with the profound truth that finds expression in the celebrated saying of Lotze :

"The more I myself have laboured to prepare the way for acceptance of the mechanical view of Nature in the region of organic life—in which region this view seemed to advance more timidly than the nature of the thing required—the more do I now feel impelled to bring into prominence the other aspect which was equally near to my heart during all these endeavours. . . . It is in such mediation [between the two aspects] that the true source of the life of science is to be found ; not indeed in affirming

now a fragment of one view and now a fragment of the other, but in showing how *absolutely universal is the extent*, and at the same time how *completely subordinate is the significance, of the mission which mechanism has to fulfil in the structure of the world.*"

There is also hidden from Nordau's view that noble conception of the place and significance of Science to which Tyndall gave expression in the eloquent peroration of his Belfast address more than twenty years ago :

"Science itself not unfrequently derives motive-power from an ultra-scientific source. Some of its greatest discoveries have been made under the stimulus of a non-scientific ideal. . . . The world embraces not only a Newton, but a Skakspere—not only a Boyle, but a Raphael—not only a Kant, but a Beethoven—not only a Darwin, but a Carlyle. Not in each of these, but in all, is human nature whole. They are not opposed, but supplementary—not mutually exclusive, but reconcilable. And if, unsatisfied with them all, the human mind, with the yearning of a pilgrim for his distant home, will still turn to the Mystery from which it has emerged, seeking so to fashion it as to give unity to thought and faith, so long as this is done, not only without intolerance or bigotry of any kind, but with the enlightened recognition that ultimate fixity of concep-