

The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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The Age of Ugliness

AS the fourth century B. C. was famous for its beauty, so the twentieth A. D. will be eminent in ugliness. We have reached and just passed a peak and pausing point when the vigor of industrial ugliness has lost its crudity while retaining originality, and the art of spoiling nature has not yet been standardized. In a generation or two we shall have to look in museums for those illustrations of the evolution of ugliness that now can be photographed in any town. At one end of the block you find naïve ugliness, boxes of brick, misshapen but solid, with a sprawling tree off center at the front. In the middle of the block is climactic ugliness of the most virile period: a Queen Anne house with Gothic adornments and an Egyptian doorway behind two beds of geraniums, one round, one square, a purple beech on the left, a horse chestnut on the right. At the end of the block is ugliness decadent. The house is near colonial taken from a magazine picture; a little Dutchy in the roof, a little Southern in the columns, pink asbestos shingles, garage drive nicely curved and lined with barberry on right, patent clothes dryer nicely spaced on left, foundation plantation of big and little evergreens like green boils and carbuncles, hardy garden, bird bath, sun porch as specified. Too smooth, too self-conscious for beauty, it is too pretty for excellent ugliness. The first fine careless frenzy of absolute incongruity is gone and the trained eye and standardized taste have reduced it to mere insipidity.

Has there been, will there ever be again, anything so satisfyingly ugly as the outskirts of London, miles of sodden bricks and contorted chimney pots, or those red rows of identical houses that stretch like petrified caterpillars on the outskirts of Philadelphia and Baltimore? Is there a vaster ugliness than the Chicago prairie, a criss-cross of irrelevant tracks in a smoky mist, where battered cars stand in a wilderness of ash heaps, débris, greasy pools, and sick and dirty grass? Is there anything uglier than a shore-front "development," its rows of untidy match boxes hiding the sea? Or a trunk auto route scared through green country between hot-dog shanties, smart gas stations, and a double wall of signboards—gigantic letters or "close-up" pictures—above which one just sees the tree tops!

Few decorations have been uglier than the girl-and-man slip cover of a modern novel in colors raucous or saccharine. Seldom has literature been uglier than the contents of some modern books, where dirt and ribaldry, dust and ashes, slang and effrontery adorn a night-club, road-house style. But literary ugliness, too, grows decadent and sinks into that sterile flatness which is neither ugly nor beautiful, but just bad.

Ugliness is overripe, and already gives way to mere prettiness. At any moment reaction may do away with the appalling ugliness of the wayside railroad station or reform the Broadway cosmetic parade. The musicians, weary of the concord of sweet sounds, have made a virtue of novelty and invented disharmonies that are as magnificently ugly as a gas tank or a boiler factory. It would be well to follow their example and collect ugliness, for just now there is more of it than anything else. Indeed the new strong things seem most of them to be ugly, while whatever is meant to be beautiful is flabby and seems old. It would be pleasant

In My Thirtieth Year

By ARCHIBALD McLEISH

AND I have come upon this place
By lost ways, by a nod, by words,
By faces, by the old man's face
At Morlaix lifted to the birds,

By hands upon the table cloth
At Aldebori's by the thin
Child's hands that opened to the moth
And let the flutter of the moonlight in,

By hands, by voices, by the voice
Of Mrs. Whitman on the stair,
By Margaret's "If we had the choice
To choose or not—" through her thick hair,

By voices, by the creak and fall
Of footsteps on the upper floor,
By silence waiting in the hall
Between the door-bell and the door,

By words, by voices, a lost way—
And here above the chimney stack
The unknown constellations sway—
And by what way shall I go back?

The Triumph of the Tough

By LEE WILSON DODD

I HAVE lived through it all, a steady reader of current writing for forty years—since I began reading steadily at six. And the first moderately hard-boiled story I was forbidden to read, and read, was "Huckleberry Finn." I cannot remember, however, that it struck me at the time as anything but a highly exciting and satisfactory tale. As for my adolescent days in fiction, they coincided with the Cloak and Sword Romantic Revival. There was Stevenson (Stevenson of "The Black Arrow," not of "The Ebb Tide"), there was Stanley Weyman, there was "The Prisoner of Zenda." It wasn't bad fare, perhaps, for a youngster; yet even then the first literary nourishment which stimulated some form of intellectual growth came to me from another sort of food—rougher, homelier, less obviously sugared or sauced and spiced. Fumbling in the College Library I hit upon "Tales of Mean Streets," by Arthur Morrison, and the first story I read therein was the gutter-tragedy of Lizerunt—Eliza or Elizabeth Hunt, if that needs an interpreter. Gods! Here was something new! (New, you will understand, to me). Why, here was a man who dared not to prettify the dwellers in a London slum, not to make of them either a jolly Dickensian entertainment or a blubberingly Dickensian Death-of-Little-Nell! It seemed honest, somehow, more self-respecting, more man-and-mind respecting, to write like that—to read things like that. Things that gave one the feel of the world, the facts!

And presently I was reading, re-re-reading "The Red Badge of Courage." Grim stabbing sentences! "A red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer." (I quote from memory, and no doubt badly). You could see, feel, smell it all. It must have been just that—the fighting. True. Truth was the thing. What else mattered?

So I raved about "The Red Badge of Courage" to my room-mate, who asked at once whether or not it had a happy ending. (Curiously, I cannot recall now whether it has or not). This infuriated me. Lots of lives, I explained, are dreary and end unhappily. "Sure," replied my room-mate, "but why write about them? You don't read to get the collywobbles, do you?"

"But what's the sense in reading lies about life!"

"There's plenty of excitement going that turns out all right," observed my room-mate.

Nevertheless, he tackled "The Red Badge of Courage." "Gosh, I hate that sort of thing," said my room-mate. "No plot, and it's damn depressing. I think a book ought to make you feel better for having read it."

Ha! My scorn, then, of such flabby talk almost gave me a jaundice! Then—but no longer. For I have heard a good deal of it since; and I still hear something of it, more diffidently expressed—from aging gentlemen, as a rule, in semi-provincial circles. And I find I am beginning to tolerate it. After all, I now find myself saying, thought and its expression should be free—and here is a point of view like another! My room-mate was quite right to express his genuine reaction to "The Red Badge"—his unforced opinion of "that sort of thing." If he had funk'd his own judgment, pretending to like it, only then would he have made himself a legitimate object for scorn. And doubtfully then

This Week



"The Story of Philosophy." Reviewed by *Ernest Sutherland Bates*.

"The Dreadful Decade." Reviewed by *Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer*.

Books on the Italian Trecento. Reviewed by *Kenneth McKenzie*.

"Anatole France at Home." Reviewed by *Christian Gauss*.

"Dean Briggs." Reviewed by *John Bakeless*.

"The Conquest of Brazil." Reviewed by *Kermit Roosevelt*.

"Drawings for the Theatre." Reviewed by *D. M. Oenslager*.

"A Theory of Direct Realism." Reviewed by *Ralph Barton Perry*.

Two Books on George Meredith. Reviewed by *Cornelius Weygandt*.

"The Connoisseur." Reviewed by *Edward Davison*.

The Poet's Housekeeping. By *Arthur Guiterman*.

Next Week, or Later

"Temperament and Race." Reviewed by *Ellsworth Huntington*.

to believe that our virile ugliness was only a new beauty in its sheath, and perhaps this is true of the skyscraper, however mere prettiness may be the sequel elsewhere. But take a long philosophic look at a backyard in the Bronx or the new hotel on Main Street, before you decide.

—for intellectual timidity, too, has perhaps its inalienable rights! But my room-mate was never timid; he always spoke out what was in him; and he is prosperous now, good citizen, good friend, good husband and father—and still prefers his happy endings which I no longer begrudge him. For why begrudge any man anything which is intrinsically his? To the Bolshevik his Bolshevism, to the Tory his Toryism, to the Romantic his illusions (if they be illusions), and to the Neo-realist his neo-reality (if it indeed be neo-real)! Such—what with introversion, hardening of the arteries, and so forth—has become my simple if unæsthetic and a-moral attitude toward life and art. But I am digressing from Zola—from Zola, Flaubert, Maupassant, the brothers Goncourt, and the forerunner Balzac; for, thanks to an exceptional upper-classman, it was into that turbid, weltering sea that next I plunged.

Here were slices of life! Great raw dripping chunks of life! Mud and blood, vomit and sweat and excrementitious material! *Truth . . .* but, faugh! what a stench truth had! Did humanity really reek like that? So I began sniffing anxiously at the heels of life.

Yes, great heavens!—humanity actually did much of it reek like that. Take man in the lump, cut off random slices, examine them conscientiously, and the records you would have to make could hardly fail to be unpleasant. Read your newspapers, please—or simply look about you for once in a way. Well, there it is. But, of course, you are used to most of it, case-hardened, or subdued to what you work in. Your nostrils are not so sensitive as they might be. I once sojourned in a small town in Southern Italy for some weeks, and it grew easier toward the end. This is one of the fortunate dispensations of our working psychology. Or is it? Perhaps if we calloused less promptly. . . .



But I am digressing again from Zola, and I mustn't; not until he has helped me through to a difficult transition and so brought me within sight at least of my elusive subject. For I am still almost certain I have something to say if I can only warp round to it. Zola, then! A tubby, tough-headed, wilful man with an unshakable belief in himself and with an infinite capacity for hard work. When he formed an opinion it was there to stay, and he fought for it. Witness his confession to George Moore: "With me an opinion is like a heavy piece of furniture; it is moved with difficulty." And one of these massive opinions which he early formed was that novel writing should really be a branch of descriptive science, a division of natural history. You looked at a man as you looked at a bug, at a group of men as you looked at an ant-hill, and then you coldly and precisely set down your exact observations. Which is a very seductive theory for a scientific age, only, of course, no novelist, including the great Zola, has ever been able to illustrate it by his works—for the quite simple reason that novelists are not scientists and have not the temperament and training of scientists or they would not be novelists. For novelists, even serious, naturalistic, sociological novelists, are at bottom men of feeling and imagination, that is to say, artists—using words not coldly and precisely but warmly and suggestively, in such a way as to make the maximum appeal to our sensibilities, our emotions. For example, Zola! Anyone less like a scientist it would be difficult to imagine. He was red-headed about life; he was a perpetually erupting volcano. His words were spears, battle-axes, hand-grenades. In short, as has often been pointed out, he was an upsidedown idealist, a wild and snorting romantic whose fantastic imagination ran out and revelled in the ugly, the grotesque, the obscene. Descriptive science be hanged! He didn't describe a world—he created one. And that is what all great writers do and always will do, be their sociological or æsthetic theories what they may.

All of which would seem—well, not in harmony with my previous assertion that an exact description of any casual slice of life must necessarily prove unpleasant. But I intend to have it both ways, as you shall see.

My point is that science, describing mankind coldly and precisely, cannot help making a record of the race which it is not very inspiring to contemplate for the uncomfortable facts are there.

True, even science must record the occasional virtues and even nobilities of man; for those facts are there also. Man, in short, as science records him, seems to be an unpleasant sort of land mammal who has the unexpected and important faculty of self-criticism, and who is very gradually and painfully, by reason of this faculty, managing to become less unpleasant than he used to be. And, as even science must admit, he has another unexpected and important faculty as well. Shall we call it creative imagination? I am certain that John B. Watson would not let me do so, but shall we call it that, tentatively, all the same? Well, whatever we decide to call it, it is there; and this is more or less how it works. Man, through self-criticism, not only becomes ashamed of himself as he is; but he is able also to imagine (more or less vaguely, perhaps) the sort of creature he would like to be. That is, to use the quaint old language of outmoded centuries, he is able to form ideals; and he really then in some fumbling sort tries to attain to them. It is a very curious spectacle, not to have been predicted from the behavior of white rats in a maze, and not a little disturbing I should suppose to Mr. John B. Watson, although I am probably quite wrong in this gratuitous assumption.

Now in certain fantastic men these faculties of creative imagination and self-criticism are abnormally developed and allied with a highly strung, and usually overstrung, emotional temperament. And the combination leads these abnormal citizens to do singular things. They take to painting pictures, to writing poetry, to founding new religions or reforming old ones, and the like. We call them saints, prophets, artists—all sorts of funny and unpredictable names. And of late years a great number of such men have become novelists, tellers of tales in prose—which is the ordinary rhythmical but unmetrical language of their kind. So they tell us their tales and we read them, but only if we find them readable, and we only find them readable when they cast a spell upon us, hypnotize us, and so make us believe for the time being that what they are telling us is true. If they tell us tales about giants and fairies, they must make us believe—*while we are reading*—in their giants and fairies. If they tell us about beings like ourselves, they must make us believe in them; if about beings better or worse than ourselves they must make us believe in them—at least, until we put down their books. After we have read a novel the immediate strength of the illusion it created departs, and we then ask ourselves that fatal question, Was it worth reading?

I submit that a given reader's first answer to this query should always be, "If I believed as I read, it was an artistic success so far as I personally am concerned. I am a good subject for that particular hypnotist." I submit that his second answer can only be arrived at by his asking himself an alternative question (which I paraphrase from my room-mate of long ago): "Do I feel the better for having read it?"



A slight pause will be made here until the immediate shower of bricks subsides. And now I resume. . . .

Do I feel the better for having read it?

That is, Do I feel *more*, or *less* able to go on with the difficult business of living my life? Am I bucked up, or am I not?

And I submit finally (which I hope may partially avert from me the curses of our militant intelligentsia!) that any given reader's answer to this alternative query must always be an individual answer. My alternative query doesn't mean that only those novels are worth reading which have a generally uplifting tendency. It means simply that any given reader is a fool who reads books which depress his vitality, his will to live and to struggle toward a life which seems to him really worth living.

And here at last, having won through my difficult transition, I come to the original subject of this paper, namely—The Triumph of the Tough.

And behold, some platitudes! We are living in a scientific, a materialistic age. The old sanctions—*etc., etc.* Select an intelligent novel reader of the present day in young maturity and the chances are you will be dealing with a man or woman who is a thoroughgoing sceptic and who has about made up his or her mind that life is a rather dreary farce. A man or woman, then, who is quit

in for such pagan compensations as life, in its meaningless insufficiency, affords! And it remains to ask what kind of novel might be expected to make such a man or woman feel the better for having read it?

In the first place, such a reader will with difficulty yield to hypnosis by any teller of tales who believes in man as a spiritual being destined to create more stately mansions for his soul throughout eternity. So mystically naïve a conception merely annoys our selected reader, and he wearily drops any book which suggests or embodies it. Our selected reader is, as we say, too hard-boiled for any such unjellied stuff as that. No novel that deals with man as if he perhaps had an immortal destiny could possibly buck up this reader of ours. On the contrary. Supposing he could win through such a novel at all, which is doubtful, it would merely have depressed his pulse and lowered his temperature. Indeed (as I gather from much current novel reading) there is only one way to buck up the finally hard-boiled. You must stimulate his capacity for scorn and feed it with appropriate images. The spirit, sir, must be one of mockery, for only while he is consciously mocking does our selected reader submit to the illusion that he is more than man. An enormous capacity for scorn, in short, is the ultimate triumph of the intelligent tough.



The years pass. It was in 1906 that William James first delivered his lectures on Pragmatism at the Lowell Institute in Boston and drew his once-famous distinction between the tender-minded in philosophy and the tough-minded. "Two types of mental make-up" he called them, and added that "The tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads. The tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal. Each type believes the other to be inferior to itself; but disdain in the one case is mingled with amusement, in the other it has a dash of fear."

Well, it was recognized even in those antiquated days that James had found precisely the right names not merely for two sorts of philosophers but for two kinds of men. His names were caught up by the Press, and by the general tongue. We were all tough-minded or tender-minded. Ah—which were we? It was doubtful then. But the years pass. Other notions came along. A world war came along—an aborted peace. A jazz age beat on its tin-pans and sobbed cynically on its luscious and insincere saxophones. And—but how oddly!—here we are! Two decades have vanished. Those who were thirty are fifty. It is 1926. . . .

But the years still pass. So—to the tough his toughness, and to the tender his hopes, though not unmingled with that devastating Jamesian "dash of fear!" And, yes, on the whole, I agree with myself. I have been a fool to read so many current novels which have depressed my vitality. As a young man, it was different; there had been a good deal of treacle about, and one craved a noggin of vinegar with a chaser of vitriol. And besides, "The Red Badge of Courage" was a very fine book, and so was "L'Assommoir," and "Madame Bovary" is a masterpiece. Oh, well, I admit that James Joyce can do things with language, and that even Aldous Huxley can ply a skilful and mordant pen! But somehow, I've never lost my taste for woolly old Wordsworth—although I've stupidly failed to revisit Tintern Abbey in seven years. Farewell, Van Vechten! Farewell, Ben Hecht! You will not miss me, and I believe I am turning home. . . .

In its current issue, a number devoted entirely to Shakespeare, the *Theatre Arts Monthly* leads off with an interesting paper, by John Mason Brown, entitled "What the Moderns Have Done to Shakespeare." Mr. Brown sketches the development of the Shakespeare stage from the "good old days" to the present of the New Movement,—when the director has become "an autocrat, a final interpreter, who orchestrates the entire performance," and the designer "an interpretative artist." The actors, Mr. Brown says, still lag behind in the old tradition, and only when they adapt their art to the new demands made upon it, will the Shakespearean productions of the New Movement make a well-rounded whole. The magazine contains in addition to Mr. Brown's study, papers by Otis Skinner, Ralph Roeder, Rosamond Gilder, Walter Prichard Eaton, and others, and a profusion of interesting illustrations.

It is a number well worth the reading.