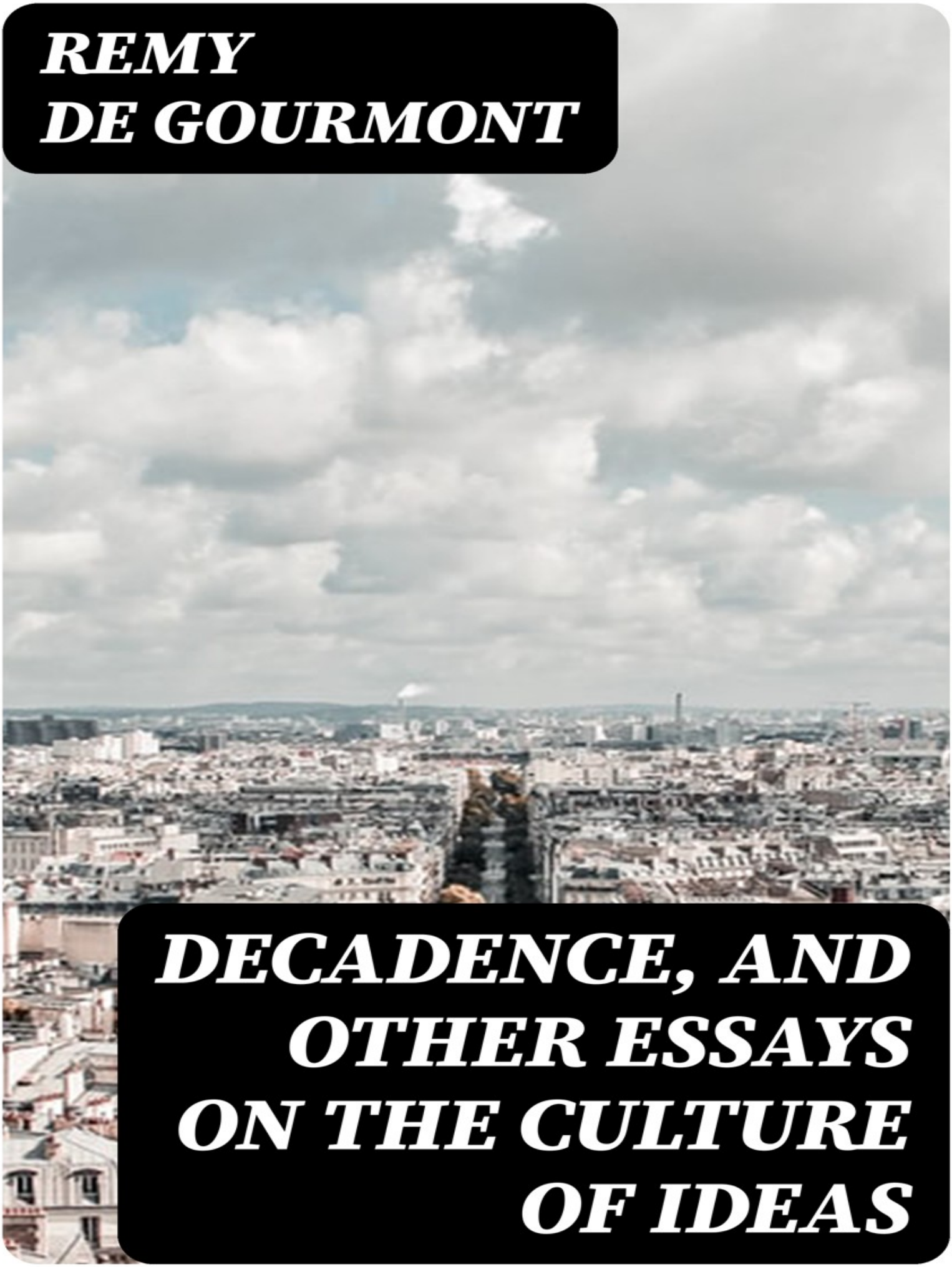
REMY DE GOURMONT



DECADENCE, AND OTHER ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE OF IDEAS

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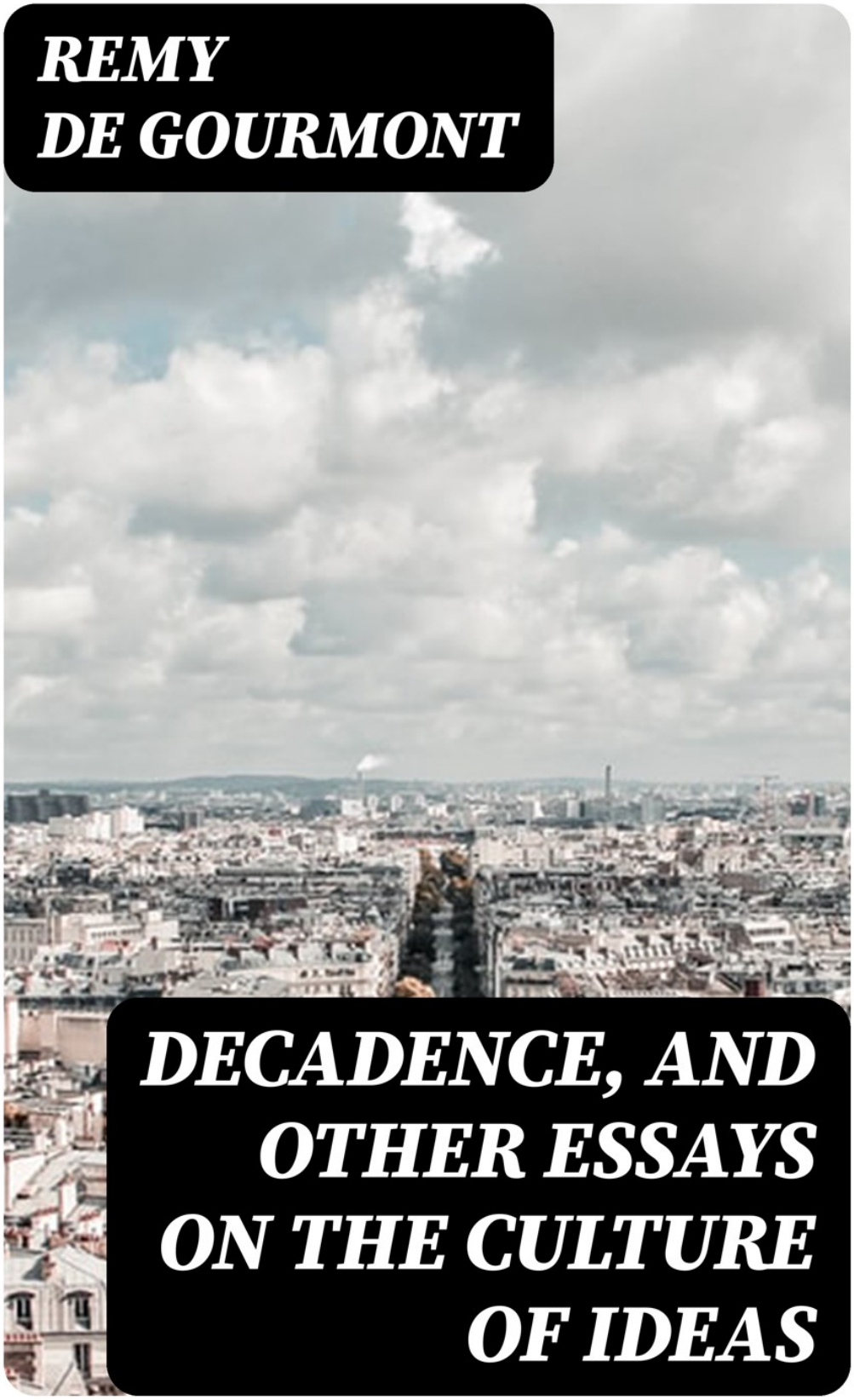

DECADENCE, AND OTHER ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE OF IDEAS

Remy de Gourmont

Decadence, and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas

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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 of the non-true." Yet Gourmont himself was carried beyond it in his destructive zeal, when he snatched, somewhat hastily, at the theories of his friend René Quinton, the biologist, to which the fates have not proved altogether kind since they were first stated. For there is usually a positive flaw in the armour of even the most discreet "sower of doubts," and how could Gourmont, who took Pierre Bayle's famous profession as his own device, resist the temptation to avail himself of so formidable an arsenal against the pretentions of the human

reason to impose its frail and arbitrary laws upon the universe?

"Reason," he says, writing of Kant's method in *Promenades Philosophiques*, "is only a word—expression of the most convenient ways of comprehending the multiple relations which unite the varied elements of nature. The reason is only a unity of measure, though a necessary unit, and one without which there would be such differences between men's judgments that no society would be possible. But this necessity is not anterior to life; it is posterior to it. What is necessary, what is reasonable, is what is; but any other mode of being, as soon as it was, would be equally necessary and reasonable." Instead of any rationalistic system whatsoever, we need "a flat-footed philosophy, familiar and scientific, always provisional, always at the disposal of the new fact which will necessarily arise, a philosophy which is merely a commentary on life, but on life as a whole. Man separated from the rest of nature is a pure mystery. To understand something of our own constitution, we must plunge ourselves, humbly, into the vital milieu whence religious pride has withdrawn us, in order to raise us to the dignity of jumping-jacks of the ideal."

It was thus that, in his essay on *La Physique de l'Amour*, Gourmont, in order to disassociate the idea of love, which, rationalized, has itself become a sort of religion, with poets for priests, sought to "situate" man's sexual experience in the vast vital milieu of universal sexuality, and such were the aim and method of all his disassociations. In them he reveals himself as perhaps the most potent corrosive

intellectual agent of our time, after Nietzsche, to whom he owed a certain élan, and whom he helped to make known in France. All he offers is, in accordance with his own requirement, a simple commentary on life—on life as a whole—when it is not, more simply still, as in his literary criticism, a mere record of his sensations; but this commentary is so shot through with the light of his searching intelligence, and with his sensual irony, that there is little in the ramshackle structure of accepted truth capable of resisting its implications. To taste it to the full, one needs, no doubt, a certain preliminary preparation in disillusion, but, for those who have already had this, no intellectual poison is more subtly stimulating—or more salutary, either.

Where, as in the case of Gourmont, the wealth to draw upon is so great, a book of selections is particularly difficult. A word may be added here as to the plan of the present volume. In the preface to *La Culture des Idées*, which gave him his first reputation, and which remains the cornerstone of his critical achievement, Gourmont refers to the incoherence in its composition, which "no preface can either correct or palliate."

"What good is it for me to pretend, for example," he asks, "that these miscellaneous articles are closely bound together by a common idea? Doubtless some of them hang together fairly well, and seem even to grow one out of the other; but, in its ensemble, the book is merely a collection of articles. When Voltaire wanted to give his opinion on a current topic, he published a pamphlet. We, to-day, publish an article in a review or a journal. But Voltaire, at the end of

the year, did not gather his various pamphlets into a volume. He let them follow their destiny separately. They were collected only in his complete works, where, then, it was possible, grouping them according to their affinities, to avoid that variegated air necessarily assumed by our collections of articles."

What has here been attempted is a first *triage* of a part—the essential part—of Gourmont's work, and its logical rearrangement. At the head of the volume I have placed that article on *La Dissociation des Idées*, which Gourmont himself regarded as having "perhaps a little more importance than the others" in *La Culture des Idées*, since in it he exposes his method; and this I have followed with four articles from *Le Chemin de Velours*, which are there grouped together under the general head of *Nouvelles Dissociations*, and which form its natural suite or sequence. In this way I feel I have been able, not only to offer a book more homogeneous than either of the two from which its contents have been taken, but also, in a measure, to realize for Gourmont a project which, as he explained, the conditions of modern publishing alone prevented him from realizing. So far as I know, this is the first English translation of his essays authorized by Gourmont or his personal representatives.

For the hitherto unpublished portrait of Gourmont which appears as frontispiece to this volume, I am indebted to the very great kindness of Miss Natalie Clifford Barney, of Paris.

W. A. B.

Vence (A.M.), France, 26 March, 1921.

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THE CULTURE OF IDEAS

THE DISASSOCIATION OF IDEAS

There are two ways of thinking. One can either accept current ideas and associations of ideas, just as they are, or else undertake, on his own account, new associations or, what is rarer, original disassociations. The intelligence capable of such efforts is, more or less, according to the degree, or according to the abundance and variety of its other gifts, a creative intelligence. It is a question either of inventing new relations between old ideas, old images, or of separating old ideas, old images united by tradition, of considering them one by one, free to work them over and arrange an infinite number of new couples which a fresh operation will disunite once more, and so on till new ties, always fragile and doubtful, are formed.

In the realm of facts and of experience such operations would necessarily be limited by the resistance of matter and the uncompromising character of physical laws. In the purely intellectual domain they are subject to logic; but logic itself being an intellectual fabric, its indulgence is almost unlimited. In truth, the association and the disassociation of ideas (or of images, for the idea is merely a worn-out image) pursue a winding course which it is impossible to determine,

and whose general direction, even, it is difficult to follow. There are no ideas so remote, no images so ill-assorted, that an easy habit of association cannot bring them together, at least, momentarily. Victor Hugo, seeing a cable wrapped with rags at the point where it crossed a sharp ridge, saw, at the same time, the knees of tragic actresses padded to break the dramatic falls in the fifth act;[1] and these two things so remote—a rope anchored on a rock, and the knees of an actress—are evoked, as we read, in a parallel which takes our fancy because the knees and the rope are equally "furred,"[2] the first above and the latter below, at the bend; because the elbow made by a cable thus cast bears a certain resemblance to a leg that is bent; because Giliatt's situation is quite tragic; and, finally, because, even while perceiving the logic of these comparisons, we perceive, no less clearly, their delicious absurdity.

Such an association is perforce extremely fugitive, unless the language adopts it and makes of it one of those figures of speech with which it delights to enrich itself. It should occasion no surprise were this bend of a cable to be called its "knee." In any event, the two images remain ever ready to be divorced, divorce being the permanent rule in the world of ideas, which is the world of free love. This fact sometimes scandalizes simple folk. Whoever first dared to say the "mouth" or the "jaw" of a cannon, according to which of those terms is the older, was, without doubt, accused either of preciousness or of coarseness. If it be improper to speak of the "knee" of a rope, it is quite proper to speak of the "elbow" of a pipe or the "paunch" of a bottle. But these examples are presented merely as elementary

types of a mechanism which is more familiar to us in practice than in theory. Leaving aside all images still living, we shall concern ourselves exclusively with ideas—that is to say, those tenacious and fugitive shades which flutter about eternally bewildered in men's brains.

There are associations of ideas so durable that they seem everlasting, so closely knit that they resemble those double stars which the naked eye seeks in vain to separate. They are usually called "commonplaces." This expression, relic of an old rhetorical term, *loci communes sermonis*, has, especially since the development of individualism, assumed a slighting sense which it was far from possessing at the start, and even as late as the seventeenth century. The meaning of "commonplace" has also been narrowed, as well as debased, till it has come to be a variant of cliché, or hackneyed expression—that which has already been seen or heard; and, for the mass of men, who employ words without precision, commonplace is now one of the synonyms of *cliché*. But *cliché* refers to the words, commonplace to the ideas. *Cliché* defines the form or the letter, commonplace the substance or the sense. To confound them is to confound the thought with the expression of the thought. The *cliché* is immediately perceptible. The commonplace very often escapes notice if clothed in an original dress. There are not many examples, in any literature, of new ideas expressed in a new form. The most captious mind must commonly content itself with one or other of these pleasures, only too happy when not deprived of both at once, which is not very rarely the case.

The commonplace is both more and less than a hackneyed expression. It is hackneyed, but sometimes unavoidably so. It is hackneyed, but so universally accepted that it comes consequently to be called a truth. Most truths which travel the world (truths are great travellers) may be regarded as commonplaces, that is to say, associations of ideas common to a large number of men, none of whom would dare deliberately to disassociate them. Man, in spite of his lying tendency, has great respect for what he calls the truth. This is because truth is the staff with which he travels through life, because commonplaces are the bread in his wallet, the wine in his gourd. Deprived of the truth contained in commonplaces, men would be without defence, without support, and without nourishment. They have so great a need of truths that they adopt new ones without rejecting the old. Civilized man's brain is a museum of contradictory truths. This does not disturb him, because he is a "successive." He ruminates his truths one after the other. He thinks as he eats. We should vomit with horror if we had presented to us, in a large dish, the various aliments, from meat to fruit, mixed with soup, wine and coffee, destined to form our "successive" repast. Our horror would be as great were we shown the repellent amalgam of contradictory truths which find lodgment in our mind. Some few analytical intelligences have sought vainly to draw up in cold blood the inventory of their contradictions. To each objection offered by reason, sentiment opposes an immediately valid excuse; for, as M. Ribot has pointed out, the sentiments are what is strongest in us, representing the elements of permanence and continuity. It is not less

difficult to inventory the contradictions of others, where a single individual is concerned; for here we come up against hypocrisy which has, precisely, as its social rôle, to dissimulate the too strident clash of our variegated convictions. We should then question all men—that is to say, the human entity—or at least groups of men sufficiently numerous for the cynicism of some to compensate the hypocrisy of others.

In the lower animal regions and in the vegetable world, budding is one of the ways in which life is created. Scission is seen to take place equally in the world of ideas; but the result, instead of being a new life, is a new abstraction. All general grammars, or elementary treatises on logic, teach how abstractions are formed. They have neglected to teach how they are not formed—that is, why a given commonplace persists in living on without posterity. It is a somewhat delicate question, but it would suggest interesting remarks for a chapter to be called "Refractory commonplaces, or the impossibility of disassociating certain ideas." It would, perhaps, be useful to examine first how ideas become associated, and to what end. The method of this operation is of the simplest sort. Its principle is analogy. There are very remote analogies; there are others so close that they lie within reach of all.

A great many commonplaces have an historic origin. One day two ideas became united under the influence of events, and this union proved more or less lasting. Having seen with its own eyes the death-struggle of Byzantium, Europe coupled these two ideas, Byzantium-Decadence, which became a commonplace, an incontestable truth for all men

who read and write, and thus necessarily for all the rest—for those who cannot verify the truths offered them. From Byzantium, this association of ideas was extended to the whole Roman Empire, which is now, for sage and respectful historians, nothing but a succession of decadences. We read recently in a weighty newspaper: "If the despotic form of government possessed a special virtue, conducive to the creation of good armies, would not the establishment of the empire have inaugurated an era of development in the military power of the Romans? It was, on the contrary, a signal for downfall and destruction." This commonplace, of Christian origin, has been popularized, in modern times, as everyone knows, by Montesquieu and Gibbon. It has been magisterially disassociated by M. Gaston Paris, and is now nothing but nonsense. But, as its genealogy is known—as its birth and its death have been witnessed—it may serve fairly well as an example to explain the nature of a great historic truth.

The secret purpose of the commonplace is, in fact, to express a truth. Isolated ideas represent merely facts or abstractions. To form a truth, two factors are needed—a fact and an abstraction. Such, at least, is the commonest mode of generation. Almost every truth, almost every commonplace, may be resolved into these two elements.

The word "truth" may almost always be employed concurrently with the word "commonplace," and is thus defined, once and for all, as a commonplace which has not yet been disassociated, disassociation being analogous to what, in chemistry, is called analysis. Chemical analysis challenges neither the existence nor the qualities of the

substance which it disassociates into diverse elements often disassociable in their turn. It limits itself to liberating these elements and offering them to synthesis which, varying the proportions and adding new elements, will, if it likes, obtain entirely different substances. With the fragments of a truth can be constructed another truth "identically contrary." Such a task would be a mere game, but useful, nevertheless, like all those exercises which limber the intelligence and lead it towards that state of disdainful nobility to which it should aspire.

There are, however, truths that one dreams neither of analyzing nor of denying. Whether furnished us by the secular experience of humanity, or forming part of the axioms of science, they are incontestable. The preacher who proclaimed from the pulpit, before Louis XIV, "Gentlemen, we shall all die!" proffered a truth which the king, though he scowled, did not pretend seriously to dispute. It is, however, one of those truths that have doubtless experienced the greatest difficulty in becoming established, and are not, even now, universally admitted. It was not all at once that the Aryan races connected these two ideas—that of death and that of necessity. Many black tribes still have not reached this point. There is no natural death, no necessary death, for the Negro. The sorcerer is consulted, at each decease, in order to ascertain the author of this secret and magic crime. We ourselves are still somewhat in the same mental state, and every premature death of a prominent man gives immediate rise to rumours of poisoning, of mysterious murder. Everyone remembers the legends started by the death of Gambetta and of Félix Faure. They

connect naturally with those that stirred the end of the seventeenth century—with those which, far more than the facts, doubtless rare, darkened the sixteenth century in Italy. Stendhal, in his Roman anecdotes, overworks this poison superstition which must still, in our day, claim more than one judicial victim.

Man associates ideas, not at all in accordance with verifiable exactitude, but with his pleasure and his interest. That is why most truths are merely prejudices. Those that are least open to question are also those that he has always sought to combat cunningly with the ruse of silence. The same inertia is opposed to the work of disassociation seen operating slowly on certain truths.

The state of disassociation reached by moral commonplaces seems to bear a rather close relation to the degree of intellectual civilization. Here, too, it is a question of a sort of struggle, carried on, not by individuals, but by peoples formed into nations, against palpable facts which, while augmenting the intensity of the individual life, diminish, for that very reason, as experience proves, the intensity of collective life and energy. There is no doubt that a man can derive from immorality itself—from his refusal to subscribe to the prejudices inscribed in a decalogue—a great personal benefit; but a collectivity of individuals too strong, too mutually independent, makes but a mediocre people. We have, in such cases, the spectacle of the social instinct entering the lists against the individual instinct, and of societies professing, as such, a morality that each of its intelligent members, followed by a very large part of the herd, deems vain, outworn or tyrannical.

A rather curious illustration of these principles will be found by examining the present state of sexual morality. This morality, peculiar to Christian peoples, is based upon the exceedingly close association of two ideas—that of carnal pleasure and that of generation. Any man or people that has not disassociated these two ideas, has not mentally liberated the elements of this truth, namely, that outside of the properly generative act, accomplished under the protection of the laws, whether religious or civil—the second being mere parodies of the first, in our essentially Christian civilizations—sexual acts are sins, errors, faults, weaknesses. Whoever consciously adopts this rule, sanctioned by the codes, belongs evidently to a still rudimentary civilization. The highest civilization being that in which the individual is freest, the most exempt from obligations, this proposition would be open to question only if taken as a provocation to libertinism, or as a depreciation of asceticism. It does not matter here whether it be moral or immoral. It ought, if exact, to be seen, at the first glance, in the facts. Nothing is easier. A statistical table of European natality will convince the stubbornest that there is a very close bond—a bond of cause and effect—between a people's intellectuality and its fecundity. The same is true for individuals as for social groups. It is as a result of intellectual weakness that working-men allow their homes to be flooded with offspring. The slums are full of unfortunate individuals who, having begotten a dozen children, are surprised to find life harsh. These poor creatures, who lack even the excuse of religious beliefs, have not yet learned to disassociate the idea of carnal

pleasure and that of generation. In their case, the first determines the second, and their acts respond to a childish, almost animal cerebral process. The man who has reached a really human stage in the scale of intelligence, limits his offspring at will. It is one of his privileges, but it is among those that he attains only to die of them.

Fortunate for the individual whom it sets free, this particular disassociation is, in fact, far less fortunate for a people. However, it will favour the further development of civilization, by maintaining upon the earth, the spaces required for human evolution.

It was not till fairly late that the Greeks succeeded in separating the idea of woman and that of generation; but they had already disassociated, at a very early date, the idea of generation and that of carnal pleasure. When they ceased to consider woman solely as an instrument of generation, the reign of the courtesans began. The Greeks seem, moreover, always to have had an extremely vague sexual morality, though this did not prevent them from cutting a certain figure in history.

Christianity could not, without forswearing its own principles, encourage the disassociation of the idea of carnal pleasure and that of generation; but it successfully promoted, on the other hand, the disassociation of the idea of love and that of carnal pleasure, and this was one of the great conquests of humanity. The Egyptians were so far incapable of understanding such a disassociation, that the love of a brother and sister would have seemed nothing to them if it had not led to sexual intercourse. The lower classes of great cities are often enough quite Egyptian in

this regard. The different sorts of incest which occasionally come to our notice, testify to the fact than an analogous state of mind is not absolutely incompatible with a certain intellectual culture. The peculiarly Christian form of chaste love, freed from all idea of physical pleasure, is divine love, such as it is seen flowering in the mystical exaltation of the contemplatives. This is the really pure love, since it corresponds to nothing that can be defined. It is the intelligence adoring itself in its own infinite self-made image. Whatever sensual element may be involved has its source in the very constitution of the human body, and in the law governing the interdependence of the organs. No account should, therefore, be taken of it in a non-physiological study. What has been clumsily called Platonic love is thus a Christian creation. It is in the last analysis a passionate friendship, as vital and jealous as physical love, but freed from the idea of carnal pleasure, just as the latter had already been freed from the idea of generation. This ideal state of the human affections is the first stage on the road to asceticism, and asceticism might be defined as the state of mind in which all ideas are disassociated.

With the waning of the Christian influence, the first stage of asceticism has become a less and less frequent halting-place, and asceticism itself, grown equally rare, is often reached by another route. In our day the idea of love has once more been closely connected with the idea of physical pleasure, and moralists are busy refashioning its primitive association with the idea of generation. It is a rather curious retrogression.