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A Pathological Movie

The World's Illusion. By Jacob Wasserman. Translated by Ludwig Lewisohn. Harcourt, Brace and Howe. 2 vols.

THERE is no denying the dramatic force of this long, earnest, and disorderly story, with its large cast of characters, its bizarre coloring, and its flickering, jumpy movement as of some heroic moving-picture. It would hold the interest through all its 787 pages if there were nothing in it save its arresting procession of grotesque incidents, but there is something more, and that something is an ironical quality that suggests the manner of the great Russians. Wassermann, in other words, not only represents the life that he depicts brilliantly; he also criticizes it furiously. His whole attitude, indeed, is far more Slavic than Teutonic, though he writes in German and his home is in uncritical Vienna. What he has got from the latter-day Germans, notably Walther Hasenclever, is simply the structure of his tale—a structure that abandons all the architectonics of the old-time well-made novel and turns to the loose, horizontal, sprawling design of the moving-picture. But in attitude the whole thing belongs to the Bad Lands beyond the Vistula. Western civilization, as Wassermann sees it, is not merely diseased; it is itself a sort of disease. All his characters, high and low, are pathological cases. If they are not downright insane, then they are gnawed by unintelligible obsessions and floored by incomprehensible griefs. If they are not dying of maladies described by Osier, then their vital organs are breaking down under vague, transcendental, Ibsenish distempers, each a form of retribution.

Thus the chronicle, to an American, cannot carry much conviction despite its fine passion and its vivid detail. We are, despite our extravagances in politics, ethics, and religion, patrons of normalcy in literature. Since the day of Hawthorne and Poe the trend has been away from *heliogabalisme* and toward the realistic examination of familiar motives and ordinary lives. In "The World's Illusion" there is a wide swing in the other direction. It is never quite possible to relate Christian Wahnschaffe, the protagonist, to the acts and purposes of existence as any sane American understands them. In the days of his epicureanism, galloping about Europe in the company of grand dukes, stage stars, diplomats, international millionaires, and other such gaudy fauna, he seems a figure out of grand opera, and in the days of his ascetic reaction, buried in a Berlin slum with thieves, prostitutes, and murderers, he passes beyond comprehension altogether. Our Harry Thaws stop with the girls of the Follies, and so play no high jinks with ancient family trees; our sentimentalists live comfortably in steam-heated settlement-houses, and so give the police and their families no genuine concern. If Wahnschaffe ever becomes real at all, it is because of Wassermann's obvious and unlimited belief in his reality. His astounding doings are simply stated, not explained. One never really finds out, despite much discussion of it, why he renounces his position and his huge heritage, and takes to a dog's life with a dying street woman. And one never quite makes out why, after her death and the murder of the one decent woman that he has found in his wallow, he cuts off the last connection with the world that he has

known, and disappears into the black depths of the human herd, penniless, friendless, and nameless.

All the other persons of the story are quite as fantastic. There is one who piles up millions on the Paris Bourse, and then goes bankrupt. As a result of this debacle "eighteen hundred mechanics and shopkeepers lost all they had in the world, twenty-seven great firms went into bankruptcy, senators and deputies of the Republic were sucked down in the whirlpool, and under the attacks of the opposition the very administration shook." Another, though a cripple, makes his way to India, and becomes the intimate of eminent and unapproachable Brahmins. Yet another is the greatest opera singer in the world. Yet another starts a bloody revolution in Russia. Yet another heals by the laying on of hands. Yet another, a German army officer, declines a challenge and shakes Junkerdom to its foundations. They swarm in the book, and one often confuses one with another. Perhaps the most nearly real of them all is Niels Heinrich Engelschall, the murderer. Niels Heinrich, at all events, manages to explain himself in logical terms. When he tells Christian why he killed Ruth Hofmann one somehow believes him. He is a loafer and a swine, but there is a certain homely sense in him. Naturally enough, Christian remains unintelligible to him. And to the elder Wahnschaffe. And to Frau Wahnschaffe, and Judith Wahnschaffe, and Wolfgang Wahnschaffe, and all the rest of the Wahnschaffe. And to Crammon, the cynical companion of his nonage. And even to poor Ruth, who loves him.

In brief, this is a novel that is not to be put on the stand and cross-examined. One must take it as one takes the new music; it obeys only its own logic, its own epistemology, its own psychology. Once that much is granted, what remains is very curious and lasting entertainment. The thing is gargantuan, but never tedious. It alarms and outrages, but it never quite gets itself heaved into the fire. It was worth doing into English, if only as an evidence of the slow but sure western march of the Slav spirit. Mr. Lewisohn's translation, as might be expected, is excellent. Now and then he falls into Americanisms —for example, the verb to loan—but that is not often.

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