

# FIVE SONNETS

By Alfred Kreymborg

## *Old Ralph Waldo.*

No dreamer can afford to scorn the human—  
He needs some flesh to feed the flying soul.  
No transcendentalist outlives the yeoman  
Who grubs the soil and brings the spirit coal.  
And yet, the hardy brutal realist,  
Who knows no soul inhabits the earthy zone,  
Must be embarrassed when some idealist  
Laughs at the way he swears inside the bone.

This riddle never troubled Emerson—  
The star of my youth and now the evening star.  
Having read the latest tough American,  
I turn and re-read the serene philosopher.  
Whether my land grows fleshly or too pure,  
“*We need more and better swearing,*” brings the cure!

## *The Two Henrys.*

When I’m outdoors again there’s nothing I read—  
Unless one reads while looking into things.  
Then, when I’m back indoors, flower and weed  
Keep haunting the heart and head until each sings.  
One could open a book and find it there as well—  
(Hear it in Heinrich Heine’s triple song—  
Comedy, tragedy, Heaven that blends with Hell—  
And how these three agree with the woodland throng.)

But books are best in lonely city places.  
When neighbors favor me with surly faces  
I long for the shortest route to a fellow creature,  
Yearn for an hour with Nature’s every feature.  
The lamp well lit, I sit with that loving robber—  
“The Homer of insects”—old Henri Fabre.

## *Yellow With Yesterday.*

Down in the dustbin, I stumble over journals,  
Mouldy, wrinkled, yellow with yesterday’s news.  
There’s little I comprehend in these diurnals,

Least of all the calm editorial views.  
 Someone agrees with me there, for here I read:  
*"Your views on the present war are very low.  
 Your hide deserves a higher type of lead.  
 Stop my subscription.—Pro Bono Publico."*

Did the Editor survive these ironies?  
 Where is his pen and where "the present war"?  
 And now one hears new warfare overseas,  
 Will upright old Pro Bono write in once more?  
 I read this morning's paper—here's the leader—  
 And one more letter signed, *your Constant Reader*.

### *The Professor Charms The Ladies.*

Professor X is conscious of his charm  
 As he leans upon the rostrum blessing Keats.  
 The ladies flutter with a sweet alarm  
 As he leads poor Shelley through his sinful feats.  
 A romantic frown disturbs the classic brow—  
 Two or three virgins plan a graceful swoon—  
 Can it be he'll dare drag in Lord Byron now?  
 A calm clear voice reads fiery Don Juan.

At last the high Professor clears his throat.  
 The President leads him to a low divan.  
 The Treasurer brings his tea and one long note—  
 Pleading sotto voice, "And now, dear man,  
 Won't you read us some of *your* poetry?"  
*"Bless you, my dear, I will for a higher fee!"*

### *Fame Or Immortality?*

The wistful thought comes over any father  
 Who has given his best to help frail children grow:  
 When I am gone will those grown youngsters bother  
 To think proud things of the man who loved them so?  
 'Tis thus a young poet feels about his name:  
 If one or two small verses outlive me,  
 Will they be glad, or hide their heads in shame  
 If folk should say of the father—Who was he?

And if the poems live—(O flattering thought!)  
 To be a kind of second generation—  
 Grandchildren now of what the parent sought—  
 What do they think of their long-gone relation?  
 The poet is but a fool who worries now:  
 He ought to rot and let the poems grow.

# JOSEPH CONRAD, 1907—

## *A Humble Apology*

By Wilson Follett

LET it be entered in the minutes, first, that these paragraphs are no attempt to set down a detailed commentary on the greatest of modern imaginative writers in English. They are written where there is not a line of Joseph Conrad's printed work to refer to, not a scrap of his writing, not a syllable of anyone's writing about him. If words of his creep into the text, they do so out of one memory which had its most recent fresh contacts with the majority of the books from ten to fifteen years ago. And if sayings of his do in that way come in, or confused echoes of his sayings, they shall stand as written, and may not be set right by the books afterward. For there is certainly a kind of value in the uncensored, uncorrected first-hand evidence of what, after a full decade, a writer of Conrad's scope and stature means to one who became his faithful reader in 1907; who then followed all that he wrote or had written, with much that was written about him, until 1918; and who thereafter, through no fault of will or memory, lost the reader's contact with not only his books but pretty much all books.

It seems to me that we know most about the enduring qualities of the writers with whom we have lived but with whom we are not now living. Re-reading is a very superior test of the writer's longevity, but non-reading is the supreme test of all. *Any* author of whom one is making a close study is important while one is doing it. We tend, while prosecuting such a study, to regard our author with the specialist's narrowness; he is at the center of consciousness, and every other subject tends to become marginal and to refer itself tacitly to him. The critic steeped in an author's significance will know a hundred small things that no one else knows; every time he recurs to his great subject he will detect a dozen fresh meanings, analogies; but he will just as certainly lose, a little by

a little, his notion of the author's relative importance. He is turning from a critic into a scholar—and it is inherent in the nature of scholarship that it throws the brightest conceivable spotlight upon the parts of a thing while leaving the whole in the blackest conceivable shadow. The specialist's mind is not a detached mind. If detachment is to be supplied, the outsider must supply it for himself. It is perhaps unfortunate for criticism that the clearest sense of a writer's whole importance is not to be discovered in the critic who knows most about his work in detail. We look to such a critic for ingenious theories, subtle discoveries, original interpretations. But for a widely tenable view of the writer's whole purport, we shall have to look every time to a person who has grown in himself while not growing in detailed familiarity with that writer's pages.

The writers who have become the victims of our involuntary neglect fall into three groups: those in whom, after a lapse of months or years, we can see nothing, and whom we are content never to re-read; those in whom we can still see about what we saw when first we read them, and whom therefore we do not require to re-read; and those in whom, through the memory alone, we can see everything, including much that passed unnoticed when we were actually reading them. All three groups may have seemed of equal importance at the outset, may have been discovered with equal excitement; but it is, I think, obvious that the class last named is the one which has survived the unanswerable test of its importance to us.

Such a writer, to me, has been Joseph Conrad in the decade during which I have not been permitted to read his books or the books of other men about him. During that period, he has not only stayed with me, not only become a permanent and nuclear part of my world, but he has grown with me as I