

club at Stanislau, and distributing numerous orders to the Royal and Imperial officers, so as to cultivate good relations with the Hapsburgs.

On our way back, a non-commissioned officer near me grumbled: 'Why couldn't they leave us in peace a day or two! We've wasted four days polishing up and preparing—busy about nothing—all for what? To loaf around in a row for twelve hours!'

However, we got a little amusement out of it three days later, when we read in the newspaper that the King, who actually had returned to Dresden the same evening, was 'spending a period with his valiant Saxons at the front.' The 'valiant Saxons' were mostly our munitions column and the bakery column, and 'the front' was the German officers' casino, miles and miles from any active fighting.

MR. CONRAD AT HOME

BY ROBERT LYND

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MR. CONRAD is nothing of a peacock. You may stare at him as long as you like, but he will never respond with a sudden spread of gorgeous vanities. He is more like some bird that takes on the protective colouring of the earth and delights in avoiding rather than in attracting the prying eye. Flatter him as you will; call him a phoenix or a bird of paradise: he may be secretly pleased, but he will only croak gruffly in reply, 'To have the gift of words is no such great matter.' He does not know how to play up to our inquisitive admiration. We may think, as when we take up *A Personal Record*, that now at last we have cornered him in a position in which he is bound to show us his fine feathers. But it is a vain hope. Glimpses we get—amazing glimpses—but never the close and detailed spectacle we desire. He protests that he is no cynic, but is he sure that he does not find a cynical amusement in teasing our curiosity in this way? Otherwise, would he have written in

the preface to *Notes on Life and Letters* that 'perhaps it will do something to help towards a better vision of the man, if it gives no more than a partial view of a piece of his back, a little dusty (after the process of tidying up), a little bowed, and receding from the world not because of weariness or misanthropy, but for other reasons that cannot be helped?' It may be that Mr. Conrad can suggest more enticing mysteries by a portrait of a piece of a back than other writers can by a full length representation, showing the polish on the boots and the crease in the trousers. In art the half (or less) is greater than the whole. Still, the principal point of showing us the back is that it may leave us unsatisfied and speculating. Mr. Conrad does not intend to satisfy us. He might have written on the title-page of his autobiography: 'Thus far and no further.'

At the same time, if he tells little about himself, he does not escape giving himself away in his admiration

for other men. He has an artistic faith that burns in his sentences as soon as he begins to talk of Henry James or Maupassant or Turgenev. He belongs to no school in literature: indeed, he hates the very thought of a school. He even becomes pleasantly angry if anyone attempts to classify authors as romantics, realists, naturalists, etc. Every great author is for him a man, not a formula. He can hardly mention the word 'formula' without contempt. 'No secret of eternal life for our books,' he declares, 'can be found among the formulas of art, any more than for our bodies in a prescribed combination of drugs.' Again, 'the truth is, that more than one kind of intellectual cowardice hides behind the literary formulas.' And once more, in reference to the good artist: 'It is in the impartial practice of life, if anywhere, that the promise of perfection for his art can be found, rather than in the absurd formulas trying to prescribe this or that particular method of technique or conception.' This may suggest to the pedantic that Mr. Conrad has no critical standards, and he certainly prefers to portray an author as he is rather than to measure him with a tape as if for a suit of clothes. And he is right; for to portray an author truthfully is to measure him in a far profounder sense than to measure his waist and the outside of his leg with a tape. Mr. Conrad's quest is the soul of his author. If it be a noble soul, he has a welcome for it, as Plutarch had in his historical biographies. He may not agree with Maupassant's deterministic view of life, but he salutes it in passing with the remark: 'The worth of every conviction consists precisely in the steadfastness with which it is held.' His first

demand of an author is truth—not absolute truth, but the truth that is in him. 'At the heart of fiction,' he declares, 'even the least worthy of the name, some sort of truth can be found—if only the truth of a childish theatrical ardour in the game of life, as in the novels of Dumas the father.'

He claims, indeed, that fiction is nearer truth than history:

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents and the reading of print and handwriting—on second hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist, too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.

I confess I dislike this contention among the various literary forms—poetry, fiction, history, biography, drama and essay—as to which of them is nearest grace. It is not the form that seizes the truth, but the imagination of the artist working through the form. Imagination and the sense of life are as necessary to a good historian as to a good novelist. Artists need not quarrel for precedence in a world in which all the great books that have so far been written could be packed into a single small room. At the same time, it is well that a novelist should take his art as seriously as Aristotle took the art of poetry. It often requires an exaggeration to bring the truth into prominence. And, in any case, the exaggerations of the novelists have as a rule been modest compared to the exaggerations of the poets.

If Mr. Conrad is to be believed, however, the novelist is the rival, not only of the historian, but of the moralist. He warmly denies that

he is a didactic writer, but at least he holds that in all great fiction a moral is implicit that he who runs may read:

That a sacrifice must be made, that something has to be given up, is the truth engraved in the innermost recesses of the fair temple built for our edification by the masters of fiction. There is no other secret behind the curtain. All adventure, all love, every success is resumed in the supreme energy of an act of renunciation.

One would have to think hard in order to fit *Tristram Shandy* and *The Pickwick Papers* into this—if I may so call it—formula. And, perhaps, it is a formula more suitable to tragic than to comic writing. Mr. Conrad as critic indeed often seems to be defining his own art rather than the art of fiction in general. He knows what he himself is aiming at in literature, and he looks for the same fine purpose in his fellow writers. We feel this, for instance, when he requires of the novelist 'many acts of faith of which the first would be the cherishing of an undying hope.' This, he declares, 'is the God-sent form of trust in the magic force and inspiration belonging to the life of this earth.' 'To be hopeful in an artistic sense,' he adds, 'it is not necessary to think that the world is good. It is enough to believe that there is no impossibility of its being made so.' There surely speaks the author of *Youth* and *Typhoon*. And there is the image of the same author in the remark that 'I would ask that in his dealings with mankind he should be capable of giving a tender recognition to their obscure virtues.' Mr. Conrad cannot escape from the shadow of his own genius. It falls on every page of his criticism as fatally as any formula, though more beautifully. His protest against what has been called 'stylism' is simply the protest

of one who did not approach the art of literature through that door. He is praising not merely Maupassant but his ideal self when he tells us:

His proceeding was not to group expressive words, that mean nothing, around misty and mysterious shapes dear to muddled intellects and belonging neither to earth nor to heaven. His vision by a more scrupulous, prolonged and devoted attention to the aspects of the visible world, discovered at last the right words as if miraculously impressed for him upon the face of things and events.

That, no doubt, is how Mr. Conrad learned the art of great writing, and we may read autobiography into his praise of Maupassant again when he says: 'He stoops to no littleness in his art—least of all to the miserable vanity of a catching phrase.' But his appreciation of Maupassant, though admirable in so far as it defines certain qualities in his own and Maupassant's work, is phrased in a manner that savours of intolerance of the work of many other good writers, from Shakespeare to Dickens and, if one may include a more diminutive artist, Stevenson. Thus he observes:

He will not be led into perdition by the seductions of sentiment, of eloquence, of humour, of pathos; of all that splendid pageant of faults that pass between the writer and his probity on the blank sheet of paper, like the glittering cortege of deadly sins before the austere anchorite in the desert air of the Thebaide.

Maupassant's austerity may have been an excellent thing for Maupassant, but to write like this is surely to degrade austerity into a formula. That 'splendid pageant of faults' may well be the salvation of another writer. We may admit that they remain faults unless they fit in as organic parts of a writer's work. But Maupassant was a lesser, not a greater, writer in so far as he was unable so to fit them in.

It would be unfair to suggest, however, that Mr. Conrad merely emphasises in other writers those qualities which he himself either possesses or desires to possess. Most good portraits are double portraits: they portray both the painter and the sitter. Mr. Conrad always does justice to his sitter, as when he writes: 'Henry James is the historian of fine consciences,' or as when he says of Maupassant: 'It cannot be denied that he thinks very little. In him extreme energy of perception achieves great results, as in men of action the energy of force and desire.' At the same time, we read the book for the light it throws, not on this or that author or the Polish question or the question of unsinkable ships, but on Mr. Conrad himself. The essay on Anatole France, for instance, interests us largely because it reminds us that Mr. Conrad is as impatient of political panaceas as of literary formulas. He remembers that Anatole France is a Socialist, and he comments cheerfully: 'He will disregard the stupidity of the dogma and the unlovely form of the ideal. His art will find its own beauty in the imaginative presentation of wrongs, of errors, and miseries that call aloud for redress.' He commands the artist to hope, but he clearly forbids anybody to hope too much. His 'Note on the Polish Problem' shows that during the war

the most he hoped for his country was an Anglo-French protectorate. Humanitarians simply horrify him with their dreams. He hates impossibilism as he hates the talk about unsinkable ships. But, perhaps, what he really hates most, both in politics and in ships, is the blind worship of machinery. He looks on Socialism, I fancy, as an attempt to build an unsinkable State—a monstrous political *Titanic*, defiant of the facts of nature and foredoomed to catastrophe. And how he hates the *Titanic*, this old master of a sailing-ship! He has little that is good to say, indeed, of any steam vessels, at least of cargo steam vessels—'a suggestion of a low parody directed at noble predecessors by an improved generation of dull mechanical toilers, conceited and without grace.' Progress? He retorts that 'the tinning of salmon was "progress."' And yet, when he met the men of the merchant service during the war, he had to admit that 'men don't change.' But all the same he is right in insisting that the man who blindly worships a machine, political, nautical or literary, is a fool. On the other hand, that is no argument against making use of machines. The machine, like the literary formula, is a convenience. Even the Socialist State would only be a convenience. It would in all probability not be a bit more alarming than a button-hook or a lead pencil.

PRUNING

From *Punch*, March 16

A LARGE caterpillar lay upon a bough, its body arched, as it were, for a spring. A careful observer might have noted that, true to the first principles of Natural Selection, it had provided itself with a coat which

blended in colour with the green slime of the old apple-tree. The same careful observer (or another one, for that matter) would have noted that its hesitation to proceed down the bough became more and more pro-