

Some Recollections of Joseph Conrad

By Ernest Dawson

From the *Fortnightly Review* (London)

I WELL remember the day when I first held in my hand, almost warm from the press, *Lord Jim*, which has remained, for me, a favorite among Conrad's works. I had just returned to England on leave after a spell of duty in the East, and this was my first Conrad book, though I had read a short piece of his somewhere. That afternoon, seated in a London garden, I heard the rigging of the old training-ship at her moorings in a northern river, humming the breathless song of her youth at sea, and saw the hateful scene of the abandonment of the *Patna* by her afterguard. Before the next morning I had been in Singapore with Marlow, had met, with him, the French lieutenant in the Sydney restaurant, and, with Jim, paddled up to Patusan.

I used to visit W. E. Henley, then living at Worthing. We talked one day of *Lord Jim* and *Youth*. Henley, who had never met Conrad in the flesh, remarked that Conrad was 'about due; he had the idea that any writer of promise (and Conrad was obviously that, and more) ought to pay him the compliment of a visit. 'Yes,' said Henley, 'Conrad is a Swell: he is a *damned* swell; you know, I sometimes think Conrad is the *damnedest* swell we've got. Would you like to meet him?'

My answer was given with an alacrity comparable to that with which, as a schoolboy, I replied to a benevolent uncle who asked if I would like to go to the play, and the matter was then and there arranged. Conrad was known to

inhabit a farmhouse a few miles from Sandgate. At Sandgate lived Mr. H. G. Wells, who was of the band of 'Henley's Men.' In the manner of an affectionate Pontiff, Henley wrote to Wells, and bade him invite me for a week-end and 'have Conrad on tap.'

In due course Wells (whom I had never seen) sent me a friendly note of invitation, and received me with much kindness at his queer but comfortable and convenient house. On the Sunday, after luncheon, Conrad arrived in a dogcart. The day was rough, and he wore a peaked cap of maritime cut, which, with his jacket and trousers of stout blue cloth, gave him somewhat of

the aspect of a pilot. Apart from details of costume, you knew him quickly for a sailor; as quickly for a *sahib*. He stood an inch or two below middle height, but never looked small; his square, high breadth of shoulders and short neck gave an impression of compact power. His face was sallowish, the skin weathered and puckered round the full dark eyes by habitual staring into the night or over the brightness of the sunlit sea. The hair and clipped, pointed beard were wiry and almost black. He wore an eyeglass, which he seldom used; when he did screw it into his eye, the effect was slightly incongruous. I never saw him use any other aid to vision, though in reading he held his book nearer his eyes than is usual with persons of normal eyesight. In some portraits of him, notably in the admirable 'Ulysses' etching by Muirhead Bone, you get that effect of a steady watching look, the gaze of sailors and shepherds.

He smoked almost incessantly and always cigarettes; at that time he rolled them for himself. He used a handsome old amber smoking-tube which had belonged to a distinguished and adventurous uncle, probably 'Mr. Nicholas B.' (that great-hearted veteran) of *A Personal Record*.

Conrad and I forgathered, that afternoon, upon some geographical turn of the conversation, over maps; it happened we were both map-lovers. But he and my host had much to say to each other, and my part was mainly a listening one. Conrad's personality impressed and fascinated me. I watched him drive away into the squally evening, handling the dogcart like a man steering a dinghy, and I wanted him for a friend.

THE Pent Farm, to which I paid my first visit soon after, was a typical Kentish flint-built farmhouse, of some antiquity. In approaching it, you left the road by a sudden dip under an overhanging bank. A mile beyond, The Pent, a great whale-backed hill, lent some shelter from the south-westerly winds. Bluish-grey like rocks, the farm buildings were inconspicuous, but if they had not been there you would have missed something. The work of men's hands had been

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JOSEPH CONRAD READING

FROM AN ETCHING BY MUIRHEAD BONE

'IN READING he held his book nearer his eyes than is usual with persons of normal eyesight.'

fashioned by time and weather to seem a part of nature. Probably a house of some sort had stood there since farming began in England.

A place like this is much more than a pleasing bit of landscape. An ancient farm is a legible record of ordered life and of work faithfully done, a monument of peace and patience and effort, the effort, for one simple and vital end, of uncounted generations of men. Such a place gave good holding-ground for the anchor of Conrad's heart, and he loved that home of his.

Upon the lintel of the main door was inscribed a distich, written by Walter Crane:—

Want we not for board or tent
While overhead we keep the Pent.

There was a short paved walk, sheltered and pleasant for a writing man to use in damp weather, and known as the Quarterdeck. Along one side of the farmyard ran a noble old barn, with lofty doors and a roof like a cathedral, full of dusty sunlight and dusk shadow, a George Morland effect.

Yes, Conrad loved his home, and took pride in it as if he had built it. In showing it to me he said, 'In London I should have to live in an ordinary sort of fifty-pound house just like another next-door, but here, you know, I could ask the Prime Minister to dine and sleep!' I do not know if any Prime Minister or dignitary of that kind ever did visit the Pent Farm, but if so he would have fared excellently well. For the house with all its service and affairs was under the direction of one whose skill (as Conrad put it) 'for many priceless years added to the sum of his daily happiness.' He wrote the Introduction to *A Handbook of Cookery* in humorous vein, but never more truly or sincerely. Many beside the readers of that modest and useful little book, all who in Conrad's home were privileged to know its author, recognize the truth of these words, and know that the world owes much gratitude to that gracious and gifted woman.

The family was completed by one small boy and one dog. The boy usually wore the white working dress of a blue-jacket, and busied himself with engineering models and toys. He was the titular owner of the dog, his inseparable companion, who bore the name of Escamillo—a fitting name, for his aspect was stagey, if not operatic. His ancestry was a permitted subject of speculation, but he had belonged to Stephen Crane.

CONRAD'S manners were courtly. The word is used without any implication of stiffness or formality. Into the Kentish farmhouse, the London



Courtesy Kennedy & Company

JOSEPH CONRAD LISTENING TO MUSIC
FROM AN ETCHING BY MUIRHEAD BONE

lodging, or the charming house and garden at Bishopsbourne, he always seemed to bring a breath of the Great World. His talk might be of the sea, of gliding through the silence of warm, dew-drenched tropical nights, of brave hours when everything above deck hummed to the sweep of the monsoon, of rivers or of ports, the towering, glooming African forest or the shadowy jungles of Malaya; he would seem quite at home against these backgrounds, and you felt that he would seem equally at ease amid rich uniforms and the silken pomp of palaces. This was because his main interest was ever in the hearts and souls

of men; scenery and accessories had their value, and he depicted them in writing with unsurpassed fidelity and skill, but whether the action passed upon sea or land, in a jungle hut or in a throne-room, the secret springs of it were his real and abiding concern.

His knowledge of English, literary and colloquial, need not here be praised. But those of his readers who heard him speak were continually surprised because he could not utter two words in English without betraying that it was not his mother tongue. And there were certain words which he, so to speak, declined to learn. One very odd example was the

word *vowel*; he transposed the 'v' and 'w' sounds, so that it became *wouvel*; I have been told that he would even write it so. He pronounced *used* as two syllables, something like *usil*.

In conversing, he often dropped into French for a sentence or two. Oftener still, he used a phrase of French apparently without knowing it. Quite commonly he would address one as *my dear*, as a Frenchman says *mon cher*.

The very wealth of his knowledge of our language, with its slang and familiar idioms, made these quaint lapses sound doubly whimsical; his talk thus gained a singular individuality, and it might be said that he spoke English with an un-English grace. His taste was unerring; he must have had many of his early lessons in the vernacular from the fo'c'sle, yet one never heard him use a 'vulgar' expression.

HE HAD read much of English history and memoirs, and of the best fiction in the language, but, I think, not much poetry. Classics apart, the power of enjoying the poetry of any language other than one's own is probably very rare.

His attitude toward what he did not care for, in literature, was often curiously inimical, or, at best, slighting. I once quoted some lines of *Andrea del Sarto*, and, as one does, added 'Isn't that how it goes?' To which he answered indifferently: 'I don't remember: to be more truthful, I don't know; I do not know my Browning.' Another time he was criticizing a story deliberately written in the *New Arabian Nights* vein, and said: 'Ah, yes, I dare say it is very good of its kind; I don't know my Stevenson at all well, but ——— ought to do much better than that!' Which seemed to me almost blasphemy.

His preferences and antipathies were very strong and very definite, but it was not easy to predict his views of the work of writers who were his contemporaries; they were often (it must be said) colored by personal feeling. Wells and Henry James were of his friends, and he spoke of their books with enthusiasm; there were others, of even equal fame but not personally known to him, whose work he preferred to ignore. The writing of others, to whom much lower seats have been allotted but who were his friends, had his warm approval. Having said thus much I must add that nothing, not even friendship, which meant so much to him, ever made him condone or tolerate what seemed to him bad or insincere work. His foible was endearing, for it was bound up with loyalty, and whatsoever fault may be found with him as a critic of

others' work, no man was ever a sterner judge of his own.

His friendships with other men of letters mostly dated from the time when his own reputation was still to make, and I think they must have been begun by the volition and acts of those men, for I cannot 'see' him making first advances. In those days he resembled a *de jure* sovereign, sure of his rights, but with his claim to the succession not yet before the world, and he was proud to the verge of arrogance. The tacit claim of Henley, poet, critic, veteran editor, and beloved master of men, to homage from the newcomer, Conrad merely ignored. Assuredly, if Scott or Stendhal, or Dickens or Flaubert (or, for that matter, Marryat or Fenimore Cooper) had risen from the grave, he would have paid that homage, but it was not in him to vail his topsails to a contemporary.

His delight in Dickens dated from his boyhood. Of other (English) novelists of the past I can remember hearing him speak of two only, the two sailor-authors just mentioned. He had a whole-hearted admiration for both, especially Cooper. We all love the gallant Marryat; most of us have loved the good Cooper; they provided noble entertainment for two nations. But I take leave to think that if Marryat's father had put him into the Army, and if Cooper had written only his fine epic of the backwoods, these two would never have darkened the doors of Conrad's Pantheon. Yet, when all is said, seamanship is an art.

There is little doubt that French literature made a stronger appeal to Conrad than English. He had the highest reverence for Flaubert; I have heard him declaim admirably a sonorous passage from *Julien l'Hospitalier*. Maupassant, Flaubert's great disciple, he admired for his technique. Stendhal he ranked very high; the only book he ever lent me was *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

In the other arts he was not much interested. I have seen a pleasing sketch by Muirhead Bone, 'Conrad Listening to Music,' but I never heard him speak of music, or heard any in his house. My memory is empty, also, of anything said by him about pictures. For him, as for many others, a picture was a record of its subject; just that and no more. Yet some rough pencil sketches of his which I have seen prove at least that he had some appreciation of the difficulties of pictorial art and some power of drawing. If the subject had charm or interest for him, and the record seemed accurate, he liked the picture. In the study at Bish-opsbourne was a large eighteenth century engraving of the Old Harbor of Marseilles; it was not a meritorious

work, but he liked it. Readers of *A Personal Record* know how and why he loved that harbor; indeed, to this day it is a romantic scene. He was also fond of a large photograph, which hung in the hall, of a full-rigged, frigate-built ship, with painted ports, every stitch set and drawing in a breeze just strong enough to keep her moving and no more.

He did not often talk about his books, but he liked to recall the circumstances and diverse places in which some of them were written. *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (affectionately *The Nigger*), which seemed to be his own favorite among his works, was begun during his honeymoon, I think in Brittany. He told me how *Almayer's Folly*, begun in Malayan ports and seas, was, *longo intervallo*, taken up again during weeks and months of enforced leisure while a steamer, newly built for the French-Canadian emigrant service, lay alongside a wharf, a place of pilgrimage for financial gentlemen (in silk hats) from Paris, and a Sunday show for Rouen citizens; how it was continued in lodgings in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, in the upper reaches of the Congo, in a Geneva hospital, and other improbable places.

WHEN I used to visit him after my long absences from England it seemed to me that time changed him very little. He grew thinner with the passing of the years, and his hair gradually became streaked with grey. The quasi-nautical style of his dress was abandoned, and he adopted what tailors call country clothes, often wearing leathern gaiters, though he seldom walked. During the War riding breeches, with polished leggings, carried some suggestion of uniform.

Our evening talks while we sat smoking, between supper and bedtime, are among the pleasantest recollections of my life. He was a delightful host, for he made you feel his own interest in all you said or did. His was a profoundly sincere nature, and he was in nothing more sincere than in this. He had that great gift, the talent for friendship. During the four-and-twenty years of my personal knowledge of him he rose from obscurity to fame, and his fame grew continuously. We were separated by great gulfs of space and time, and letters between us were few, yet, when we met, it was as if there had been no separation. I have known no other man who could so easily and naturally pick up such threads. The meaning of this will be best understood by Anglo-Indians, and those others whose life in their own country is measured by months and their absences by years. There are few who, like Con-

rad, not only look for and welcome the home-comings of the exile, but almost succeed in making him forget that he has been away. Fewer still, perhaps, would do this if their own lives had, in the interval, undergone changes of magnitude, including a notable rise in fortune and the achievement of a great figure in the world. Through all comings and goings and all changes Conrad was faithful, and remained always in sympathy.

Once, in Canterbury, when we had been looking at the cathedral, he said, 'You know I often forget that I am not an Englishman,' and in this as in all else he was sincere. He loved England (all that that name stands for, not just Canterbury, or London, or the countryside of this small island) more and better than many do who bear the name of Englishmen. His love sprang partly from a profound admiration of what, very loosely, may be called the political side of the national genius. An aristocrat by temperament and conviction as well as by birth, he, whose family and friends had been persecuted, plundered, exiled under a stupid and brutal bureaucracy, knew the English theory of political liberty as much more than a rhetorical phrase. It is now a habit with natives of this favored realm to speak of their rulers at best indulgently. Conrad, the Pole, on the other hand, whole-heartedly believed in British governance, especially in British diplomacy and foreign policy.

He was immensely gratified when, late in the War, the Admiralty permitted him

to serve in an armed vessel 'made up' as a Norwegian brig, in the North Sea submarine hunt. I have no space to tell here the tale of this adventure, a tale which he related with an almost boyish glee. They had 'no luck;' U-boat commanders had grown extremely wary; but, like a good fighting man, he bore no malice. When, a year after the Armistice, I came home and met him, he spoke temperately and with a marked absence of bitterness. 'In a very few years,' said he, 'we shall walk arm-in-arm with them again. It must be so, and it will be right.'

I had a meal with him in town on the day of his return from America; he was in fine spirits, delighted with his trip. Thanks to the kindness of his American friends (of whom he spoke very warmly), and their well-judged planning of the tour, what might have been a severe nervous strain had been, in fact, a refreshing holiday. The visit had also, I understood, been very successful from the financial point of view.

That was in the summer of 1923. In the autumn I spent a night at 'Oswald's,' and we played a game of billiards and had what was to be our last talk, for I went abroad again, and when I returned in the following year it was only a few weeks before his sudden death.

I WAS of the little company that, on a changeless August day, followed his mortal part to the grave, among pines and cypresses, a little without the walls of the gray, red-roofed historic city. One

looked almost for a naval guard; at the least one looked for some corporate representation of the sailors of England. With all his fame he was proud to be a master mariner; the simple marine honor, the flag spread upon the coffin, might well, it seemed, have been rendered to this seaman at his voyage end. But the sea wind from the Downs, sighing through the trees of that green place, fluttered no flag, there was no symbol or emblem of his calling at that sailor's burial. Only some three or four elderly men who, by their appearance, perhaps were seafarers; shipmasters, it may be, whose voyaging was over. There was a little party of writers and journalists, among them, his white hair streaming in the summer breeze, one whose noble elegy, 'Inveni Portam,' appeared a few days later.

'And so' (wrote Cunninghame Graham of his friend) 'we left him with his sails all duly furled, ropes flemished down, and with the anchor holding truly in the kind Kentish earth, until the Judgment Day.'

Not the world of letters only, but the wider world of men and women, is much the poorer for the passing of Joseph Conrad. For, as the Dean of Canterbury (who, I think, knew him only through his books) has said, 'If one quality more than another may be singled out as the special theme of his writings, it is honor, fidelity, loyalty to trust. . . . A great and noble-minded man, a prophetic man, a man led by the Spirit.'

Sonnet in the Manner of Christina Rossetti

By Maurice Baring

From the *Saturday Review*, London

My soul is like a garden overgrown,
My heart is like a dead pomegranate tree,
A woodland grove bereft of minstrelsy,
A nest from which the birds long since have flown.
I have exchanged sweet Manna for a stone,
And bartered freedom for captivity;
I have forgone my birthright; now have I
Nor right nor wish to call my soul my own.

Yet if I saw you passing in the street,
And you should look at me as once before,
I think the sun would shine for me once more,
And Autumn turn to resurrected Spring;
And I would leave behind my leaden feet,
And feel the impulse of a soaring wing.

Paul Valéry Takes a Walk

An Intimate Description of a Modern Literary Lion and his Foibles

By H. Lucius Cook

I HAVE never met Paul Valéry, but even an American can hardly pass the summer in Paris without hearing anecdotes of one of the most talked of literary men in France. One evening I was sitting on a terrace chatting with a young French university student. He began bemoaning his approaching vacation in Haute Savoie. Paul Valéry had recently come to spoil the spontaneity of life in the delightful rural community where my friend had passed his happy childhood summers. Valéry visits a friend whose estate borders that of the family of the student. These neighboring families are intimate, and often dine together. Hence my friend knows Valéry. I could not help questioning him on his aversion to a vacation in such excellent company, and here is what he told me.

Such a gloriole surrounds Valéry that silence reigns whenever he approaches, everybody waiting eagerly for whatever profound statement he may let fall. Whenever he is present, the dinner is a bore. Nobody speaks. After a long, almost unbearable silence, Valéry says, 'I had a fine walk to-day.' Everybody listens greedily to these long awaited words, looks at his neighbor, smiles approval, and then waits for what the great man will deign to utter next. Silence again thrills the room until Valéry finishes another course. If the domestic delays in bringing this, Valéry may be moved to utter, 'I found the water in the lake too cool for a swim to-day.' After these gracious words, a gentle, general murmur of approbation from the assembled guests glides into silence, which continues until the end of the meal. No conversation is possible unless Valéry speaks. One is there only to listen to him. Nothing matters but him, and what he says; and this consists of platitudes.

But by that evening, word runs in the village that Paul Valéry has had a fine walk, and that he found the lake water too cool for a swim. Many villagers approve this wisdom, and forbid their children to begin to bathe for another week. Then all the good people congratulate each other on the presence in their midst of a great man and profound philosopher.

But one, much wiser than the rest, ventures that no doubt a subtler mean-

ing underlay his words; that he was talking poetry, and deep philosophy. His walk was probably an excursion through starry fields of crystal thought, where none but he is advanced enough to enter. That is why he lapsed into silence after



Courtesy Harcourt, Brace & Company

PAUL VALÉRY

FROM a woodcut by Zadig.

saying he had had a fine walk. He could conduct the others no further than the gate. He could only say that he had spent some time in starry fields of crystal thought. His silence indicated that none had followed him nor could follow him within.

BUT how about the water in the lake?' another asked. And the wise one answered that it was far from him to be able to sound the depths of all of Valéry's meaning, even when it was only a matter of lake water, but that the great man might have meant almost anything. For example, he might have meant that after his fine walk in the starry fields of crystal thought, which he had just been reviewing in his mind during the silence at dinner, the material world in which we are immersed offered too cold a reception to give him pleasure on his return, and he therefore begged his friends to refrain from further conversation, so as not to chill the ardor of his mental excursion. Or he may have meant that at the end of his walk through the starry fields of crystal thought, he came to a great lake

whose secrets were impenetrable even for him. And when he added 'to-day,' he may have meant that he will soon be able to bathe in this lake, and give us the results of his experience. It was no doubt an announcement of a new book he is about to write on some great subject that even he himself cannot tell us about until to-morrow.

Then all the villagers applaud, and write their friends that Valéry is about to give the world a new book in which he expounds a new philosophy.

My friend once applied for the position of secretary to Valéry. He was recommended by Valéry's best friend. He was not even considered for the position, however, because Valéry wanted no one he knew for secretary, nor anyone with any intelligence. He wanted no one who would make suggestions to him, criticize his work, or even understand it. A mere machine, it seems, suffices for a secretary.

I do not know whether Valéry has written anything on how to choose a secretary, but perhaps one can be pardoned for not having read everything the great man has written, when he is so fearful of imparting something for nothing in return that it is reported that even his best friend pays enormous prices for a single copy of his limited editions, receives only type-written letters from him, signed by a secretary, and has paid for every signature of Valéry that is in his possession.

My friend was once present at a large reception given to Valéry by some three hundred of his friends when he returned from a speaking tour in Germany. These good people anticipated the difficulty that foreigners must have had in understanding the lectures of a man who is so great he is understood only with difficulty by his own countrymen speaking his own language. When asked by them how he had been received in Germany, he replied that he had been acclaimed everywhere as cordially as he is acclaimed in France, which led him to believe that the Germans understood him quite as well as did the French.

Thus Valéry takes a walk, and his words of wisdom reach even America, because a French university student makes fun of a great man who has for his own motto, '*Je me moque du Monde.*'