

A NOTE ON MR. CONRAD

BY EDWARD MOORE

WHEN *Almayer's Folly*, Mr. Conrad's first book, appeared in 1895, the *Spectator* observed with unusual discernment that its author 'might become the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago.' Mr. Conrad has since then become much more than that, but that his advent should have been proclaimed first by the *Spectator* is both fitting and ironical. It is fitting, for Mr. Conrad is distinctly the Apollonian artist of his time, and, while other writers have prophesied or blasphemed, he has been content to describe. It is ironical, for in the picture of life which he has drawn, there is so much which might have shocked the critic of the *Spectator* could he have but seen it.

Mr. Conrad is incomparably the most subtle writer of his age. Even his silence is significant, and it is as certain that his politics and his philosophy are profound as that he has told us nothing about them. He has not, indeed, a 'philosophy' at all, like Mr. Wells or Mr. Shaw. Is it because he is too skeptical or because he is too sure? That one has to ask such a question shows how much lies behind his work.

There are three qualities which stand out in Mr. Conrad's novels: the love of beauty, the insight into the mind, the sense of character. With beauty, the mind, and the moral conflict, he is concerned almost exclusively. The passions he has portrayed, it is true, but he has portrayed them pre-eminently in their effect upon the mind and upon character. In short, he has studied them under glass, and as a psychologist and a moralist. The soul he has not tried to know at all. The conflict in his novels is not the spiritual, but the moral, conflict. And this is

what separates him from Dostoievsky, whom, as a psychologist, he resembles so much.

Dostoievsky showed man in his relation to God; Mr. Conrad shows him in his relation to men and to nature. The former is a mystic, the latter a rationalist. The one knew human nature, human and divine; the other is interested in human nature simply as human nature. Neither Mr. Conrad nor his characters mention the name of God, and we feel it is because they would consider it insincere, even theatrical, to do so. There is something admirable in this reticence. Not to say a word more than one means — to say a word or two less, if possible: that is the sure way of making one's words memorable. And Mr. Conrad's words are memorable, more memorable even than those of Dostoievsky.

Mr. Conrad, then, is pre-eminently artist, psychologist, and moralist; in other words, he is interested essentially in beauty, the mind, and character. And he is interested perhaps in beauty primarily. He writes by instinctive choice of beautiful things: of the sea, of ships, of tropical skies, and of men whose lives have still the atmosphere of romance around them — of seamen, of barbarians, of South American bandits whose minds have something of the naïve morality of the Renaissance. And he never writes, as Stevenson constantly did, with the design of being 'romantic.' His beauty is not stuck on. On the contrary, when he describes a scene it strikes us first by its astonishing truth and then by its astonishing beauty. Take this 'scene' out of *Nostramo*:

A fire of broken furniture out of the Intendencia saloons, mostly gilt, was burning in the Plaza, in a high flame swaying right up to the statue of Charles IV. The dead body of a man was lying on the steps of the pedestal, his arms thrown wide

open and his sombrero covering his face — the attention of some friend, perhaps. The light of the flames touched the foliage of the first trees on the Alameda, and played on the end of a side street near by, blocked up by a jumble of ox-carts and dead bullocks. Sitting on one of the carcasses a lepero, muffled up, smoked a cigarette. It was a truce, you understand. The only other living being in the Plaza besides ourselves was a Cargador, walking to and fro, with a long, bare knife in his hand, like a sentry before the Arcades, where his friends were sleeping. And the only other spot of light in the dark town were the lighted windows of the club, at the corner of the Calle.

What a marvelous picture that is! As a description, what vividness and truth there is in it; as a picture, what masterly composition, what beauty. The beauty in Mr. Conrad's novels is of the highest kind; it springs directly out of truth and justifies for once Keats's celebrated dictum. That amorphous word, 'romantic,' has been applied monotonously to Mr. Conrad's works. They should be called, more simply, picturesque. Mr. Conrad writes in pictures, for the pictures come, and what he shows us is not action, but a progression of dissolving scenes, continuous and living, which in the end reflect action and give us a true apprehension of it.

For the accomplishment of this he possesses a fine style, the finest English style of his day, a style perhaps too loaded, too careful, but possessing that last gift, called magic, whereby the object is made to leap before our eyes by a power beyond mere description. *Nostromo*, his greatest exercise in the picturesque, is full of these successes, successes a little laborious, a little too careful, but indubitably successes. The laboriousness in his style accounts for its slow tempo, its fullness: the right word is sought with a rigor so severe that the sentence is sometimes retarded. It is a

style like a mosaic, or, rather, like one of those sunsets in which one picture melts into another, insensibly, gorgeously, unerringly, and as by some effect of careful art.

But when Mr. Conrad turns aside from his description of the beautiful, in which there is so much noble passion he becomes at once the detached student of humanity. In his vision of nature a poet, he is in his investigation of the mind and the passions almost a scientist. To study passion, he might tell us, it is necessary above all to eschew passion. Certainly the passions he shows us are sterilized passions — sterilized by his unique attitude to life. He is interested in life, but he does not love it; and in detaching himself as an artist entirely from life, his interest in it has actually become greater, has become interest and nothing else. Mr. Hugh Walpole says that he finds in Mr. Conrad's work 'gusto.' But if there is one quality which it lacks, it is exactly gusto. Balzac possessed gusto, Stendhal possessed gusto, and one can imagine what a glorious immortal figure the latter would have made of *Nostromo*.

Mr. Conrad's temper forbade him to do that. *Nostromo* is a figure splendidly cut, but he is not a splendid figure: Mr. Conrad will not allow us to deceive ourselves about it for one moment. And that, once more, is because the quality which distinguishes him is not gusto, but interest — interest the most alert, the most entrancing, but still interest. He studies all men; he is carried away by none. Even heroism, which comes so often into his pages, does not elate him. 'All claim to special righteousness,' he says, 'awakens in me that scorn and anger from which a philosophical mind should be free,' and his novels are a commentary upon it. He is a student of heroism, he notes how the spirit re-

sponds to uncertainty, to danger, to calamity, and he is interested in the responses.

This temper has made him perhaps the greatest psychologist since Dostoevsky; it has also condemned him to see everything in man except the soul. But other writers and the greatest, it will be said, have not given us the soul in their works. Nevertheless, it is true of Shakespeare's characters, of Fielding's, of Scott's, that, if their relation to God is not *given*, we still know it to be there. They are related to God, although the relation is not expressed; but Mr. Conrad's characters are not related to God at all. It is because they are not men and women (it is both a censure and a compliment to Mr. Conrad's art to say so); they are something much more definite than that: they are specimens of humanity, collected and docketed with incredible finesse. Lord Jim is a specimen, James Waite is a specimen, Heyst is a specimen. But specimens have no soul.

The novelists in the classical tradition, Fielding, Scott, Balzac, gave us figures less completely defined than Mr. Conrad's, but they gave the large movement of life. Their characters, in a word, lived in the world. But Mr. Conrad's characters exist insulated by the resolve of the author to study them; they exist in a laboratory of psychology. And the difference is not a difference merely of method. The characters of Fielding carry their background with them because the soul is implicit in them; Mr. Conrad's remain solitary because in them it is not implicit. Everything about them has not, indeed, been observed,—that would deny to Mr. Conrad the gift of imagination, which is his in a high degree,—but they are things which always *could* be observed.

Yet what a wonderful, and within

his limits what a satisfying, psychologist Mr. Conrad is! Nothing is half done, nothing is guessed; and the most masterly knowledge is squandered quietly on subsidiary characters and episodes. The French admiral who comes into *Lord Jim* for half an hour and passes out again is realized in every gesture so exactly that he exists for us complete. Observation in Mr. Conrad is united with an almost immaculate perception of the essential, an unexampled finesse in picking out just the word, the aspect, the gesture, that expresses the man or the situation. He selects a gesture as a connoisseur might select a precious stone, and in their setting his gestures have the impressiveness of precious stones. Imagination of the highest kind alone, and not mere observation, could give this unerring felicity in characterization: Mr. Conrad knows — he has not to guess — in what way his characters will act.

The rationalist who peeps out of Mr. Conrad the psychologist, reveals himself completely in Mr. Conrad the moralist. In his ethics it is reason that is moral, and the irrational that is immoral. The moral conflict is, therefore, the conflict between man in so far as he is a rational creature, and nature as a thing, a moral, and unknown. Nature against the conscious, the discovered, the ordered — that is to Mr. Conrad the real antinomy of existence. He gives the highest value, therefore, to the known, to the little in the ocean of the irrational which man has been able to wrest away and precariously to maintain. This alone is certainly good.

The symbol of the immoral is always nature in one of her moods — sometimes the sea, sometimes the impulses in man's breast. The known, the painfully conquered, on the other hand, is simple, so simple as to be commonplace; it consists to Mr. Con-

rad in the necessity for three qualities, vigilance, courage, and fidelity. These are man's highest qualities, and they are also his essential ones, for without them he would cease to be man. There is but a plank, or, at any rate, the timbers of a ship, between mankind and the anarchy of nature. It is the conception of a sincere skeptic and a seaman. Mr. Conrad's heroes are at once fortifying and discouraging; they fight, but they fight with their back to the wall. They have not the right to despair, however; for if they cannot win, they may not be defeated! Their endeavor, of course, is not to advance and to conquer — that would appear to Mr. Conrad the most extreme romanticism — but to maintain one or two things without which they would perish. And these are a few truisms. Man voyages over the devouring waste of existence on nothing more stable than a few concepts, a few platitudes.

This conception, so simple in appearance, is, in fact, extremely subtle. Only a profound mind could have given such fundamental meaning to platitude. It is the conception of a skeptic who is sure of one or two things; who accepts the minimum, who accepts platitude, indisputable platitude, because he is sure of nothing else. He has found two or three planks to put between him and the incommensurable, and that suffices him. And thus while he denies himself hope, as austere he denies himself despair.

His hopelessness is not like Mr. Hardy's, a hopelessness without bound; it is a sane hopelessness, a hopelessness full of courage. And his very skepticism must be the source of infinite intellectual enjoyment to him — how many *interesting* questions it must raise! Yes, skepticism like Mr. Conrad's makes one interested in life: it is, perhaps, the source of his own interest in it.

The New Statesman

THE 'RIGHT OF REVOLUTION'

OUR Socialists, unwilling to explain to their constituents the true causes of their electoral defeat, are trying to cover their defeat by defending the right of revolution. It is not at all surprising that the extremists, balked of their attempt to overthrow the state by a seizure of the legal power, should insist that, in spite of their defeat at the polls, a 'right of violence' exists, which will some day bring about their revenge.

Let us not make the mistake of believing that the revolutionists have renounced the methods by which they roused against them all upholders of order. Quite on the contrary, they persist in their fault; for a plain avowal of disaster would compromise their influence with those masses which they hope to lead into the morass of mad adventure.

Before the elections, the French Socialists spoke but rarely, and with a certain reserve concerning this right of revolution. They lived in the illusion that the 'organized proletariat' had arrived at such a degree of power that its simple gesture at the polls would reveal its preponderance, and permit it to prepare the foundations of that dictatorship of the manual laborers which is the final aim of all true Marxian Socialism. They know well enough that the majority of the population is not with them, and that all hope of a revolution in the laws is forbidden them; and this fact thrusts them upon the immemorial principle of militant minorities — a 'right of revolution.' They maintain this to be a historic right, and declare that all the leaders of the French proletariat and the foreign proletariat — Blanqui, Vaillant, Marx, Lenin — have never failed to assert the right to have recourse to violence.