ALLAN MONKHOUSE

Essays of To-day and Yesterday

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ESSAYS OF
TO-DAY AND YESTERDAY

ALLAN MONKHOUSE

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

IN these studies of men, books, and plays Mr Allan Monkhouse shows that sanity and "sweet reasonableness," which is ever the mark of the true bookman. "Let us have our favourites," he pleads, "but don't let us treat them as subjects for petrifaction." And again, "Some of us might get on better if we could say simply what we like, and why, without bothering with formal criticism. . . . The best fun is to have favourites, but they must be real ones." Such candour from a critic is rare and refreshing indeed. With this sanity is mingled a quiet and captivating humour, as when he asserts his belief that "it is possible to live a respectable life without *Prometheus Unbound* or *The Revolt of Islam.*" But most of all one must admire the fairness that comes out in all that Mr Monkhouse writes—a fairness which, as a recent critic has declared, is comparable only to that of Mr Galsworthy.

Mr Monkhouse was born in 1858, and is a member of that brilliant and devoted band which C. P. Scott gathered round him on the *Manchester Guardian.* He is also one of the most prominent figures in the Repertory movement, which has infused new life into the modern theatre.

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F. H. P.

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MINE OWN

THE critic who reacts quite correctly to masterpieces is hard to find, but your professional critic may be canny enough to hide his eccentricities; if he has a wild impulse he will count twenty (or is it twenty-five?) before speaking, as that young woman in Dickens couldn't be induced to do. But those without professional responsibility will sometimes even glory in being astray. I heard the other day of a man who said he could read all Dickens with pleasure except *David Copperfield*; in that he had stuck. Possibly he was tired of hearing that this is Dickens's best book and just wanted to assert himself against the world. Or perhaps Steerforth and Rosa Dartle and Uriah Heep had been too many for him. But in real life—or private life—people are far from uniform in judgment. They like or dislike in very arbitrary ways.

No doubt, we all do so. I could not explain why some things—passages in books or plays—affect me so deeply. It might be possible to trump up a critical reason, but that would not cover the ground. Yet it is part of the critical habit to choose the places where you will let your emotions go free. The critical habit is sometimes conceived as a damming (no; not damning); perhaps it is rather the direction of the stream. I have wondered sometimes in watching a play whether I was in line with the rest; you may compare notes with a friend and find that the pulse of his emotions has not run with yours. There are passages in which it seems that the appeal to you is deeper than to anyone else. I

suppose I have seen *Hindle Wakes* half a dozen times at least, and still I can hardly watch the first scene without tears. It may be partly because I knew Houghton and associate this play or this scene with him, but I have no sentimental association with Mr Bernard Shaw, and I can see myself shaken with emotion when the poet rounds on the parson in *Candida*. I suppose that everyone sees that these passages are good, but we haven't all this habit of letting ourselves go when the time comes. Perhaps some people let themselves go too early and too often.

I remember that when Houghton gave me the MS. of *Hindle Wakes* to read—long before its performance—we had some discussion about that first scene in which the announcement is made of the poor girl's death at Blackpool. I told him that such sharpness of tragedy threw the play a little out of gear; that it was not quite consonant with the rest. Possibly this was pedantic, but I am glad to know that I told him, too, that the scene must stand; that it was impossible to jettison anything so fine as that.

As receptacles of emotion we are all very different; and it is equally true to say that we are all very much alike. A Professor of Philosophy told me once that he found it impossible now to read to the end of the great scene of the theatre in *Vittoria*; the excitement of it was too painful. And I knew what he meant. I feel the thrill of it when the young Italians catch the descending curtain and Vittoria sings, "I cannot count the years"; I feel that the outburst for which we have been waiting—"Italia, Italia shall be free"—is almost unbearable. And, though Meredith is a great poet, these are not among his best verses; they have even a

touch of the libretto about them. The effect of that chapter should not and could not depend on the quality of the verse.

People in a community see the same things and read the same books, and the mental apparatus is very much in common. And yet, happily, in one memory and in another different things stand out. Sometimes, indeed, one's high lights are the same as those of others, and then we may be divided between an exalted sympathy and the instinctive resentment at an encroachment on our holy places. To be one with our kind is good and gives confidence in the order and sanity of the world, but we must have our peculiar possessions if we have souls of our own. And you may make a thing your own; you can mould it to your own mind. There are lines or passages of Shakespeare that seem to be more mine than his. He deserves some credit for them, certainly.

[1921]

ON HAVING FAVOURITES

THE other day a little girl told me that of all authors she considered Judge Parry to be the best, and I received some credit in being able to claim acquaintance with him. And I have a friend who places first among created beings (I don't think this is going too far) Madame Sarah Bernhardt. It is good that there should be such enthusiasms; they bless him that gives and him that takes. That someone in the world should place you first, not because you are a husband or a lover or the head of something, but from sheer admiration and appreciation of what you've done, must be very heartening. Most of us, however, flatter ourselves that we are catholic, that we appreciate and admire in the right proportions, that we are above arbitrary prejudices. The sane critic may find it a little depressing to know how near he can come to agreement with another sane critic. And if you are a modest person arguing for this or for that it may come upon you that you are not quite so much in the right as you thought you were; that you have become rigid in some old loyalty or that you have been led into some eccentricity. You must lop off the excrescence that you had fondly imagined to be individuality.

Yet it is difficult to steer accurately between conservatism and revolt. To the old fogey the handsomely bound classic carries an authority that becomes an obsession. These gorgeous or solid volumes have lain on Victorian tables in their thousands, and their con-

tents have acquired a kind of sanctity. To the average reverential man of the passing generation it is incredible that the upstarts whose names are quoted so frequently and unnecessarily in the papers can be put on a level with the canonized ones. And then, perhaps, he may find himself reading something by Mr de la Mare and liking it better than what he had just read of Matthew Arnold's.' So then he must read *The Scholar Gipsy* again to restore the balance, but in his heart he knows that these are not a god and a man, but two men. Arnold was the favourite poet of a friend of mine who died long ago. I don't think he was prepared to argue that Arnold was greater than Wordsworth or Keats; only that he appealed more to him. And that is right. Let us have our favourites. We are not all exquisite critical machines, and it is bad to pretend to be. These poets have not an absolute stature, and we have, or should have, our idiosyncrasies, our queer individualities. I could believe that somewhere there is a quiet, obscure person whose favourite poet is Hood.

There is danger in getting your opinions pigeonholed, certainly, and it may be unfair to those you have admired. A little book of essays recently published by Mr Hewlett has an introduction in which he complains that readers will pin down an author to their original conception of him. Thus, "it is still the fact that six readers out of ten expect every new book of mine that reaches them to be more or less of an echo of *The Forest Lovers.*" And he can do nothing except foam at the mouth. *The Song of the Plow* is a greater work, but Mr Hewlett is an established favourite in the other line. Mr Hardy, too, is always known

as a novelist, though critics keep telling us that *The Dynasts* and the poems are more important (*I* don't believe it). By all means let us have our favourites, but don't let us treat them as subjects for petrifaction. Even the critic may find himself limited by what he has said or written. Far back in my own dark ages I wrote something about Gissing, and when I read it again many years later it seemed that I was exactly where I had been. If you write a thing down and have it printed it becomes an epitome to which you cling in a shifting world. Ask a reviewer what he thinks of a book, and he will repeat the heads of his review; ask him years afterwards, and if he remembers anything at all he will give some hazy outline of that review. We are fixed, we are not open-minded enough, and yet perhaps it is worse to be too fluid. There is loyalty that is not mere rigidity, a loyalty to your sincere enthusiasms. I don't like people to tell me that Ruskin was a great man to them and that now he is nothing; you cannot be right to throw people over like that; the gods of your youth are not false gods.

I think that most reviewers are canny, moderate people who fear to make fools of themselves. They would like to discover and acclaim genius, but the pseudo-genius is a dangerous fellow. He has so often been taken at his own valuation; the grandiose, the pretentious, with a bit of talent to help, may go a long way. Criticism wants both pluck and discretion, and I think sometimes that some of us might get on better if we could say simply what we like, and why, without bothering with formal criticism. It might be as well, though, before taking this course, to make ourselves as

well-proportioned as we can. We strive towards a just all-round appreciation, and it would be disaster to attain it. The best fun is to have favourites, but they must be real ones: they must answer to something in our nature.

[1922]

THE CONVERSATION OF AUTHORS

IN a recent list of books was a little volume of Hazlitt's essays, selected by Mr P. P. Howe, and published by Messrs Methuen, two of which are *On the Conversation of Authors*. Hazlitt begins by saying that he can't see that the author is 'bound' to talk better than other people, and, indeed, some modest authors to-day would be alarmed if they thought that this was expected of them. Hazlitt agrees, of course, that literary folk don't have it all their own way: "though we have read Congreve, a stage-coachman may be an over-match for us in wit; though we are deep-versed in the excellence of Shakespeare's colloquial style, a village beldam may outscold us"—and so on. Yet he goes on to say that the conversation of authors, though "not so good as might be imagined," is better than any other, and that "when you are used to it you cannot put up with any other." He says that people of fashion talk about the same things as do authors, but do it worse, that "they, in fact, talk out of newspapers and magazines what *we write there*."

Perhaps we may take what Hazlitt says with several grains of salt. He is an essayist making out his case, and he isn't afraid of overstating it. The fault that he finds with literary men's conversation is that it is too tenacious, too thorough. But I can't help quoting what he says of Charles Lamb, though it may be familiar to my readers: "No one ever stammered out such fine, piquant, deep, eloquent things in half a dozen half-sentences as he does." Lamb was not a dogmatist, and

Hazlitt tells us that he persuaded him that Fielding was better than Smollett. They must have had some good talk at those Thursday evening parties at Lamb's, and perhaps Hazlitt, in backing the conversation of authors, didn't allow for his being among an exceptional lot. In some ways they were very like ourselves. "In general we were hard upon the moderns." We still go on being hard upon the moderns, and the celebrities of yesterday point out the absurdities of those of to-day. Perhaps there was some embryonic revolt in Hazlitt's time against constituted literary authority, but the rebels could hardly have held their own as do our young iconoclasts.

But at these Thursday evenings they were above the pedantry of insisting on authorship. What they demanded was zest. How like ourselves! We are always insisting upon zest or what the Americans call punch. "If a person liked anything, if he took snuff heartily, it was sufficient." And Hazlitt tells us that the best converser of all was Northcote, the painter, because he could listen too. The good talkers may be the bad listeners, and therefore the worst of company. There is Coleridge, for instance. Did Mr Max Beerbohm ever do a finer design than his "Coleridge, table-talking"? One wonders what Lamb and Hazlitt would have thought of it. Perhaps no man was more loyal to his friend than Lamb to Coleridge, but he called him an archangel slightly damaged. Hazlitt says that he talked well on every subject, and I suppose that if a man is a good talker he can't help talking well.

Hazlitt's own conversation, he suggests, "is not very much unlike a game at ninepins." That of others he compares to various eatables, one gentleman's being

like anchovy sandwiches. I knew a lady who cultivated this idea of identifying her friends with particular dishes; I wonder whether she got it from Hazlitt. If she said you were like fig pudding you went away thoughtful.

It was Horne Tooke who said that nobody could write a good style who wasn't accustomed to hear his own voice. But here we are again at another of the questions that still occupy us—of the relation of the written to the spoken word. If writing loses effect when it is read aloud there must be something wrong, but people don't usually talk as they write. It has been considered fatal to conversation to talk like a book, though some books do make you feel that the authors must talk well. It is incredible, for instance, that Mr Max Beerbohm should be a dull talker, and, indeed, report indicates the contrary. There are some who can give you the impression of wit without saying anything of moment, and any of us may feel quite witty by means of circumstance and the brisk mood. I know a man who had lunched with George Meredith, and was greatly impressed by the brilliance of his conversation. He didn't seem able to reproduce it for me even in fragmentary or attenuated form. And yet—yes—there was the point at which the cheese was brought in; not, I take it, a mere slice or slab from the grocer round the corner, but a fair, upstanding cheese—probably a ripe Stilton or a really first-rate Cheddar in the pink of condition. And Meredith, seizing the knife, flourished it as might a jovial priest in the act of sacrifice. He exclaimed: "Ha! the Cheese!" and then—but I don't know what came next. My friend was clear that it was capital, but he couldn't quite recall the hang of it.

THE CONVERSATION OF AUTHORS

Literary men have this advantage in conversation, that they are accustomed to express themselves. Some of them, too, have been what you might call professional talkers, and you couldn't expect the man in the street to come in and hold his own with Dr Johnson. Boswell gives us a notion of what his talk was like, though I suppose it is the hits rather than the misses that are chronicled. Authors, one would say, must be like their books, though perhaps this isn't conspicuously true of Dr Johnson's talk. Hazlitt says a fine and acute thing about this matter of identity. "A really great and original writer," he says, "is like nobody but himself. In one sense Sterne was not a wit, nor Shakespeare a poet." You may say that there is something wrong here, that this can't be true, but one recalls that Mr Gladstone once said that there are two kinds of truth, and was immensely derided by political opponents who thought they had got him. If he had been canny he might have said that there are twenty kinds.

In conversation the thing is, I suppose, to be yourself, and if you are an unpleasant person it is best to be silent. I think William Morris talked like the petulant child of genius; Dickens, I fancy, was the Inimitable of his letters; Shakespeare, surely, had a large discourse looking before and after. Browning, some say, put himself away at the end of his day's work and became a genial diner-out. I wonder whether Mr Conrad habitually goes off into thrilling yarns, lasting days and nights, while spellbound, exhausted friends pass the bottle. You can hardly compare the old talkers with the new; it would be like trying to compare actors. And you can't select your champion as you do in golf or lawn tennis with a knock-out tournament, which does

sometimes, though not always, establish the fact that one man played better than another on two or three

A limited experience leads me to believe that nowadays authors talk very much like anybody else. Perhaps when they get among themselves the standard is pegged up suddenly. I doubt it. They may talk about the wickedness of publishers or the circulation of bad books or American royalties; nay, they may talk sincerely, passionately, about the things that matter. But they are not a sect apart; they are men and women of the world, ready to find their fellows anywhere in the world.

[1923]

REVOLUTION AND LITERATURE

MR Arthur Ransome has been giving us some interesting information about Trotsky's ideas on Russian literature and art. Have some of us been afraid that Bolshevism means the annihilation of such things? Trotsky is very far from such an intention, but he wouldn't let art go to sleep; he does not conceive it as

> Like a toad within a stone
> Seated, while time crumbles on.

A change in the main current of history, he tells us, such as the acceptance of Socialism, involves a corresponding change in art; art, indeed, must be the test of the vitality of any phase of life. Yet we must not look for any sudden, immediate revelation, for a changing society will concern itself first with elementary problems of existence, comfort, and primary education. A Socialistic culture must not be founded on poverty and repression; it must not be merely an expression of revolt. In Russian literature, he tells us, there has been a feudal period and a bourgeois period; the one has passed, the other is passing. Art is now in a transitional period, and this is likely to be prolonged. Art must be reconciled with labour, but it must not in its ultimate development be marred by the rivalry of classes; the proletarian period is transitional, and art must not know classes.

But after all, does not this point to a humane art which has long been both an ideal and a practice? Naturally, the art will be conditioned very much by the

existing type of society. It is not to be revolutionary, for the revolution is only a phase; and, of course, revolutionary art is not the same as art about revolution. Yet the new art is to be produced by men and women who have become what they are by virtue of the revolution. And here one may confess to finding the exposition a little vague. There is to be a period of struggle during which the art will be under the 'sign' of the revolution, and an end will be made of mysticism, romanticism, pessimism, scepticism, or "other forms of spiritual prostration." In place of these we are to have realism, working collectivism, and creative faith.

Doubtless this attempt at epitome does less than justice to both Mr Ransome and to Trotsky. One does not perceive with any clearness what is to be the nature of the division between the so-called bourgeois art and the coming art which, as Trotsky says, must not be revolutionary and not proletarian. It may be realistic, and when it has thrown away those bourgeois trappings of romanticism and the rest it may even be bleak, but is there anything new here? Haven't we already realism and austerity? It is too soon, perhaps, to conceive the nature of that creative faith which will come with the brotherhood of man, but haven't we brotherhood already? Are there not now artists who are pitiful and helpful and understanding? Perhaps this is to speak in terms that are already becoming obsolete. Pity, it may be, is not the point, nor brotherhood. But what is this revolution? What can it give to the artist that is not now within his reach? The artist may live in a stucco villa and play golf, but that doesn't make his art bourgeois. The slave that Ruskin pictured, aloft on the

façade of a Gothic cathedral, carving out his imaginings, had a free mind. Is it this that we are after? And why wait for the revolution? If Trotsky can conceive a new order with a new art, there must be a thousand artists (or shall we say a hundred?) who are capable of projecting their imaginations into the future. We do not lack pioneers; the trouble is that they don't usually arrive anywhere.

Those who live very much in the past may be anxious about the revolutionary attitude to the past, to history, to the classics. On the particular occasion Trotsky doesn't appear to have said anything about that. You may sometimes hear gallant young people talking as though they would scrap everything up to date. "Wheer's Wully Shakespeare noo?" may presently be the cry from the revolutionary gallery. And perhaps the new folk will look askance at anything that seems gentlemanlike; will, for instance, reject Matthew Arnold. If democracy rejects *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* it has failed or, at least, it goes forward crippled. Its problem is to maintain everything of value; it must not be afraid of tainted sources, of gathering grapes from thorns, of finding good things even in a capitalistic age. After all, we know a thing or two; dare one put it that we are not quite ignorant of the means to enjoy life, that there are among us experts in happiness? Don't let us have the future too virtuously drab. Certainly let us divide the happiness better, but to have a big share need not stint your neighbour.

As to the classics, it is very difficult to say what they are. The accident of preservation has something to do with it. Are we now to have a great review and

winnowing of what pass for classics, or will the old choices persist? It is not easy to get rid of a classic that has made its way into the libraries and the anthologies. You can't clear a man out. People don't read Southey's verse, perhaps, but he caught hold of posterity's tail by his *Life of Nelson*, and a beautiful poem called *The Battle of Blenheim* keeps cropping up. I suppose that if publishers positively cease to print him an author must ultimately cease to exist, but it seems that he may go on almost for ever in neat, cheap, little editions of the classics. One wonders sometimes whether these are read or merely given to one another by the well-meaning. Does anyone outside a university read Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, for instance? Well, I have been reading something of her in Mr John Long's little book in the Carlton Classics. Will a virtuous democracy have any use for her and her gossip about old intrigues and scandals? Scores of women to-day could write better letters than those I read, but there is a curious interest in such letters, in the faint flickering of a fire that once had heat and flame. She was a woman of spirit, and she imposed herself on the community when it wasn't as easy to do so as it is now. Perhaps her letters might be preserved as an awful indication of what society used to be before we were all austere and well-mannered. But one hopes that the post-revolution people will not bar jokes; indeed, we can have confidence in human nature there. We may differ about tragedy, even comedy brings doubts, but we all roar together over a good farce.

[1923]

MELVILLE AND "MOBY DICK"

THERE are certain books which everyone of mature age ought to have read. Among these are *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gil Blas*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Don Quixote*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Ring and the Book*, *Lavengro*, *The Excursion* (or shall we let them off that and leave it just for the right people?). I believe that it is possible to live a respectable life without *Prometheus Unbound* or *The Revolt of Islam*, and certainly, at this time of day, you needn't read *The Curse of Kehama*. There are others, no doubt, besides those I have mentioned, but I put down what I am proud to have read myself. Most of us have a vague impression that we read *The Faerie Queene* at school, and we intend to read it again when we have time. But until the other day I had not read a word of *Moby Dick*, which is certainly in what we may call the championship class.

Moby Dick runs to one hundred and thirty-five chapters and I don't know how many pages. It is a book to have read ; it is even a book to read. And yet I confess that I did a fair amount of skipping; it is a book of genius in which you can skip. At times I got tired of it and wanted something else, and this without relaxing in admiration. I suppose that Sinbad got tired of the Old Man of the Sea, though all the time he must have been considerably impressed by him; he must have admired the Old Man as good of his kind. I remain impressed by *Moby Dick*. It is a stupendous account of the chase by a lunatic of an enormous, terrific, mystical white whale. It is that and other things. It goes on

and on; it has the persistence of genius. It holds you in its grip till you try to get away. You want relief as you would from the veritable experience. I have felt something of this in reading Conrad's *Typhoon*. That storm, too, has the persistence of genius. I wanted it to end; I wanted to get away quietly. These great men have great stomachs. They don't just give you a hint or two and let you think that you, the reader, are the imaginative artist; so to speak, they lay it on thick.

There is an immense amount of learning in *Moby Dick*, and, as methods in whale-fishing must have changed, a good deal of this may be obsolete. It is impossible that men should go on catching whales like this. "Why, sir," said Dr Johnson—or words to this effect,—"no man would choose the life of a sailor who had contrivance enough to get into a jail." The ordinary sailor's life must be one of humdrum amenities beside that of whaler in the good old days. Why did they do it? If they could have been quietly picking oakum or breaking stones at home, why did they go out in whale-ships with people like Captain Ahab? The voyages lasted for incredible periods—for three, four, or even five years,—and the dangers and hardships were appalling. Perhaps they didn't know any better; perhaps their fathers had done it before them, and there wasn't anything else to do. I think that these men, or some of them, must have had a great zest for life. They didn't want to sit at home in sunny gardens and have naps at regular hours; they soon wanted to be up and doing. Herman Melville has this zest, and it makes a great writer of him. He is a kind of madman writing about madmen for madmen. His people are savages who can commune with the stars and bellow salutations

to the universe. Of course, his book has some relation to facts. It is, as I have said, very learned, but it is wildly remote from realities too. Melville's mind is possessed by his subject, and he infects us with his monstrous fancies. He has a passion for the sperm whale, and the other kinds are treated as inferiors. Perhaps he is one of the men with a passion for everything he touches (I haven't read his other books). He kindles at statistics of dimensions and quantities; he gets excited about blubber and oil. His white whale, Moby Dick, finishes gloriously by butting into the ship and sinking it, after drowning the boats' crews. He is on the side of the whale, and he barely permits the narrator to escape.

Miss Viola Meynell, writing of Melville, says that he has "the wildest, farthest kind of genius." She suggests (I think she suggests this; anyhow, she does to me) that sometimes he goes too far, so far that he can't get back again. And yet in this book you might find kinship with Lear or Othello. It is possible to conceive a neater play than *Othello* and a neater book than *Moby Dick*: one that recognizes more limitations, that makes things look more like what they are in the market. But verisimilitude doesn't matter when your mind is seized and exalted. *Othello* possessed Shakespeare's mind as *Moby Dick* did Melville's, and they both had the means of communicating with us. From point to point in our exaltation there are intervening passages of make-believe that we must not be niggardly in accepting.

Perhaps one should hasten to get Melville's other books and read them. I don't know. Does he keep it up? Does he, as Miss Meynell suggests, dive so deep

or rise so high that we lose him? I want to get my breath before I read another. I hope the anthologists won't tackle him. He has a glorious indifference for his readers. How did publishers get on with him? Did they remonstrate, or was it all enthusiasm and encouragement? I should never have taken *Moby Dick* as a best seller. It is to the credit of the world behind literature that Melville should have emerged. The right things do generally come to the top. There are some understanding people in the world.

[1922]

"BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER"

I GET a chance to read an old novel now and then, and the other day I took up *Beauchamp's Career*, which, if not quite old, might be described as of the middle distance. It recalled the enthusiasms of thirty years ago, when I thought it about the finest novel in the English language. I have read a good many novels since then, and I should like to think that my spiritual experience has deepened. Am I impervious to ideas and incapable of evolution? Have I long since petrified in a mould? Am I hopelessly stuck in the mud? The book seems to me as fine as ever. The impression it makes on me is very much the old impression; the passages that thrilled me then thrill me now. I don't say it with pride, hardly with confidence. There is danger in loyalties, fixities. One wouldn't be a fogey even on the higher plane. Yet the good things, the great things, don't wear out.

There isn't such a thing as a perfect novel; I don't think there's a perfect sonnet. The edition of *Beauchamp* that I have been reading has 527 pages, and I'm willing to excise to the extent of the odd seven. It is a political novel. It is about the time when there wasn't a Labour party and Radicalism was the Extreme Left. The politics give it, here and there, a certain toughness, though it is generally quite lucid. Dr Shrapnel, the old agitator, is an excellent character, but occasionally he is a little long-winded. Casting about for faults or weaknesses, one might agree that Mrs Wardour-Devereux and her Lydiard are not of

much value; Meredith likes a little decoration in the background. Of course the writing is not all on the poetical plane; it cannot be; it ought not to be. And whenever Renée comes into the story it seems that, with all its activities, the world had not been fully alive. Yet it is one of the most humane of novels.

You might think that a book about the Radicalism of fifty years ago must be out-moded, but it is extraordinarily fresh. It has historical interest, and I suppose that Beauchamp is the best example in fiction of the idealist, aristocratic politician. The astonishing thing is that Meredith can present him as a comic figure. Of course he is tragic too; he is lovable; there never was such a hero. This is a book for generous youth to read. There are Beauchamps to-day, though we would tuck them out of sight or call them prigs. They are far more interesting than the adventurers of a hedonist cross between Tom Jones and Aubrey Beardsley. But I mustn't begin to revile; this is only a hint. Meredith wasn't afraid to make his hero noble and moral, but he made him amazing, delightful, moving. You can see that he might, on occasion, become a bore, as noble, persistent people may, but he does not bore the reader. I think he is a character of the first rank, and that there are two others in the book—Renée and Romfrey. When I say the first rank I mean the class into which we might put Rosalind or Don Quixote or Falstaff (I don't mean that there is any connexion between these and Meredith's people; they are used for emphasis). And besides these three—an enormous allowance for one book—there are innumerable characters that fill their places perfectly. All the women are excellent, and I don't know a novel with more of rightness and

delicacy in all manner of relations; even relations that are deep, strained, or passionate.

I suppose that some people judge a novel chiefly by its general impression, and some rather by its episodes. *Beauchamp's Career* can stand either test. If one had to choose a single episode to represent English fiction (I suppose this is jejune and absurd, but I am launched now) there is nothing that would come before the night and morning on the Adriatic when Nevil Beauchamp ran away with Renée and turned back. And then there are the incidents at Tourdestelle, the adventure of the boat, the tussle over Dr Shrapnel, the "lame victory" (What can advanced young moderns make of that? It is taking politics seriously indeed!), Jenny Denham's reception of Lord Romfrey when Nevil was ill. This illness is only less moving than the final scene when the fisherman says, "Do you hear that voice thundering? That's the great Lord Romfrey," and the woman cries, "O, God, let's find the body!" Such power, such art, such sympathy cannot be staled or out-moded. I have heard it said that this final catastrophe should not be there, that it is extraneous, an accident. To me it is the significant, the only possible ending, the finest use of symbolism if the slightest.

I suppose that these Romfreys and Halketts and Beauchamps belong to a passing society. They are very near us; yet to some of us they may seem nearer in time than in social habit. Are there people in civilized society as stupid as Colonel Halkett, as brutal as Captain Baskelett? Could Dr Shrapnel's letter be so misconstrued? I don't think these things are overdrawn, or that we have got far away from them. Perhaps the people are too much at the mercy of small accidents,

but the story is crammed with invention, it is alive, it flourishes. It has a great exterior movement, an elaborate and ingenious plot. Undoubtedly it's Victorian. And these Victorians will make such appeals to your emotion. Meredith is not afraid to shake his hero, to place him in a position that can hardly be heroical. It is when Beauchamp lies ill that you realize his greatness; you see it in the agitations of Rosamund, of Romfrey, of Dr Shrapnel. All this later part of the story is extraordinarily moving. The full and final impression is of beauty.

[1922]

"RICEYMAN STEPS"

YOU must be cautious about giving books to a literary man or pictures to an artist, and it is safer generally to give a goose or a bottle of rum. Yet the book may sometimes hit the mark, and I was fortunate enough this Christmas to receive Mr Bennett's *Riceyman Steps* just when I was ready for it. It would be absurd to read fifty novels or more in the year and not to read that, and one might say as much of *The Rover*; it is pleasant to have both past and future, to have Mr Bennett's book in one's mind and Mr Conrad's beckoning. For these are two great novelists; at least that is my conviction. Others are doing all manner of curious, delightful, and interesting things, are justifying their existence by being individual and authentic; but it's another matter to be a great novelist, to be in the succession of Thackeray and Meredith. Of course there's Mr Wells, who is capable of anything, and has done wonderful things, but one wouldn't call him a great novelist (though, by the by, there's *Tono-Bungay*!) any more than one would call Mr Shaw a great dramatist. (Yet, indeed, he wrote the first act of *Candida*!) Perhaps in this rough-and-ready old world they are something as good.

Riceyman Steps, then, is a great success; it is a strange, beautiful, original book. I am not going to criticize it here, but I must say that. It is Mr Bennett at his best, or at one of his bests. Its subject is the starvation of a miserly couple in Clerkenwell and the reactions upon a serving-maid. The beauty is very

much in this maid, Elsie, but not altogether, for there is much that is charming in the misers, and all the human relations are exquisitely done, with many of those humorous explosions of joyful perception in which Mr Bennett excels. Perhaps it is difficult for a genuine progressive to approve of Elsie. She is faithful and obedient to a reprehensible extent, though she does learn to disobey. In a small, semi-conscientious way she lies and steals, she is an innocent overcome with the sense of guilt. If one knew such a girl it would—wouldn't it?—be one's duty to incite her to revolt, to stand up for her rights, to insist on her share. Happily, we are not called upon to urge her to become less beautiful:

> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

I feel a little impatient sometimes with those who would dismiss Mr Bennett as not taking a poetical view of life, as a realist or photographic recorder. This novel of his seems to me extraordinarily imaginative, with a terrible, relentless movement; combined with its realism is a quality of imagination that one might compare with that of a partly discredited genius, G. F. Watts, in such a design as his "Love and Death."

Writers have their periods, and it is unreasonable to expect that a talent will exert an even pressure. There may be some who improve in steady gradations, making each book better than the last—but I don't know who they are. I suppose it would be ideal to have a fresh and buoyant beginning, a middle period of strife, agonies, and triumphs, a strong and serene ending; such is the kind of thing that Swinburne attributes to Shakespeare. But in this imperfect world we must take hold of

things as we can and not as we would. It must be discouraging sometimes to realize how good your work has been. You have to keep up to that? To surpass that? I think most literary men must know what it is to read some of their old stuff with a despairing admiration. Perhaps they go on to do something better, but they are conscious of a hard taskmaster, their ruthless, vigorous old selves. Critics are on the watch for their decline, it may be, and it is pleasant to think of Mr Bennett baffling these. For you never know where you have him; he is one of the few who can write on various planes, and it seems that he may gain freshness and power by a spell of not being very earnest with himself. It's useless to attempt to condemn him on a book; you would only be attacking a mood.

I hate the light dismissal of an artist, a writer, who falters. You must judge, but not cruelly. I like to see men come again (perhaps one is overdoing this in relation to Mr Bennett). There are those who have suffered detraction and now stand higher than ever. It is a nice question who determines the ebb and flow of reputations. I should think that most of the best critics keep fairly steady, and have some conception of a man as a whole. There are many, it is to be feared—and perhaps they shouldn't be called critics,—who judge by the latest book or are simply subject to reaction from praise, tired of hearing a man called just. The great reading public likes a change—not an essential one, but a change of name or form,—and the small fry of criticism is at the beck and call of the public. There is not much pluck among reviewers generally; they want a lead: or they have the excess of enthusiasm that leads

to the discovery of a genius every week. It is an imperfect world.

Yet there's a good deal of competent reviewing, and I suppose *Riceyman Steps* had a good press. I shall vote for its being one of the half-dozen of Mr Bennett's books to be preserved when we decide to have the great clearance and make it a penal offence to republish anything beyond the selection approved by the Academy of Letters. Perhaps there may be exceptions in the case of the Poet Laureate or the Grand Old Man of Letters. One hears that in the literary circle there are discussions as to who will succeed Mr Hardy in what we all hope is the distant future. Mr Bridges might have doubled the parts of Grand Old Man and Laureate, but he isn't good at cutting any kind of a figure. Have we any Grand Old Man growing up? There is Mr Shaw, but both he and Mr Wells are too restless. Mr Galsworthy advances quietly. The young poets will grow older. And there is Mr Bennett.

[1924]

"THE FORSYTE SAGA"

I HAVE been reading *The Forsyte Saga*—the title, as Mr Galsworthy says, is "used with a suitable irony,"—and I followed it up with *The White Monkey*, which is part of the scheme. I don't know whether Mr Galsworthy intends to continue, whether he will follow Irene and Jon to Canada or expand laterally, but I should think it the more likely that he will not; there is the danger of adding to a completion. Perhaps the design is not complete; no story of human beings can be tightly drawn, without the possibilities of development; but in this last or latest contribution we are passing away from the period of the Forsytes to a state of unrest from which other influences must emerge.

Of course, I think that this is a great work; one of the finest examples of history in terms of fiction—fiction that has the dignity of history. Mr Galsworthy tells us that numerous people have claimed that their families are the originals of the Forsytes; perhaps we all feel qualifications for such a claim, as we all felt that Sir Willoughby Patterne might have been aimed at us. Mr Galsworthy assures us that this is "no scientific study of a period; it is rather an intimate incarnation of the disturbance that Beauty effects in the lives of men." Even the Forsytes are not impervious to beauty and passion, though they are, in the main, collectors; Irene, among other things, was a magnificent specimen. *The Forsyte Saga*, then, appears to me under two chief aspects; there is this idea of beauty "impinging on a possessive world," and there is the warning that this

world, as it is represented here in extreme, exclusive manifestations, is coming to an end.

Perhaps it is because I am no longer young that Mr Galsworthy's old people are more to me than the young ones; or perhaps it is that his beautiful shades of humour and irony impress one most when they are applied to these futile, disappearing figures. Old Timothy and old James on the brink of death interest me more than Val and Jon in love and with life before them. I suppose it oughtn't to be so, but it is. Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of all is Mr Galsworthy's conduct of Soames through all these disturbing, disconcerting events. This Man of Property is the type of what we are agreed (are we not?) must be swept away. I don't get to the point of liking him, precisely, but I am anxiously on his side. I am thrilled by the gallant lie to his dying father; and, again, by that exquisite scene with the dying George Forsyte, who had the single point of contact with Soames that he could trust him. And, foolishly, when Soames parts finally with Irene in the picture gallery and she makes her slight gesture of farewell—that most imaginative invention—I want him to go back and do something sentimental or, at least, gentlemanly. Mr Galsworthy is austerely right, but he has made me sympathize to the point of wanting him to do wrong.

The White Monkey brings us down to the present times, and I could almost believe that Mr Galsworthy devised Fleur as a portent and then stayed his hand. Here, too, are the young men with modern laxities grafted upon the public-school spirit, and passions in which it is sometimes not quite easy to believe. There are parts of *The White Monkey* in which I seem to be

not very far away from what, in supercilious mood, I think of as the London Novel. It is Mr Galsworthy's vision, no doubt; it is sad and purposeful; but when I read of this world of "beliefs cancelled, faiths withdrawn" I wonder how far this is a London fashion. If this society is tottering to its fall I don't think it has much to do with the loss of faiths and beliefs; rather, indeed, with the gain of them. Sometimes Mr Galsworthy seems to be presiding over a conflict of pity and cynicism that hasn't an issue, but, indeed, he is not an unpractical man. He suggests that when the labouring class is clean in its habits and speaks good English equality is here. And so he has gone about this task of "embalming the upper middle class." It is more than that; he has preserved its life.

We have had voluminous political discussions of late, and some of these have reached a high level of argument and of faith. I think I find in *The Forsyte Saga* a deep relevance to these. It is a great piece of destructive criticism of what has been called the acquisitive society. I don't know Mr Galsworthy's political party, if he has one, but I can believe that he is on the side of fundamental change. In detail he is impartial, but it is possible to imagine him as one of those amongst us who would call ourselves Socialists were it not that somebody might say: What do you mean? Perhaps even Mr Galsworthy hasn't any scheme or system handy. He is certainly not one of those who would have wealth and privilege very much as they have been, while a labouring class, more or less contented, is encouraged to try for prizes in the lottery, and so to emerge from that class. If *The Forsyte Saga* means anything it means that the day of the unproductive collector of

riches cannot last. It preserves a society historically while helping to its destruction. And here (will you say?) is what prevents Mr Galsworthy from taking his place among the great impartial artists. Is he to be pursued and condemned by that well-worn word didactic? Well, Mr Galsworthy is an exceptional man. He takes the edge off his villains; he gives opponents or enemies fair play; he can even rejoice in their virtue and strength. There is more in it than that. He is both just judge and passionate advocate. If he cannot be indifferent to suffering and wrong he can make them serve his design.

The Forsytes were great people in their day and honest men by their lights. As an historical pageant they are impressive, but they must yield or change. Their chronicles in these books should last as long as our successors are interested in us.

[1924]

CONRAD AND TROLLOPE

TWO or three weeks ago I wrote an article on the subject of Anthony Trollope, and in the course of it I asked—I wondered—whether Mr Joseph Conrad read Trollope. I didn't suppose that I should ever know; it was an idle but not, I hope, an impertinent speculation. Mr Conrad has done me the great favour of writing on the subject, and what he says is very interesting; I have his permission to share it with my readers. He says:

> I read with the greatest pleasure what you say of Trollope. I made his acquaintance full thirty years ago, and made up my mind about his value then, as a writer of remarkable talent for imaginative rendering of the social life of his time, with its activities and interests and incipient thoughts. I watched him coming into his own again with very great pleasure, and I agree with you as to the merits of the Barsetshire novels. His gift of intimate communion with the reader is very remarkable there. It is hardly less so in the sphere of London Parliamentary and social life, which is the subject of another cycle, if I may call it so, of his novels. I was considerably impressed with them in the early eighties, when I chanced upon a novel entitled *Phineas Finn.* I haven't seen them since, to tell you the truth, but I have preserved a strong impression of a notable gallery of portraits rendered with that same intimacy of technique (if technique is the word) in which I believe the secret of his fascination lies.

And then, with the modesty that we often rightly associate with greatness, Mr Conrad disclaims authority for his opinions. He says that he has neither the

temperament nor the equipment for a literary critic, that his feelings of repulsion or sympathy are "primitive." But in the case of Trollope, he says, "my sympathy is not tempestuous. It is quiet and deep, like his view of life around him. I don't mean to say that Trollope was very deep; but I question whether in his time, in a highly organized if not complex society, there were any great depths for him to sound. Like the young men of the Georgian era, he was very much a man of his time and with a personal, obviously sincere, liking for mankind."

And, indeed, there is something to be said for a novelist having that liking for mankind. You may do curious and interesting things from hatred or scorn of mankind, but liking is better. It may manifest itself in many ways. Trollope and Mr Conrad seemed as far apart as the poles, and yet see how near they are to one another! I am glad to have had this from Mr Conrad; it helps to build up things, to stimulate one's sense of comradeship in literature.

I told a friend what Mr Conrad had said, and his response was: "Ah! I believe it will be found at the Last Day that everybody likes Trollope best." Even wit has its element of truth sometimes, and many of us may have to confess that we have liked peace better than the stormy seas. One mustn't expand epigrams, but there is comedy in that notion of slipping away from the choice of our strenuous, pretentious days; from Meredith and Henry James (to say nothing of Mrs Virginia Woolf and Miss Rebecca West) to slippers, the easy chair, and Trollope. Can it be that most of us prefer to die in our beds?

But this is not fair to Trollope. Since I wrote that

other article I have re-read *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, and all the parts about the Crawleys are wonderfully good. Crawley, I repeat, is a noble, tragic figure, and Mrs Crawley is never less than beautiful. Grace and her love affair make good reading, and in this book the Proudies become real and significant. But why does Trollope prolong his story by introducing those wretched London folk who have nothing to do with the theme and, intrinsically, are bores or worse? You are in the midst of a moving story, a chapter ends, and you are switched off to something quite irrelevant. The Victorians were often guilty of this blemish, which perhaps we must sometimes accept as the defect of a method. I don't see how a wide representation of society such as you have in *Middlemarch* can keep us hot on the scent all the time. Yet Trollope should have been able to see that he was wrong; perhaps he was simply determined to write a long book and 'underplots' were the fashion. I suspect that they were derived, in the dim distance, from plays and the necessity to give the chief actors some rest.

Mr Conrad appreciates Trollope; he appreciates, I am sure, a hundred things that are not specifically in the line of his work. We may ask ourselves sometimes why an artist, perceiving so much, caring for so much, concentrates his tillage on such a narrow plot. For all Mr Conrad's richness and variety it is possible to think of him as tilling a narrow plot. I do not complain. Sometimes I hear the young people talking of their games, their hockey and football, and one says: "Yes, but he plays left half"—or, it may be, centre forward. And I say: "Isn't a good man good anywhere?" I blunder in so, and I think I have a point; but, of

course, I'm told that each place has its peculiar technique, that a lifetime is hardly too long to mark the difference between left half and centre forward. In the catalogue all go for men, but we must see

> every one
> According to the gift which bounteous nature
> Hath in him closed.

You have to find out what you can do best and do it. That's the ideal, though so many of us have to struggle with what's at hand. We can't always be getting up new techniques; there comes a time when it's hopeless to attempt it. But, happily, we can appreciate deeply—not finally, exhaustively—what we could never hope to imitate. It might be interesting to see Mr Conrad's blank-verse tragedy, but we don't insist on it; after all, that plot of his embraces continents and oceans and is enough for any mortal man. Yet there's an interest, a deep interest, in learning something about the attitude of a great writer to other writers.

[1924]

JOSEPH CONRAD

A GREAT deal has been said and will be said about Joseph Conrad, and I must add a few words to it; other subjects sink for the moment to insignificance. I never saw him, and yet his death seems peculiarly a loss to me. I have gazed often and long at portraits of him and listened eagerly to what friends who knew him had to say. And a few months ago he wrote to me about something that I had written. We had a precious little correspondence, and he sent me a copy of *Nostromo* with a cordial and generous inscription. One treasures these things; there is something reassuring in the casual humanities of great men. He was strong, deep, beneficent; he was on the right side, a good man. That matters enormously, and it gives such value to the characters in his books. For instance, there is *Lord Jim*. Marlow, looking at Jim, says " He was one of us," and the tragedy is overwhelming. And then there is that astonishing, illuminating episode of Captain Brierly. I am lost in admiration of this, and I think any novelist would be. Later in the story comes Marlow's talk with the old French naval officer who has his dogmatic conception of honour. These three occasions are all extraordinarily interesting in themselves, they are vital in the design, and they go deeply and wisely into humanity. Conrad's sympathy never fails and his mercy never clouds his justice.

If he had never written a line he would have been a great man. He was a very great novelist, and I rejoice that I have not ceased to proclaim it. I really can't help

the intrusion of this egoism; I want to boast that I have always admired and praised him. I wish I could have been in at the beginning like Mr Edward Garnett. The first of Conrad's novels that I reviewed was *Lord Jim*, and that is nearly a quarter of a century ago. I was only a humble contributor to the *Manchester Guardian*, and it seemed very bold then to send in nearly a column about a novel, but it appeared all right in the paper. Then came the volumes *Youth* and *Typhoon* and, a little later, *Nostromo*. This period, I think, was Conrad's greatest, though he has done splendid things since. In one of the letters he wrote to me he said of *Nostromo*: "At his first appearance the public had no use for him. Some newspapers (but that may have been the publisher's fault) failed to notice him at all. He has come since into his own, and that wound —for I was really hurt—has been healed a long time ago." And then Mr Conrad referred to something I had said about the book. I had reviewed it and praised it, but in the light of repeated readings I felt that I hadn't praised it half enough, that I had missed an opportunity. Because I said so Conrad was "profoundly touched." And I am touched by the great man's courtesy and humility. He feared that *Nostromo* had been marred by his "over-anxiety, passing often into a weary restlessness."

I have heard a little story about Conrad's humility, and though it isn't my story I think I may tell it here. He was at a public dinner—I think it was at Liverpool, —and his friend Captain David Bone was also a guest. Conrad insisted that Bone must speak before him because the captain of a great liner must precede one who had never commanded anything over 2,000 tons.

Perhaps there was some infusion of playfulness here, but it wasn't merely that. The typical sailor believes in order, obedience, precedence, and through all his honours and glories Conrad remained a sailor. It is our pride that he was an English sailor. If his health had not been troublesome he might have continued to sail the seas instead of writing novels. We should have lost a great deal, but at least it would have given us another trustworthy and humane captain.

Conrad's death is a blow to many who are not strictly literary. One knows some very unlikely people who read his books and think greatly of them. Perhaps it is that character speaks to character; when you read him you are in contact with the man himself. I suppose he has had considerable influence on some of the writers of his time; the most conspicuous instance is Mr William McFee, an admirable novelist who has caught something of his manner. Conrad will take his place among the greatest writers on the sea, and the sea includes the harbours, creeks, rivers, the ships, and the men. But, of course, he did not confine himself to the sea, and there is great variety of scene in his books. They take us to the Malay Peninsula, to many Eastern ports and islands, to South America, Russia, to queer places in London, to odd corners of the map. In *The Secret Agent* he shows himself a Londoner, and he had great sympathy with phases of English life. Trollope's Barsetshire novels were part of his favourite reading, and hardly less so, he says, those "in the sphere of London Parliamentary and social life, which is the subject of another cycle." This sympathy with the England of Trollope, he tells us, was "quiet and deep." He was a quiet and deep man, who loved England and

Englishmen. I can't think of anything more in our favour than that. English novelists may be proud of their calling when they remember that Conrad and Henry James chose to belong to them, and now one would wish to be an English sailor too.

I could not if I would bring my mind to a critical attitude. In my world Conrad's death is an event that brings thought, speculation, reverie; one might produce formulas, but it remains deeply mysterious. He has left us a great deal, and we may be thankful for that. We have lost a great figure; with all his austere and exacting philosophy, his depth, knowledge, clearness, I see him as romantic; Mr Muirhead Bone, whose noble portrait will tell posterity what kind of man he was, has been happily inspired to call him Ulysses. He has told us a wonderful tale.

[1924]

MADOX BROWN

THE centenary of Ford Madox Brown's birth reminds us that he had a close connexion with Manchester. But what justification is there (it may be asked) for dragging him into a column about books? I am hoping to achieve a high degree of irrelevance in this column, but Madox Brown is not quite irrelevant. We are told that he was a 'literary' painter; he painted stories and illustrated scenes. When it comes to writing about pictures I am a flounderer and, doubtless, a blunderer, but I can't see why you shouldn't express yourself by painting stories and scenes; a colossal genius might do it that way. All honour to modern developments and tolerance to modern fashions, of which the average man lacks knowledge and understanding, but old painters and old methods have given us what cannot be given in any other way. I suppose that nobody will ever paint again like Madox Brown, but to some of us his pictures are memorable; they are abiding.

I think his *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cordelia's Portion* are the two noblest illustrations of Shakespeare I have seen. They are adequate; they are of Shakespeare's quality. No actor has ever expressed so poignantly, so splendidly, the passion of the lovers' parting. Of course from the pretty picture point of view it won't do at all; the Juliet is mature and Romeo's cloak is queer. The picture may be full of technical monstrosities, but the spirit of it penetrates to me. So I believe it to have technical excellencies. And the figures in the King Lear picture make a wonderful company.

They are naïf; they are the products of a childlike genius; and one could pore over them for hours. Such, at any rate, is my simple condition of receptivity. I can take my history from Madox Brown as from Shakespeare. Perhaps the dreaming Cromwell on his farm is hard to reconcile with the truculent figure that sprawls on the table while Milton dictates to Andrew Marvell, but it is an imaginative contrast. It can never be forgotten that we have a great historical series in Manchester, which will always be to the credit of wise citizenship. And we have the incomparable *Work*.

Madox Brown's sojourn in Manchester was not altogether without tribulations, but he has spoken of the many kindnesses he received here. I met him once at a little reception in the room above Mr Rowley's shop when it was in St. Ann's Street. You could see that he was a great man. I was young and wanted to have a word with him, so I edged up and I said: "Are you making a long stay in Manchester, Mr Brown?" That was all I said to him. He replied affably and at considerable length, and then we were interrupted. I didn't get another chance, but I was glad to have spoken to him. I remember that he wore cloth boots and had a benevolent aspect. I never saw him again, but one heard about him from some of the ladies who helped him to carry out his designs for the decoration of the dome in the 1887 exhibition. He was a great favourite with them, and told them stories of his contemporaries. I recollect one about Rossetti. Madox Brown was writing, as Rossetti knew, to a common acquaintance, and appealed to Rossetti about the spelling of a word. "Don't make a stranger of him, Brown," was the reply.

Manchester owes a great debt to Mr Rowley for bringing famous and distinguished people into contact with it. I remember a dinner at which I had the incredible honour of sitting beside William Morris. I couldn't take advantage of it; I was frightened. He imposed his personality on me well enough, but I made no impression on him. In such a case it is foolish to assert oneself, and that particular foolishness was spared him. But as human intercourse it was too unequal, and I missed the chance of my life in not explaining to him that Irving's Macbeth was not bad, as he thought, but a very great performance. He told me that he had once seen *Macbeth* done as the curtain-raiser to a pantomime, and he was surprised to hear that Tennyson had written a play called *Becket*. "I didn't know," he said defiantly.

[1921]

PIRANDELLO

I SUPPOSE that a great many English people go to Pirandello's plays, and it would be interesting to know how they get on. I am old enough to recall seeing the great Salvini in *Othello* and *Hamlet*, but one knew much of these by heart, and they belong, I suppose, to what one of Pirandello's translators calls " the old sentimental and ethical drama," in which you can be pretty sure of your whereabouts. Incidentally one may remark with some amusement upon the attitude of some of the adherents of the " new " theatre towards those who are still loitering with Shakespeare and Molière, Galsworthy or Masefield; it recalls that of a certain type of rock-climber to the fell-walker. They make kind concessions, of course, but the forward ones seem to have established a scare among dramatists who fear to be left behind among Elizabethans, humorists, and those who attach too much importance to right and wrong. It is all up with the downright dramatist, it seems.

But the plays of Signor Pirandello are puzzling, and all the Italian in the world may not help you very far with them. I suppose they have a philosophical basis, but it is curious to find Pirandello protesting, as Ibsen did thirty or forty years ago, that he is an artist. Yes, and so is Mr Galsworthy, but artists have their prepossessions. You might say that Galsworthy's is pity, Ibsen's freedom, Pirandello's mistrust of what we call realities. Pirandello would have no difficulty in showing us the insufficiency, even the absurdity, of such attempted

conciseness of statement. Generally he would leave things as they are; he deprecates the untruth of definition. Like the Browning of *The Ring and the Book*, he sees that there are many points of view, but he could hardly bring himself to favour one side and condemn a villain. One of his best-known plays is a "dramatization of the artistic process itself." This, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, had been banned by the Censor, who has now effected the delightful compromise of permitting it to be played in Italian. The 'facts' of the play are hideous enough, but Pirandello is not concerned with facts except for the generation of ideas. Nobody could be more free from wanton offence against decency, but there are many people who are not ready for Pirandello.

Six Characters suggests that our conceptions of good and evil are conventional when shames and agonies are dispassionately examined. The six characters interrupt the rehearsal of a play, and their leader demands that their terrible realities should supplant the stage conventions. How they do this is shown with extraordinary skill and a sense of comedy. Pirandello examines his art in a drama of infinite modulations. You may say that there is a vast amount of philosophical straw-splitting, which would appeal particularly to the undergraduate preparing for 'Greats,' but Pirandello is always ready for you, and is expert in forestalling objections. Indeed, it might occur to one that his dramatic course is sometimes determined by the objections to it; that he cares especially for the sympathy of the convert. His interest is in drama rather than in persons, and you may even feel that character wilts under his sceptical, ironical survey. Yet his

embodied ideas move you, though perhaps then he is less Pirandello and more the eternal dramatist. He attacks the facts with resolution. We have ideas of people, but they have nothing in common with their ideas of themselves. The art of acting as an expression of the dramatist seems to be demolished. The manager's suggestion of make-up as an aid to personation becomes richly comic. Acting is an absurdity as an expression of another's spirit. As to the 'human' drama, that, at the best, is animalish. "The animals suffer without reasoning about their sufferings. But take the case of a man who suffers and begins to reason about it. Oh, no! it can't be allowed! Let him suffer like an animal, and then—ah, yes, he is 'human'!" Of course we mustn't make a mosaic of dramatic expressions into a creed. All manner of stimulating and intriguing things are here. Pirandello examines himself and his art.

In *Henry IV* we have again the interplay of the real and the unreal or the material and the fantastic. The mock Henry IV is a strange figure of irrelevant dignity. It appears that he is a lunatic placated by a simulation of the historical period he affects. The queer thing is the revelation that he remains mad by choice; it is not mere shamming, but involves the retention of some consciousness. Is it an impossible distinction? In the bitter irony of the play the madman has a lucid interval of violence and murder, and then reverts to the dignity of make-believe. Again in *Right You Are* it is the comic idea rather than the comic character that is pursued. There is a mystery, a piquant situation, the gossips are baffled. Their overpowering curiosity, their shameful inquisition bring out extraordinary, inex-

plicable contradictions. What is the truth? Conceive the irony of malignant busybodies searching for the truth! And they are confronted with the maddening announcement that there is no truth. Perhaps gossips do not care much about the truth, but the basis of their occupation is gone if there isn't such a thing. The wind is out of their sails if outer manifestations are discredited and, particularly, if for the facts of the matter you would substitute the point of view. Which is truth and which is falsehood? Which is mad and which is sane? Pirandello's mouthpiece in the play says: Take your choice. It is a case of handy-pandy, as the children used to say. This attack on facts is baffling and edifying if not convincing. And the play is fine with beautiful touches of humanity.

Perhaps Pirandello sometimes comes to general conclusions from abnormal cases. He would permit us, I dare say, to retain a few working hypotheses if we use them with moderation. He has a wonderfully ingenious mind, but one would like to know whether in the acting a good deal of the philosophy doesn't come to the audience as comic rigmarole; perhaps this is a fate common to philosophical dramatists. He can be brilliantly amusing, but sometimes this seems to be in interludes, and one feels a little like the stupid Elizabethan groundling getting his alternation of fun in the poetical drama. Our average audience, it is to be feared, will not make much of Pirandello, but we may recall that it used to be staggered by Shaw, who, however, was canny enough to provide jokes lavishly. There may be some chance that Pirandello may thrive on his difficulties as Browning did in the days of Browning

societies. There could be no great harm in that. Our thoughts want stimulating as well as our emotions. But to some of us Pirandello will be memorable less for method or for philosophy than for poignancy and wit.

[1925]

"HEDDA GABLER"

HEDDA GABLER is a very great work, and though Ibsen pursues his point unswervingly, with a perfectly economical use of his material, it strikes one as a great portrait—or the exhibition of a single spirit—rather than as a great play. There is no tug of contending forces, unless we are to make Lövborg the centre of things, but we cannot care much what becomes of him or of his colourless good angel, and there is not even a struggle in Hedda's mind; we watch the expenditure of a great force that burns away to our admiration. The world has played a strange trick in condemning such a woman to the inane, and we could conceive that in her boredom she might even have experimented with the humanities, though Mrs Patrick Campbell in her memorable performance never relaxes from the ideal of perfect egoism. Hedda has the artist's sense of her devilish work; she would have Lövborg to do what he has to do beautifully, courageously—Ibsen's diction seems to rise from the colloquial to an exalted symbolism in her appeal for beauty,—and perhaps, too, she wants example and incitement to strengthen her in meeting her own fate. It is futile to pity Hedda, though she is a woman of twenty-nine and a-weary of the sun, as it is futile to pity Iago, and indeed in this play we do not pity anyone. Mrs Campbell was clearly and rightly free from any note of pathos, any vestige of a concession to the sentimentalist; her performance was quite austerely beautiful. And yet, after all, Hedda seems the most real of these people, though Tesman,

too, is a very real mannikin. Perhaps he is a little too silly, and it may be the craving for familiar humanity that would welcome some indication that there had been a shred of disillusion on Hedda's part. We must not be too ready, in a work so ideal, to force our comparisons with the world of men and women. It would be vastly interesting if a humane dramatist, big enough for the work, could confront a Hedda Gabler with a Petruchio who might undertake the great adventure that must end with her humanizing or his destruction. Lövborg is altogether too little a creature to be cast for such a part; in the play his tragedy is quite insignificant.

Of course Hedda Gabler's story might be told in the terms of melodrama, and the springs of jealousy are common to the sex and race. Her revenge, in its outward manifestation, comes curiously near to the crude passions of which we have so many crude representations. But Mrs Campbell never becomes a vixen; she is impassioned and exalted, and maintains a perfect intimacy of personal relation. We may say, with Judge Brack, that people don't do such things, and yet it was some shuddering diner-out who said that Hedda was the type of woman he commonly met at a party. This implacable and exasperated woman, revolting from nothing in particular and with no particular object, is remarkably like the small people who make mischief timidly, and even she has timidities of her own. Perhaps an intelligent woman like Hedda could have found a way out of the particular mesh that is cast about her by the unspeakable Brack, but though Ibsen's treatment of her coming motherhood is not easily understood it seems clear that this impels her to destruction. The revolt from the bondage of such a creature as Brack

carries our undivided sympathies; it is a more terrible ideal of egoism that one may read into some passages. Something of Hedda Gabler is in every woman that is great and various enough, but most of them, fortunately for the existence of the world, have compensating qualities.

Mrs Campbell played this extraordinarily difficult part supremely well, with exquisite gradations of manner and diction. One hardly thinks of her as an actress in this play, and by virtue of a perfect sensitiveness she marked the quality of each separate personal relation. Nothing was finer than her insinuation into Mrs Elvsted's confidence, with its well-devised caresses and its exquisite treacheries. Most stimulating, too, was her last scene of revolt; but it is idle, indeed, to select scenes for commendation from such a performance.

[1907]

It is the persistence of actors, who have to endure a great deal of chilling circumstance, that we must thank nowadays for the performance of Ibsen plays. They are condemned to the fag-end of the season or to halls inefficiently disposed as theatres. Still the enthusiasm for hard and fine things has its own particular successes, and the impression made by these honourable persistences must not be measured merely by the number of the audience. Even if Mr George Alexander were to play Tesman and make him thoroughly sympathetic it would hardly bring *Hedda Gabler* into vogue. We are not sure, indeed, that we want it to be in vogue, or that we may reasonably upbraid those who decline to take these excursions beyond the temperate zone of humanity.

On the particular occasion the audience, which was not a large one, might be divided into two kinds. A section seemed to have strayed in by mistake, and found its chief entertainment in tittering when Tesman says "Just fancy!" but the general attention and the note of the applause indicated that a very good and well-balanced performance was keenly appreciated.

Limelight is an obsolete device in the serious theatre, but Hedda Gabler stands in a spiritual isolation, divided almost absolutely from her fellows. Miss Octavia Kenmore's Hedda, which is forcible, well modulated, and accomplished, seems warmer and more emotional than that of Mrs Patrick Campbell, which we must always remember as one of the outstanding things of the modern stage. This Hedda is, nevertheless, superbly indifferent to the sentimental illusions, and we may ask ourselves with some trepidation whether our most cherished humanity is inseparable from them. Hedda lives among these kindly or aspiring people, craving insatiably for some unattainable experience, and the failure to seize even the poor things that should be within her grasp rouses her virulent egoism to its cold fury. We may hardly make surmises about what circumstances might have done for Hedda, but Miss Kenmore helps us to speculate on some possible satisfaction of her inveterate curiosities within the limits of citizenship if not of domesticity. It is a monstrous irony that such a woman should be tied to Tesman—the comic little man ready to make himself snug on a barrel of dynamite,—but even with a mate of stronger, finer stuff could she have accepted motherhood? It seems that she is the woman incapable of mating; the abnormal woman who could not accept that outrage on her

egoism which would bring her into the sequence of the race. She would not be a mother, but, as all individuality, even of the most straitened egoism, must exist in relation to others, she is capable of a kind of fellowship. Her chances lay in some kind of spiritual affinity, and her best attempt at life was with the shaky Löwborg. As it is, she gains her most thrilling experiences in compassing his annihilation; but if vast sacrifices must be made for her diversion, she is indomitably ready to make her own sacrifice when the sanctuary of her egoism is attacked. Her revolt from Brack is splendid, and rallies us to an exalted sympathy with her. Miss Kenmore, in her final scene with Brack, emphasized the emotions more plainly than we expected, but always her performance had a great deal of plausible life in it. The languors and irritations were very clearly marked, but perhaps the strength of Miss Kenmore's acting lay in a passion that was implicit in her Hedda and was not displayed merely at moments of agitation.

[1908]

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