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Portrait of the Artist: Full-Length

By JAMES BRANCH CABELL

The Chase of the Cosmic Comic

By JOHN E. ROSSER

Robert E. Lee as a Tragic Hero

By ARCHIBALD HENDERSON

Galsworthy and May Sinclair as Rivals

By ALEXANDER BLACK

A Champion of Rembrandt's 'Prentices

By CHARLES de KAY

Maligning Our Neighbors in Fiction

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Portrait of the Artist: Full Length

By James Branch Cabell

NO REASONABLY conceited author, if for the moment we may imagine any of the tribe to merit the adverb, would aspire to be perpetuated in a form more worthy than, in the Carra Edition, his American publishers have bestowed upon the Collected Works of George Moore.⁽¹⁾ It is true that I write with, of the promised twenty-one volumes, only fourteen at hand: but these I find in every nicety of book-making to be wholly admirable. Paper and binding and printing are of the sort describable as luxurious. The frontispieces most handsomely present George Moore in every imaginable phase of mustache and mental abstraction. And, tho for a while I had thought to lay finger upon one defect—that the lack of running-heads to the pages creates some difficulty in locating at once the especial subdivision of the volume for which you happen to be looking—yet reflection makes against such petty fault-finding, by revealing that, after all, it is as opulently remunerative to read in one place as another, in this longish book, which is devoted, after all, entirely to one topic.

For Mr. Moore, of course, has nowhere written except incidentally about anything except George Moore. To some this may appear a dubious axiom, in view of the circumstance that of these fourteen volumes no less than seven consist of the earlier realistic novels—comprising "Lewis Seymour and Some Women," "A Mummer's Wife," "Muslin," "Spring Days," "Esther Waters," "Evelyn Inness," "Sister Teresa," "The Untilled Field," and "The Lake"—wherein there is no explicit word as to George Moore. Yet, when seen in the entirety of the Carra Edition, and as component parts of the one longish book which every sincere literary artist perforce composes, and of which his various publications are each a chapter—when thus regarded, these novels fall into their proper niche. George Moore in youth was exposed to, among other perils, the corrupting influence of realism; and here are some of the results, directly valuable to letters, in chief, as the record of a phase through which passed, long ago, George Moore. These books, to-day, rank somewhat with the extracts which Balzac gives you from the writings of his auctorial protagonists—of Lucien de Rubempré, of Lousteau, of Canalis—and which Balzac very sensibly presents not as literature *per se*, but as useful lights upon their partly taken from life and partly imagined author. So here, in depicting George Moore, does the compiler of the Carra Edition appear to illumine his subject with

copious extracts from the novels of his hero, who, again, is partly taken from life.

These novels are quaint reading now. They seem faded, and somewhat pathetically droll, and they a bit too aptly illustrate the author's petted word *suranné*, the while that young George Moore toils conscientiously at a ruthless exposition of the race-track, or a fearless depiction of the evils of drink, or is daringly

describing the temptations of stage life. Yes, it really is rather quaint as long as George Moore is playing up to his then current Vizetellean advertisements, and turning out "studies of degradation mercilessly done," or is endeavoring to convince the unwary that "you are in a moral dissecting room, watching the demonstration of a brilliant psychological surgeon." But the first moment he spies a chance to let his characters, at some breathing-spell between their disasters and their assignations, fall into talk about academic or esthetic matters which interest George Moore, then the style quickens, and fancy gallops. And the puppets discourse for pages upon pages the heresies and petulancies and "studied disrespects" of George Moore, and all advances briskly, undrugged by any narcotizing "drops of story." By and by, to be sure, the ghost of Germinie Lacerteux or of Bel-Ami (tho the Carra Edition tactfully omits "Mike Fletcher") arises to coerce the apostle—even then—of candor, with its gibbers about realism. But in a while the young puppet-master is again playing truant from his art's



GEORGE MOORE

imagined responsibilities, and is contentedly expounding the notions of George Moore.

So one must not take these realistic novels over-seriously. That sort of realism—the realism of "the human document" and the selected "corner of creation," here to reecho that far time's old-fangled catchwords—was, as they said, the "trend" of that era. And even to-day, with the innate conservatism of youth, still do the immature laboriously transcribe the insignificant, in their exposures of the inadequacy of American standards and the loneliness of the budding artist in one or another parish of Philistia. These "trends" one, willy-nilly, must put up with. . . .

Of course, there is not, and never has been, in any important sense, any trend in literature. One says, in any important sense, because of the so amply attested fact that the only books which ultimately count, for their permitted season, are adequate expressions, not of any ideas just then in the air (to employ that delightfully two-edged phrase), but of the individual being who wrote that particular book. And personality seems a remarkably haphazard affair. You are born, for one inexplicable reason

(1) THE COLLECTED WORKS OF GEORGE MOORE. The Carra Edition. 21 volumes. Printed for Subscribers Only, by Boni & Liveright, Inc., New York: 1922-1923.

or another, as such and such a person, as a person endowed with private and especial faults and hallucinations. And if your book is ultimately to count, however transiently, you will in your book have managed to expose that person, very much as Mr. Moore came in the end to do, without talking or thinking any nonsense about "trends."

Meanwhile, to be sure, the popular styles in books for the intelligentsia must always be varying, somewhat as every season the styles a little alter in disbeliefs and neckwear, and give room to some other method of irritating the conventional. And all really competent manufacturers of reading-matter, whether as publishers or authors, must always be kept upon the alert to cater to the latest hebetude of serious-minded persons sufficiently cultured to assume that whatever they can not quite understand or read with reasonable pleasure is probably high art. But the philosopher recalls that, somewhat to emend the proverb, every vogue has its day; and that, also, all literary modes must pass, pass very often with a hullabaloo but always with rapidity.

It seems, in fact, only yesterday that both the books and the décolleté "sport shirt" of Blasco Ibáñez were the height of fashion, and "The Young Visitors" was a perdurable production. And now, in really literary circles, they tell me, the art of M. Maeterlinck is no longer spoken of in lowered tones, but rather with raised eyebrows: Stevenson has become just a working model for writers upon the art of selling the short story; and even Mr. Kipling has passed into the wan oblivion of being praised by Mrs. Gerould. Thus suddenly their fame is made a vain and doubtful good, and the shining gloss of all their glories is faded, in the bright prime of such impeccable prosateurs as Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad and Marcel Proust: and it is salutary to reflect that Sir Rabindranath Tagore and O. Henry, they also, were once upon a time immortal for several months. . . .

Well, and just so, in the departed youth of this George Moore, in the perverse Victorian 'eighties and 'nineties—when, as Mr. Moore now puts it, "we were all cowed by the spell of realism, external realism"—did many persons regard Zola and Flaubert and Maupassant and Huysmans with a seriousness which the considerate dare not wager that posterity will emulate, when it comes to appraising us and our own literary idols.

All of which seems rather Mooreishly digressive. It would be perhaps a neater adhesion to the point succinctly to inform you that, with the addition of some peculiarly delightful prefaces, the books which I have named of those that Vizetelly & Co. used to advertise as Mr. George Moore's Realistic Novels—listing them, one finds, with an invidious separateness from those of the firm's publications which, the *Sheffield Independent* was wont to guarantee, "may be safely left lying about where the ladies of the family can pick them up and read them"—that all of these, with the exception of "Evelyn Inness" and "Sister Teresa," have been rewritten throughout, alike with a view of stylistic improvement and of, as it is rather handsomely phrased, "returning from the conventions of 'Vanity Fair' and 'The Small House at Allington' to those that inspired the writing of Shakespeare's plays and the Bible." Mr. Moore, at last at ease in the exclusive company of one thousand subscribers only, can now speak freely without bothering about such finicking contemporaneous notions of delicacy and indelicacy as, we now learn, have until to-day somewhat hampered him. And for the rest, even in their most tedious passages of "brilliant psychology," Mr. George Moore's Realistic Novels really do remain interesting, as relics.

The going is immeasurably better, tho, when we come to the consistently important books, to "The Confessions of a Young

Man," "Avowals," "Memoirs of My Dead Life," and to the Hail and Farewell trilogy. For here Mr. Moore is candidly, and without any vain pretense of ascribing real weightiness to anything else, expressing his own nervous reactions to painting and books and to the best examples of human thought and anatomy, and here he has turned most potently to ensnaring us with "nets woven of curious stuffs—of a singer's corset-lace, a forgotten dream, a strand of honey-colored hair, a phrase from Walter Pater, moonlight on a pillow in Orelay, a scrap from the Catechism translated by Verlaine, hopes, aspirations and, here and there, a faint, not too secret shame."

Now, it is in these books, to my finding, that Mr. Moore has made perhaps his only but his ineffably interesting addition to creative literature; and has caused to move like a corporeal, breathing being of flesh and blood his one great character, George Moore. How lavishly that character repays attention by the parodist was shown but yesterday when, in "Heavens"—that most trenchant of volumes from which I have just quoted—Mr. Louis Untermeyer wrote what is, actually, the very best and loveliest appreciation of George Moore yet given us by anybody outside of the pages of Mr. Moore. Then, too, there is the Beer-bohm parody, not anything like so good, of course, but still containing its really superb sentence—"There are moments when one does not think of girls, are there not, dear reader?" This is the sentence which George Moore has not ever, quite, dictated to his secretary: but for some years now he has fluttered close to its perfections.

Yes, certainly, the character does lend itself to caricature. Yet I shall not here speak of the rôle's component oddities, nor prattle any word about the Nouvelle Athènes or the Celtic Renaissance. Nobody dare attempt in a brief paper to sum up George Moore after seeing a fine artist give over a lifetime to the task. So I can but refer you to the Carra Edition, as to a longish book which is devoted entirely to this topic, with the rider that I have found nowhere volumes more engaging.

Our human taste for the irrelevant provokes, of course, some natural speculation as to how much of this perverse, painstaking, fleeing and inconsequential personality is based upon truth? How many facts, in short, has Mr. Moore at odd times woven into his scandal-mongering about George Moore? Well, nobody, by excellent good luck, can say; nor is it wholly to the point thus to appraise this portrait by lugging in the refrain of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous poem. For Casanova also, you will recall, indulged in the same sort of romancing; and secured his most admirable effects through mixing in some revelatory fiction with etymologically pure truth. But to me the George Moore of the Collected Works suggests—with, to be sure, a difference—that Thackeray who is really the main character of Thackeray's collective works, the Thackeray who is always interrupting his puppets, to edify you with the unaffected confidence of the author, as a shrewd and tolerant and tender-hearted man of the great world who, as we now know, existed nowhere outside of these books. Just so, I daresay, Mr. Moore has given us George Moore as he, not wholly spurred by either moral or esthetic criteria, would like to be: and I find—upon the whole, and if it a bit matters—both his aspiration and his artistry to be commendable. In that unending literary shadow-show wherein "all passes except Shakespeare and the Bible," George Moore should stay for a long while one of the great characters of English fiction: and in creating him, Mr. Moore, I take it, has quite actually—just as he says—"never cared for painting or music or literature, but has used them as a means of self-development." The upshot justifies him, rather prodigally.

