

George Moore and a Literary Friendship of the 'Nineties: Fresh Evidence

F. G. ATKINSON

THE following unpublished letters by George Moore (published here by kind permission of J. C. Medley and R. G. Medley, the owners of the copyright of the works of George Moore) contain critical opinions by Moore on his own work and that of others; they afford revealing new autobiographical glimpses of the man and the writer; they throw interesting light on the London literary scene in the 'nineties; and they constitute fresh primary evidence for Moore's friendship with A. T. Quiller-Couch (1863-1944), a friendship noted only meagrely by Moore's principal biographers and commentators. Joseph Hone, in his biography of Moore, refers to Quiller-Couch as 'an acquaintance of the nineties'¹ and also mentions Moore's work for *The Speaker*,² the Liberal weekly of which Quiller-Couch was assistant editor from its inception in 1890 until 1899. Hone, among others, also mentions the well-known review of *Esther Waters* which Quiller-Couch wrote for this paper³ and which forms the principal subject-matter of the first letter below. Quiller-Couch's biographer, the late Dr F. Brittain, likewise notes Moore's connexion with *The Speaker*⁴ and mentions, in general terms, several meetings between the two in the 'nineties. Moore himself mentions Quiller-Couch in an unpublished letter to Edmund Gosse⁵ and comments publicly

¹ *The Life of George Moore*, 1936, p. 434.

² *Ibid.*, p. 116 and p. 178.

³ *The Speaker*, Vol. IX, 31 March 1894, pp. 366-7. Hone, *op. cit.*, p. 194, erroneously assigns this review to *The Spectator*: see J. C. Noël, *George Moore — L'Homme et L'Œuvre*, Paris, 1966, p. 258.

⁴ *Arthur-Quiller-Couch*, Cambridge, 1948, p. 19.

⁵ B.M., Ashley MS. A1193.

on an article written by Quiller-Couch for the *Pall Mall Magazine* of July 1897.¹ Until now, however, with the exception of one reference by Hone, to be considered below, there seems to have been no evidence for the existence of correspondence between the two figures, at least from the Irish novelist's side; and indeed good Moore letters from his earlier days have always been in rather short supply, apart from those quoted by Hone and, more recently, those in Gerber's collection: even these last are mostly brief business communications to Unwin.

At first blush Arthur Quiller-Couch, romantic novelist of the 'eighties and 'nineties, bland and eupeptic critic and generally embodiment of tradition and an establishment outlook in letters, seems an unlikely person to be a congenial acquaintance for the mercurial and vitriolic Moore: yet the two letters given below indicate that such was the case and thus admirably illustrate John Eglinton's observation that Moore 'kept his friendships in different compartments, writing with almost equal intimacy to people who knew little or nothing of one another'.² One sees, too, from these letters to Quiller-Couch, the Moore identified by Eglinton: 'The Moore of these letters is I think an attractive figure, certainly a model of energy and industry, always good-humoured and (a favourite word of his) "forthcoming" . . .'³

LETTER I

8 Kings Bench Walk
Temple
Monday.

My dear Q

You letter made me smile. It was not a little absurd for you to apologise for your admirable article. I am sorry to hear that you were ill but I never should have guessed it from the article. How much praise do you think I expect? My desire is to do my best, to live by my writings and to entertain a faint hope that perhaps one day a critic will take a volume down read it, and say, 'Well that fellow had some talent'. I should not care to be made much of in my lifetime. A word of praise from those whom I respect is welcome, very welcome, but I do think that we labour too much after praise, that we desire notoriety far too much . . . Zola's life is wholly odious to me — reporters and dinners and speeches and afterwards oblivion.

¹ See H. Gerber, ed., *George Moore in Transition*, Detroit, 1968, p. 138.

² *Letters of George Moore to John Eglinton*, 1942, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

I bought the *Delectaby* [*sic*] Duchy¹ and left it in a cab that is why I have not read it But I shall get another copy There is no one writing with whom I am in more entire sympathy. I am delighted to hear that you are coming up to town. It will be a great pleasure to meet you again.

In your letter you mention what I think best in *Esther Waters* — the last chapters. I do like those last chapters, when the women return where they came. The trouble and stress of *Esther's* life were bad enough but the real pathos of life seems to me to come when life is no longer an adventure. I do not often shed tears over my own writings but I did shed a few when I wrote the description of the two women walking up the hill and looking at the landscape they have known always, when coming down the hill Mrs Barfield asks *Esther* if she would like to marry Fred Parsons and she answers 'What, to begin all the worry and trouble over again etc.' And then the last scene of all when *Esther* introduces her son to Mrs Barfield. That is what I think best in the book so it was a great pleasure to hear that you think the same. It is only from a fellow worker that one can get such appreciative criticism. Archer² said in the *Chronicle* that I had failed to develop the character of the child. I need not tell you that if I had attempted to develop the character of the child I should have destroyed the composition of the book. Thanking you again my dear Q for your admirable article I remain

most sincerely yours

George Moore.

The above letter, as often with Moore, is somewhat imprecisely dated, but early April 1894 seems a very likely date for several reasons. Quiller-Couch's review of *Esther Waters* appeared in *The Speaker* for 31 March 1894, a Saturday. This paper normally went on sale to the public on Saturdays but Moore, as both contributor and private subscriber to it, usually received his copy on the previous Friday.³ Hone⁴ mentions that at the time of writing the review Quiller-Couch wrote privately to Moore saying that the novel was, in his view, even more praiseworthy than he had declared it to be in *The Speaker*: it seems likely, then, especially in view of Moore's 'How much praise do you think I expect?', that the above letter is Moore's reply to the one from

¹ i.e. *The Delectable Duchy*, a volume of Cornish short stories by Quiller-Couch first published in 1893.

² i.e. William Archer, the drama critic and translator of Ibsen, who at this period did a great deal of reviewing for the *Daily Chronicle*.

³ See *Conversations in Ebury Street*, New York, 1924, p. 163.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 194.

Quiller-Couch mentioned by Hone and hence that 'Monday' could well be Monday, 2 April 1894.

Moore's ambivalence towards his best-known novel and his repudiation of it in later life are critical commonplaces. Thus M. Brown has referred to the 'violence of the duality' betrayed in Moore's pronouncements on *Esther Waters*.¹ The foregoing letter, clearly written in the first flush of success, in no way denies the later 'frank disparagement' (Brown's phrase) poured on the novel by Moore himself. At the same time his obvious delight that *Esther Waters* had found favour with one whose critical reputation he respected highly at once highlights and extends the available primary evidence for Moore's ambivalent, not to say self-contradictory, attitude towards popularity.² The letter also provides evidence tending to refute Brown's claim that Moore's favourite sequence in *Esther Waters* is the description of the racetrack crowds on Derby Day.³

LETTER II

92 Victoria Street

London

October 11th

My dear Couch,

I send you an article which I think will interest you perhaps suggest a subject of a causerie. It appears in this month's 'Cosmopolis'. The end as you will perceive, the last paragraph, I mean, is weak. I ought to have gone to Balzac's 'Illusions Perdues' for an end — When Lucien comes up to Paris with Madame Bargeton. Balzac's description how Lucien buys himself clothes is infinitely (*sic*) better than the philosophy of clothes attempted by that howling Scotchman.⁴ All the excitement and emulation of society are given by Balzac. Thackery (*sic*) omitted that too. I write these things in the hope of suggesting a subject. You say in your last causerie that you do not believe in the permanency of prose fiction and in support of your belief you say the Elizabethan romances are not read now. But prose fiction is surely not more than forty years old. It began with Balzac and has been continued by Tolstoi Tourgueneff and Flaubert. Surely that is the history of prose fiction. Such is my conviction. If you discuss the subject you need not consider these last remarks as private they are part and parcel of the article I

¹ *George Moore: A Reconsideration*, Seattle, 1955, p. 128.

² Noted by Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴ An allusion to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4).

send you. Why dont you come to London. Two more years and I shall have finished my new novel 'Evelyn Innes' three years are not too long to spend on a book

Truly yours George Moore

Moore has omitted the year from the date on this letter but a number of items of internal evidence point to 1896. Moore's reference to 'your last causerie', i.e. to Quiller-Couch's weekly column in *The Speaker*, clearly relates to the causerie for 10 October 1896 (on the poetry of William Morris), in which Quiller-Couch had observed: 'For my part, I begin to have a very uneasy suspicion of the permanence of even the sincerest prose fiction'.¹ In any case Moore's mention of his own article 'in this months "Cosmopolis"' would itself be sufficient evidence for the acceptance of 1896 as the year of this letter: he manifestly refers here to his provocative critical essay, 'Since the Elizabethans', which appeared in *Cosmopolis* for October 1896.²

Moore's occasional literary criticism is not generally regarded very highly these days: Brown's view may be taken as fairly representative: 'Moore's critical opinions were designed to compel attention and showed a forthright disregard for taste, orthodoxy, or common sense'.³ It is interesting to notice, therefore, that in 1896 the above letter and the *Cosmopolis* essay mentioned in it were taken sufficiently seriously by Quiller-Couch (himself an embodiment, not to say champion, of contemporary taste, orthodoxy and common sense) to be thought worthy of immediate follow-up by him in *The Speaker*. On 17 October, i.e. in the paper's very next number,⁴ in a causerie entitled 'The Moral Idea in Fiction', Quiller-Couch examines and replies to 'Since the Elizabethans'. Summarily stated, Moore's position in this essay resembles his view in the above letter, namely that prose fiction begins in effect with Balzac and is continued by Flaubert, Turgenev and Tolstoy: he then develops the further point that the English novelists had never faced the great moral questions, as Shakespeare did, but had mainly treated themes of

¹ Vol. xiv, p. 392.

² Vol. iv, pp. 42-58.

³ Op. cit., p. 194.

⁴ Vol. xiv, pp. 417-18.

purely secondary and evanescent importance and consequently had failed to produce works of the first order:

The essential is that the Saxon discovered the materialist novel in 'Tom Jones', and liked it so much that he has gone on producing it ever since. Thackeray improved its form, Dickens enriched it with genial caricatures, . . . but in essentials it has not changed, for the character of the race has not changed for the last hundred and fifty years.

Quiller-Couch is not prepared to endorse these strictures in their full rigour ('I believe that Mr Moore rides his hobby too far and too fast') but admits nevertheless that Moore has a point:

But I confess I could answer him more effectively and with the lighter heart did I not feel the importance of the principle on which he lays stress . . . I can get at the heart of a story by Tolstoi or Tourgueneff as . . . I could never get at the heart of a story by Thackeray or Trollope. The two Russians always appeal to an universal, the two Englishmen to a particular comprehension.

Thus it may be seen that, on one occasion at least, Moore's critical views struck a contemporary as valid and cogent; Quiller-Couch's reaction to his correspondent's censure of the 'Saxon materialist novel' serves as a reminder that in the 'nineties critical absolutes unchallenged for generations were in the discard while a search for new values had begun which was to result in canons still given endorsement even in the present. It is in this connexion that the above letters by Moore probably have their greatest value, as primary documentations of two men's part in a general reappraisal of the English novel which foreshadowed and gave direction to the more radical break with tradition represented by the great experimental novelists of this century and which thus gave rise to artistic tenets still regarded by many as 'modern'.