'They all made me feel so *dowdy*'*

ST-JOHN PERSE

'Conrad would never judge a friend morally or intellectually,' Perse continues. 'Friendship was sacred for him. He did *not* love the sea, of course – he lived forty-two miles inland, you know – but man-against-the-sea, and ships, and he never understood me when I talked about the sea itself. I think he must have disliked my poems, though the only literature that I am certain he positively hated was Dostoevsky. Conrad once told me about a dinner he had had somewhere in the country with Shaw, Wells, Bennett. When these *savants cyniques* of the literary industry talked about writing as "action", poor Conrad, horrified, left the table pretending he had to catch an earlier train. He told me later, in *épouvantable* French,¹ except for one English word I will never forget, "Writing, for me, is an act of faith. They all made me feel so *dowdy*."

NOTES

St-John Perse (1887–1975) was the pseudonym of the poet Marie-René Alexis Saint-Léger Léger. Born on a small coral island which his family owned near Guadeloupe, he had a diplomatic career in France and at one time lived in America. His first poem was published in 1909, and his reputation rests on a long poem, *Anabase* (1924), which T. S. Eliot translated in 1930. He won the Nobel prize for literature in 1960.

St-John Perse, bearing an introduction from Conrad's friend Agnes Tobin, came to visit Conrad at Capel House in the summer of 1912 and stayed for a few days. Half a century later, he recalled the visit in conversation with Robert Craft, during which he also remarked that Conrad was "'the most perfect aristocrat and the truest friend I have ever known"'.¹

1. St-John Perse's description of Conrad's French as 'dreadful' is a rare, perhaps unique, criticism of his command of the spoken language.

* Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968) p. 250.