

'Truer than History'

EDWARD THOMAS

CONRAD said a great many good things about art and about life in his prefaces, letters and reminiscences, and it has worried me that otherwise perceptive critics should have been so ready when it suited their argument to disparage or discount these explicit opinions. Of course one can point to the fact that many of the prefaces were written years after the books themselves; one can suggest that the letters were coloured by Conrad's attitude to the intended recipient; and one can take the view that the memoirs, if not deliberate camouflage, tell us nothing very intimate or important. Thus E. M. Forster, reviewing *Notes on Life and Letters*, spoke of 'the severe little apartment that must, for want of a better word, be called his confidence'.

But all these points, besides being arguable in themselves, involve depreciating the novelist's intelligence or sincerity, and one must prefer, *if it is possible*, to fit Conrad's novels to his own declared intentions. What follows is an attempt to take Conrad seriously, to show that his ideas had a coherence inside and outside the novels. More particularly I want to suggest that his ideas about the novel as an art-form constitute a challenge to the critical premises of two kinds of critic, and that this may have something to do with why his declared views are sometimes ignored.

But first there is an underlying, theoretic question which cannot be shirked: do we believe, with F. R. Leavis and many others, that there is 'an elementary distinction to be made between the discussion of problems and ideas and what we find in the great novelists'?¹ Or do we believe that the greatness of the novel consists in its being able to include anything and everything that can be treated in an essay and article, in its capacity for generalization as well as for the rendering of detail? Of course one must make all the allowances for the form and working out of the

¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 1948, p. 7.

novel, not merely take the opinions of the characters as if they were the author's; one must admit the importance of the imagery and allow that the novelist draws on unconscious levels that may lie dormant in more discursive writing; but in the end do we emphasize the 'separateness' of novelistic truth from other kinds?

I incline to the view that we should not, and certainly not in the case of Conrad. He was, as Robert Penn Warren insists 'in the fullest sense of the term, a philosophical novelist. The philosophical novelist or poet is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values'.¹ What is more he does this in very similar terms inside the novels and outside them. It would not be difficult to find passages of general thinking that could equally well appear in both positions, and the critic who starts by dismissing Conrad's discussion of problems outside the novels can easily end up as a high-formalist, basing Conrad's claim to greatness not on anything he *says* in the novels; but merely on the pattern, the arrangement.

Quite often in his prefaces Conrad calls to mind phrases in the novel. In Chapter III of *Under Western Eyes* we read 'the true Razumov had his being in the willed, in the determined future — in that future menaced by the lawlessness of autocracy — for autocracy knows no law — and the lawlessness of revolution'. In the preface we find many of the same words, and certainly the same thought:

The most terrifying reflection (I am now speaking for myself) is that all these people are not the product of the exceptional but of the general — of the normality of their time, place and race. The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of heart must follow the downfall of any given human institutions.

In the same preface Conrad remarks on the special exercise in restraint which writing about the Russian situation required of him as a Pole. He faced 'the obligation of absolute fairness imposed on me by the peculiar experience of race and family'.

¹ Robert Penn Warren, Introduction to Modern Library Edition of *Nostramo*, 1951.

With this phrase we can compare the reference to Razumov in the novel itself: 'It is inconceivable that any young Englishman should find himself in Razumov's situation . . . he would not have that hereditary and personal knowledge of the means by which a historical autocracy represses ideas.' The words 'hereditary and personal' take us back to 'race and family' in the former quotation.

We cannot avoid a judgement here on whether Conrad did show bias in this novel. Edward Garnett thought he showed hate, and Douglas Hewitt thinks anti-Russian feeling has been given free rein. If this is true, then perhaps it is *because* Conrad included so much of his 'opinion' instead of getting on with the business of submerging himself in the material of life. But is it true? We must note that Conrad was very conscious of his natural bias and therefore in the best position to check it; that he defended himself strongly against the charge, that in the same novel he implies considerable scepticism about 'Western' values too — the smug Swiss at their café tables who have made a compromise with history; but most of all we should note that the thesis advanced by Conrad and illustrated in the first pair of quotations is now something that specialist historians take for granted — the continuity of autocratic and repressive traditions between Tsarist and post-revolutionary Russia. If it has been difficult for us to do justice to *Under Western Eyes*, this may be because, like Conrad's young Englishman, we had little understanding of autocracy. It is perhaps the drawing back of the Anglo-Saxon world into the main current of European politics that has been partly responsible for the critical reappraisal of Conrad's political novels, and it may be that this has not gone far enough. It was, interestingly, George Orwell who wrote of Conrad: 'What he did have was a sort of grown-upness and political understanding which would have been almost impossible to a native English writer at that time' and again: 'Conrad was one of those writers who in the present century civilized English literature and brought it back into contact with Europe from which it had been severed for almost a hundred years.'

Conrad's meditations, generalizations, on the events of his novel, ask to be measured against our own experience of the world; indeed (this is a point excellently made by Guetti) many

of Conrad's statements about his characters are the statements of a reader who already knows the story from beginning to end and is reflecting on them. But this invitation to participate is nullified by the critical approach which concentrates attention on what is seen as unconscious motivation in the novelist; general truths are then explained away by particular factors in the author's background.

Poland, the fixation on going to sea, the abandonment of his family traditions, are often shown as appearing in transposed or allegorical form in the novels — Jim's jump from the ship, Decoud in *Nostramo*. But we should be very chary of such an approach. A great novelist is by definition someone who has thought *more*, not less, about human motive than the average critic, and his unconscious drives will operate only at the limits of a great self-awareness. When Conrad goes over his family and national background in *A Personal Record* he is indeed oblique and ironical, but this is not necessarily evidence of an inability to confront a painful past. He *does* confront his mother's death, he expresses his own cold anger at the stupidity of Tsarist officialdom which hastened her death; he shows that he is moved by the dedication of the Polish patriots, but he also feels the futility of Polish politics and notes how the ridiculous is always getting mixed up with the most noble purposes. His attitude is complex because there is no simple way for an honest and intelligent man to look at these things. It is not surprising that this same complexity should come out in *Nostramo* which treats themes present in Polish as well as Costaguanan politics — 'events flowing from the passions of men short-sighted in good and evil'.

One can find all sorts of parallels, and some of them Conrad himself pointed out. Antonia Avellanos, he tells us in the Author's Note, was modelled on his first love: 'It was I who had to hear oftenest her scathing criticism of my levities — very much like poor Decoud — or stand the brunt of her austere, unanswerable invective.' That reference is enough to make us realize that Decoud did not creep in as unconscious therapy for the author. Conrad is dealing with himself, but consciously. The important thing is to distinguish between the early life used *as material* (the states of mind as much as the events) and the early life as an unconscious force working itself out despite the author.

Even at its subtlest the latter approach, it seems to me, diminishes the subject of criticism. Graham Greene has a splendid phrase about Conrad: 'memories of a creed working through the agnostic prose' — splendid because it registers two elements with which Conrad worked. He is always moving between the passionate and analytic worlds, Poland and the Anglo-Saxon countries, Catholic and secular societies. But by using the phrase 'working through' Greene implies that some deep level of true feeling comes through despite the author. In this way he avoids confronting Conrad's own synthesis, a way of looking at the world which differs from his own. And this is what we should be interested in, for we are all half-enamoured of heroic revolutionary periods, religious depth, self-sacrifice for ideals, but at the same time we have lived into a world of comparative values, have what Conrad once called the 'contrastive sense', doubt the absolute value of any political or religious ideal. We read Conrad's novels, among other reasons, because he has tried hard to order these different feelings without denying the truth of any experience.

We can only keep ourselves open to what Conrad is saying if we allow him the freedom which he claimed for himself: 'My attitudes to subjects and expressions, the angles of vision, my methods of composition will, within limits, be always changing — not because I am unstable or unprincipled but because I am free. Or perhaps it would be more true to say, because I am always trying for freedom — within my limits.'

I am pressing towards an 'objectivist' interpretation of Conrad that has a great deal in common with Marxist criticism, and only by following Conrad's claims and the Marxist claims in some detail do we see where the paths divide. Not only are Conrad's political novels compatible with the Marxist view of history (for a subtle Marxist every good novel should be *that*); in some cases they positively bring it to mind. '*Heart of Darkness*' writes Arnold Kettle in one of the best Marxist essays on Conrad, 'is perhaps the most horrifying description of imperialism ever written'.¹ He points out that in the early years of the century only two considerable writers of English — Kipling and Conrad —

¹ Arnold Kettle, 'The Greatness of Joseph Conrad', *Modern Quarterly*, III, Summer, 1948.

looked the phenomenon of imperialism in the face; one might add that very few others were in a position to do so. *Nostromo* almost suggests a theory of economic stages; Sulaco 'where the military band plays sometimes between revolutions' is caught in the seemingly endless circle of dictatorship and bloody insurrection — the liberals are always talking in their club, the bandits are in the *sierra*, the corrupt military are planning coups or committing atrocities, the common people are muttering. The only thing that breaks the circle and brings a realignment of forces is the introduction by Charles Gould of American capital into the mine. When the novel ends, the stage is set for the next round of the struggle — this time between capitalist and worker. It is 'a small, frail, bloodthirsty hater of capitalists' who is with *Nostromo* when he dies. This, as Kettle says, is an astonishing feat of intuition, but one must add that Conrad would also have been likely to see the next stage of the struggle in a tragic light.

Again Conrad lends himself to a Marxist interpretation in so far as he believes that everything is interrelated, that individual fates interact constantly with social forces: 'I would wish him [the novelist] to look with a large forgiveness at men's ideas and prejudices which are by no means the outcome of malevolence, but depend on their education, their social status, even their professions.' The growth of what one can call 'sociological consciousness' is perhaps another reason why Conrad has been re-evaluated. His very theory of the novel demanded that every detail should have relevance, that nothing should be wholly accidental. 'An accident has its forward and backward connections,' he wrote in *The Partner*. Even his studies of isolated figures are indirect and implied studies of society. The two Europeans isolated geographically and morally in *An Outpost of Progress* tell us a great deal about Western civilization. Even Willems in *An Outcast of the Islands* was conceived in social terms: 'The man who suggested Willems to me was not particularly interesting in himself. My interest was aroused by his dependent position, his strange dubious status of a mistrusted, disliked, worn-out European living on the reluctant toleration of the settlement hidden in the heart of the forest.'

Marxist criticism, then, is valuable because it concentrates our attention on the material of the novels and away from the psycho-

logy of the author. This is how Conrad would have wished it. It also brings out the strong feeling in Conrad for the social forces which shape individual life. Conrad is concerned with the histories of individuals and of groups, or if one prefers, with 'History'. 'As to their own histories,' he wrote in the preface to *Nostramo*, 'I have tried to set them down, Aristocracy and People, men and women, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, bandit and politician, with as cool a hand as was possible in the heat and clash of my own conflicting emotions'. *Nostramo* was to catch 'the spirit of an epoch in South American history'. *Under Western Eyes* was to capture the psychology of Russia. Even *The Duel* was 'an attempt to realize the spirit of the Napoleonic era'. Conrad was attempting to render not the externals of history but the internal meaning, as his phrases suggest, and this too seems to favour a Marxist interpretation.

But only superficially. For in the end Conrad claims a special kind of creative objectivity; he is not discovering an existing objective structure in history, but making the meaning by the power of his own imagination. His view of life acquires objectivity only when other people assent to it: 'Fiction — if it at all aspires to be art — appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the time.' This was written in 1897 in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. Much later he was to quote Novalis: 'It is certain my conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it.'

Conrad was an ambitious novelist in the most extreme sense of that overdone adjective. 'We agreed,' wrote Ford Madox Ford, 'that the writing of novels was the one thing of importance that remained in the world.' 'Art,' wrote Conrad, 'may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible world, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.' He believed in the novel rather as Milton believed that the Epic was the greatest work that the mind of man was capable of performing. We see now what tradition he is in. It is the tradition that goes back through

the memorable phrases of Shelley and Sidney to Aristotle and that asserts the sovereignty of the artist's kind of truth. The novelist, Conrad believed, was writing something 'truer than history' because it was the highest and most comprehensive kind of history. That is why in the end one has to choose between agreeing with Conrad's Marxist critics and agreeing with Conrad, just as one has to choose between agreeing with his 'psychological' critics and with the novelist himself.

Uncle

At last we have taken that picture down,
For more than twenty years his photograph
has looked out from our chimney-breast,
his calm, unblinking eyes watching us,
his regimental badge permanently bullshone.

As children we accepted his grey face
as part of the furniture, his fixed smile
hiding the fear of war — the khaki lie
of a young man nailed up on our wall,
pretending he was a soldier.

Three days later he was killed in France.
(Or was he drowned? I just forget.)
All I remember are the days of questioning,
the tears on faces I had not seen cry,
and then that blown-up photograph.

And now it's down what can we find
to put there in its place? A coloured print
of our own children and their wedding days?
Or something from our holiday in Wales?
Or shall we leave the nail for next year's calendar?

EDWARD STOREY