Watt on Conrad: "Heroes of the Wars of the Mind"

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 $\mathbf{1}$ N AUTHOR RISES above the status of simply a major or minor figure and becomes a literary industry when he has a journal devoted exclusively to his work (such as Conradiana) or when an important critic devotes 375 pages to a fraction of his career. In Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, Ian Watt deals with Conrad's life and work only up to 1900, and promises a second volume on a novelist who, though born in 1857, did not publish his first book until 1895. The only works treated in detail are Almayer's Folly, The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Heart of Darkness, and Lord Jim, though in the 1890's Conrad also published An Outcast of the Islands and Tales of Unrest; these receive passing attention. Watt's title might hint at consideration of Conrad as Victorian or Romantic or fin du siècle - all tenable theories - but in fact, while Watt does study him as the product of various nineteenth-century influences, he clearly accepts the traditional view that Conrad is one of the early, important "moderns." At the end of this study he even suggests that Conrad's most modern works were written during the reign of Queen Victoria. But all the best moderns were raised beneath her gaze.

In his Preface, Watt announces three main avenues to his subject: biographical, historical and interpretive. In practice, these are not three separate critical approaches, but a single, historical approach treated in three stages. Watt consistently argues from the author to the work. He deals first with Conrad's life and the many circumstances that affected his writing; he then describes the composition of each book, setting it in a wider philosophical and literary context; and finally he analyses style and themes. Each chapter deals with a single book and is divided into biographical, historical, and interpretive sections following in regular sequence. The result is a rich and immensely readable account of a many-sided author. By the end we feel thoroughly immersed in Conrad's life, times, and works after a succession of dunkings in them.

The historical-biographical approach to Conrad is well established, and in this as in most aspects of his study Watt shows himself an orthodox Conradian. Conrad's life impinged on his work in many, ambiguous ways. He drew on actual experiences for many of his tales, but doctored the truth freely: "I had to make materials from my own life's incidents arranged, combined, coloured for artistic purposes," he admitted to A. T. Saunders.¹ Even in his memoirs he adopted the pose of The Author presenting his memoirs; he preserved an "anonymous intimacy," in E. M. Forster's phrase, that conceals as much as it discloses.² He romanticized his past and, in one case, turned himself into the hero of his own novel, The Arrow of Gold, a melodramatic tale of political intrigue, love affairs, and duels. He wrote in Richard Curle's copy of the book: "All the persons are authentic and the facts are as stated."3 But the truth, biographers have discovered, was probably quite different and involved an inglorious attempt at suicide. Consequently, the critic must be wary. As Watt observes, Conrad is constantly "personal without being directly autobiographical" (p. 93).⁴ Not only plot and character, but the narrative voice of his novels suggests a presiding personality and a range of experience that draw us back to the author, who then retreats from our efforts to approach him. His "concoction of artistic lies," as Conrad described his own fiction,⁵ arises deviously from the complex truths of his life. He was a Pole who became a French and then British sailor, who became an English author; he was a man of the mid-nineteenth century, raised amid traditions older still, who somehow became a major modern novelist.

Watt's biographical sketches are brief and offer no new information, drawing instead from the work of Jocelyn Baines, Gustaf Morf, Zdzisław Najder, Norman Sherry, and Jerry Allen. He does not use Frederick Karl's fat biography, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979), published in the same year as Watt's book, but several references suggest that he received assistance from

Karl. However, Watt is very well informed, and consistently finds biographical material that illuminates Conrad's interests and skills. He contrasts Conrad's actual experiences in the Congo with the depiction of them in Heart of Darkness, showing how the changes serve both political and literary purposes. He analyses the various sources that combined to form the character of Lord Jim. Even tiny details are significant, such as the fact that in presenting the voyage of the "Narcissus," Conrad accurately followed the wind patterns prevailing from June to October along the route described. Such fidelity to detail in an author who frequently alters facts reveals the guidance that he needed, especially earlier in his career. It suggests too the "retrospective piety" that, Watt claims, Conrad felt for his Polish and nautical years, "that abiding reverence for people in his past merely because they had left traces in his memory" (p. 40). The importance of memory to his plots, characters, narrative strategies and aesthetic theory (however roughly formulated) suggests that despite alterations and evasions. Conrad's work was intimate, if not always revelatory, and had a personal urgency for him.

This intimacy is apparent in an area which Watt passes over rather quickly - Conrad's youth in Poland. His family coat of arms showed "a handkerchief with two corners tied together, standing for faithfulness to country, religion, and God."6 His first written words on a photograph sent to his Grandmother were: "To my beloved Grandma who helped me send cakes to my poor Daddy in prison — grandson, Pole, Catholic, nobleman — 6 July 1863 - Konrad" (p. 3). As a young man, Conrad quickly abandoned but did not forget all these traditional ties. He left his family, homeland, religion, and position. He became an exile and wanderer, a "marginal man," as Frederick Karl frequently calls him, at once conservative and skeptical, mistrustful of religion, privilege, and social justice, yet strongly ethical and loyal. Once established in England, he was unjustly vilified for deserting and betraying Poland, a charge which he always vigorously denied. Watt rightly stresses the importance of loss and upheaval in Conrad's formative years, but does not pursue the subject. Yet in novel after novel we find a sudden disaster that disrupts a character's life and challenges all his comfortable notions of moral

and social stability. The unforeseen event is a "jump," "fall," or "test" that throws him into a "world of improbabilities" (*The Resue*) or a "world of hazard and adventure" (*Victory*). Not just the individual life, but the whole world is called into question; it becomes a "destructive element." Bertrand Russell observed that Conrad "thought of civilized and morally tolerably life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths."⁷

Conrad received advice on how to conduct so precarious a walk from two family sources - his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, and his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. Watt discusses this familiar topic briefly, though he does not cite Robert Hodge's The Dual Heritage of Joseph Conrad (1967), a work that uses the influence of the opposed personalities of the two men as its major premise. Korzeniowski was romantic, emotional, inspired, a poet, a political rebel and patriot; he died when Conrad was only eleven. Bobrowski was realistic, practical, stoical, a responsible lawyer who raised the orphaned Conrad and supported him financially until he was 31. These two figures recur in various guises in Conrad's fiction, often paired as complementary types, the one offsetting the other, seeking access to him, criticizing and admiring him: Marlow and Kurtz, Marlow and Jim, Haldin and Razumov, Leggatt and the Captain of "The Secret Sharer." Occasionally, both personalities conflict within a single character such as Decoud or Heyst. Perhaps this unexpected combination is possible because Korzeniowski and Bobrowski provided the young Conrad with examples of competing kinds of egoism. The father was a revolutionary leader and martyr who adopted a messianic view of Polish history. His funeral "was made the occasion of a tribute by the people of Cracow to a man who had sacrificed his life to his conception of patriotic duty; Conrad walked at the head of an enormous procession."8 The uncle, on the other hand, maintained a proud, authoritarian restraint. His Memoirs and his letters to the errant Conrad containing a stream of advice, warnings, and rebukes, testify to an egoism different in nature but equal in degree to Korzeniowski's. In Conrad's novels we find a fascination with yet mistrust of the assertive individual. There is

admiration for heroic courage and fidelity, tempered by a keen awareness of the delusions of heroism and the essential powerlessness of the individual. Jim's "exalted egoism" is his glory and his undoing. Charles Gould, like Nostromo, is a masterful leader who becomes the slave of his obsession. For such characterization Conrad became known as a "romantic realist," a term which he approved and which hints at his dual family heritage.

The second stage in Watt's approach to Conrad is historical. He begins with the composition and sources of each book, advances to a consideration of models and literary influences, and then widens his view further to discuss social, philosophical, and intellectual history. He comments on these large issues only when they have direct bearing on Conrad's life and work, and admits the shortcomings of a history-of-ideas approach to literature: "the search for such portable intellectual contents as can conveniently be pried loose from a literary work deflects attention from what it can most genuinely yield, and at best gives in return a few abstract ideas whose nature and interrelationships are much more exactly stated in formal philosophy" (p. 147). Nevertheless, Watt does wish to establish Conrad's place amid the portable abstractions of modern thought, and his periodic observations on these ideas combine in a coherent argument.

Its main features will be familiar to readers of Watt's The Rise of the Novel (1957). There he studies the eighteenth-century novel as a literary response to and expression of the basic shift in sensibility and thought that marks the beginning of the modern age: "Richardson's narrative mode, therefore, may also be regarded as a reflection of a much larger change in outlook — the transition from the objective, social, and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist, and private orientation of the life and literature of the last two hundred years."⁹ The philosophical legacy of Descartes, Locke, and Hume was a rejection of universals, abstractions, and revealed truth in favour of insistance on the private, skeptical, solitary mind. In Britain especially, the empirical tradition stressed the epistemological responsibility and uncertainty of the individual apprehension of reality. Impression is prior to idea, sensation to conception. Because each observer must receive and interpret all the busy par-

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ticulars of experience, he is endowed with a great creative power. But this very power isolates him from others and from the world; hence the characteristic modern concern with alienation, identity, and anxiety about the general and ethical truth of one's limited experience. The novel arises to dramatize these powers and problems. Its realism, narrative conventions, fluent prose, and reliance on time and memory all portray the privileges and dangers of subjective individualism. They place an emphasis on social particulars, motivation, and especially the inner life of the mind, what Henry James called the "ordeal of consciousness." Watt concludes The Rise of the Novel by glancing ahead and insisting on the novel's continuing allegiance to presentational realism. In Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, he recapitulates and continues the argument, albeit sporadically, by treating Romanticism and Victorianism as periods that intensify the privileges and problems of modern philosophical realism. They elaborate its inherent tensions, especially its opposition between the self and the world, and seek means of resolving this opposition through art. In confronting the question of the kind of truth embodied in literature (as opposed to science), they grant the imagination greater powers that give the poet a god-like stature and even, by the end of the century, make art a substitute for religion. The poetic imagination thus provides a means of reasserting those universals that philosophy, which had indirectly given imagination such prominence, originally called into question. This paradox accounts for the violent dualities that Watt traces in nineteenth-century thought: realism and romance, materialism and idealism, naturalism and symbolism. Romantic individualism expects a boundless increase in social and personal power; yet it is accompanied by a growing despair over human frailty. The two combine in science as well as literature, for example in the "astrophysical pessimism" made popular by Lord Kelvin's formulation of the second law of thermodynamics. It seemed to suggest that "like all else, the earth would end in cold and drought through the diffusion of heat-energy" (p. 152). It is interesting to see that the modern fascination with "entropy" arises from a Victorian commonplace.

Conrad, always a man of contradictions, falls readily though with some awkwardness into this scheme of things. He was certainly no philosopher, and often belittled the power of his own understanding and of human thought in general. As he lamented rather indulgently to R. B. Cunninghame Graham:

Life knows us not and we do not know life, — we don't know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish: words once pronounced die: and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow, — only the string of my platitudes seems to have no end.¹⁰

"After the fashion of his own folly" could be the epitaph for many of Conrad's characters, while the ironic, self-deprecating comment at the end points to the skeptical narrative means he adopts to unmask his heroes' follies. But Watt perceptively observes that Conrad, if not a thinker, "strikes us as very thoughtful; and if we cannot call him a philosopher, the intimations of his fictional world steadily invite ethical and even metaphysical response" (p. 147). He was not formally well-educated, but he read widely and had an inquisitive mind. His letters and novels reveal an acquaintance with literature, philosophy, history, science, and almost anything to do with the sea. His intelligence and the idiosyncratic way he conducts a train of thought are illustrated in Watt's careful and sympathetic account of the Preface to the Nigger of the "Narcissus." Conrad is concerned with both the craft and the truth of fiction. Both depend on the recalling, recording, and communicating of impressions as interpreted by the temperament of the artist. Conrad considers all these terms in his own way, and implies them all in his famous dictum that his task is, above all, "to make you see." If the structure of his essay is "partly expository and partly musical" (p. 82), his ideas - suggesting Maupassant, Pater, Schopenhauer, and less directly, the English Romantic poets - are logical and consistent with the intellectual history outlined above.

Watt never gives a sustained account of Conrad's "philosophy." With his reticence, inconsistencies and deceptions, Conrad makes this a difficult task, and various books devoted to it have produced various results. But just as from his biographical sketches Watt conveys a strong sense of Conrad's personality, so from his historical observations he suggests the intellectual problems that Conrad tended to argue with if not argue out. His interests are "ethical and even metaphysical" in Watt's phrase, and in that order. He is fundamentally a moralist and treats social, political and psychological issues from a moral perspective. Larger metaphysical questions are implicit in his dramas of character and behaviour, but are seldom discussed as such. Given his background, years at sea and self-education, it is understandable that Conrad's thinking should begin with the responsible, vulnerable individual and should consider the way he directs his life, his response to freedom and its demands, his adherence to or betraval of traditional values, his citizenship, egoism, and faith in ideals. The virtues of the sea - solidarity, duty, courage, perserverance - also permeate his thinking, offering a model of behaviour that is sustaining, satisfying, but at the same time simplified and routine. Watt notes how Conrad's moral confidence suffers from a typically Victorian "dualism of attitudes ... in which, very roughly, ontology is opposed to ethics" (p. 149) or more simply, truth is opposed to belief. In fact, the universe is heedless of human desires and values, and if Conrad affirms certain standards, he does so in full knowledge that they are fictions imposed on an indifferent world. One can admire the sincerity and even passion with which such fictions are maintained while still recognizing their falsehood. Marlow in Lord Jim explains that man takes refuge in the "sheltering conception of light and order" that only partially conceals the "vast and dismal" disorder of reality.¹¹ But another of Conrad's favourite images, the sea, reminds him that man floats precariously in an ocean of reality that has "no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory."12

If he is Victorian in these notions, he is modern in his discovery that man's sheltering, buoyant ideals are themselves problematical. Watt does not pursue this moral ambiguity, though he is not reluctant to assert Conrad's modernity or complexity. It is not a matter of virtue going unrewarded or unanswered in the world, but of virtue proving dangerous. Marlow is upset by Jim's desertion of the Patna because it casts doubt on the "sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct," and forces him to look "on the convention that lurks in all tradition and on the essential sincerity of falsehood."13 Conrad casts doubt not only on the power of standards but on the standards themselves. He dramatizes what R. A. Gekoski calls the "riskiness of values."¹⁴ He shows that man can be damned by his best intentions, that sincerity and integrity can become fanatical, that heroism is a form of egoism. In The Nigger of the "Narcissus," pity makes the crew decadent. In Heart of Darkness, Marlow seeks "an unselfish belief in the idea - something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to";¹⁵ but his image suggests both idolatry and Kurtz's degraded practices (Watt takes a different view of this passage, pp. 216-17). In Nostromo, even the idea of justice becomes an obsession that "can bring the heaven down pitilessly upon a loved head."¹⁶ There is a grotesque and comical tangle of good and bad intentions in The Secret Agent. Therefore Conrad shows that man cannot live without ideals, but that he cannot trust them, nor can he completely trust himself.

Watt proceeds from the history of ideas, to literary ideas in particular, and through them to Conrad's novels. The third stage in his study, the interpretive, examines the early works in great detail by explicating selected passages, and isolating special problems. Watt concentrates especially on the implications of narrative. He treats Conrad, above all, as a storyteller — though Conrad disliked being called a spinner of yarns — who has brought the age-old craft up to date. He examines narrative techniques, illustrates their operation and then uses them to direct him to themes. He is very sensitive in analyzing what he calls "narrative pressure," and in this regard he resembles Albert Guerard, a critic and novelist who knows exactly how a novel fits together and whose book, *Conrad the Novelist* (1958), for that reason remains a key study.

Narrative pressure means the way a story is directed and its details are asserted, the way it unfolds and draws toward its conclusion. It means the appeal made to the reader so that his interest and sympathy are controlled. It suggests in the word "pressure" the force that impels the narrative. It involves all aspects of

style: tone, point of view, imagery, time-shifts, multiple narrators, progression d'effet. Watt does not break new ground here, but he surveys the field with discrimination and with that pervading historical sense that sets each technique within the larger narrative tradition. He argues, for example, that the familiar term "timeshift," introduced by Ford Madox Ford, is less accurate than Joseph Warren Beach's alternative phrase "the chronological looping method": "Beach's term has the advantage of placing the critical emphasis, not on the shift as such, the break which separates chronologically distinct episodes, but on the looping, on the kinds of continuity created by the juxtaposition in the narrative sequence of episodes which would not follow each other if the story were told chronologically" (p. 291). This is a good example of how precisely Watt uses his critical vocabulary, and how attentively he observes Conrad's actual practice. He focuses attention on "the kinds of continuity," another way of expressing narrative pressure, and then seizes on what is essential in Conrad's use of temporal dislocation (anachrony):

The fundamental aim of Conrad's use of time, then, is not directly mimetic, as Ford implies; Conrad does not use anachrony to be more realistic in representing the discontinuities in the process whereby we ordinarily learn about the lives of others. His aim — the revelation of moral essences — is much more inward than that described by Ford; and so his handling of time is essentially a means of representing a progression of moral understanding. The source of this progression, in *Lord Jim* as in *Heart of Darkness*, is Marlow's probing mind as it tries both to recollect experience and to decipher its meaning. (p. 300)

Many of Conrad's techniques are suggested here: impressionism, recollection, fictional narrators, puzzles, as well as temporal dislocation. But it is in the phrase "a progression of moral understanding" that we see the final meaning of narrative pressure. The pressure of Conrad's narrative is toward understanding and judgment (though as we have seen, both may be encouraged yet not satisfied: understanding may be baffled; values may prove ambiguous). The term narrative pressure is useful because it permits discussion of many techniques, but insists on how all participate in the narrative structure of the novel and ultimately contribute to theme. Watt's final concern, then, is semantic. He studies narrative for the many ways it conveys, embodies, promotes, and even withholds meaning. In practice this involves examining kinds of symbolism. Words, objects, impressions, characters, tiny details, and whole scenes are all invested with meaning. Everything is in some sense symbolic. However, Conrad's characteristic style is "interrogative rather than indicative" (p. 279). Although earlier in his career he was fond of grand, rhetorical pronouncements, he pruned them from his best work - as examination of his revisions discloses - just as he tempered the authority of the omniscient narrator by using the inquisitive, hesitating Marlow. In revealing meaning, therefore, Conrad does not assert truths to which we accede; he follows "a process of prolonged moral and psychological probing" (p. 308), a questioning that entices us to find answers. Everything is a clue to the "revelation of moral essences."

Conrad suggests this very strategy in the famous description of Marlow's skill as a storyteller in Heart of Darkness: "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."17 Watt gives an excellent exegesis of this passage, tracing its impressionist and symbolist implications and showing how it accounts for the style, mystery, and meaning of Heart of Darkness. One technique that Conrad uses to envelope this and other tales with hazy or spectral eloquence is the delaying of explanations, not by concealing information so much as by withholding the moral and psychological significance of keenly observed images. We are shown the "facts of the case" (as in Lord Jim), but not what they mean. We are given the signifier and the sense that it is symbolic before we are told the thing signified. The result is what Watt calls a "semantic gap" or lapse in meaning. He coins several phrases to explain this technique and its variants. "Delayed decoding" is the device of presenting a sense perception but not at first naming or identifying it. It approximates the actual experience of a character who sees more than he immediately understands; it immerses us in his impressions, but also in his

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ignorance. An example occurs in Heart of Darkness when Marlow observes "sticks" whizzing by him, which he later identifies as arrows when he realizes his boat is under attack. "Symbolic deciphering" is a more complicated device because the delayed meaning is not simple (sticks revealed as arrows) but multiple. Deciphering suggests "the much more tenuous and complicated process of making out a message that is inherently difficult to read, and whose meaning is intentionally hidden, or at least ambiguous, mysterious, or unresolved" (p. 276). The episode with Captain Brierly in Lord Jim is an example. The significance of Brierly's suicide and its relation to Jim's disgrace are not immediately explained, but even when they are clarified, there is no adequate explanation. The event remains mysterious, subject to different interpretations. The narrative is "structured so as to engage our bewildered participation in a puzzle" (p. 279), and both our engagement and bewilderment lead us to consider the fundamental moral issues of the novel. A third device, "thematic apposition," is more familiar in Conrad criticism. It depends not on narrative delay, but on a juxtaposititon of scenes so that one comments on the other.

Conrad in the Nineteenth Century is commendable for its style, its scope and its subtlety. It is very readable - a virtue too rare in criticism — so that even though it is limited to Conrad's early writing career, it never seems to exhaust its subject. Watt is also delightfully commensensical. He admits that some of Conrad's writing, adversely affected by Polish and French influences, simply "sounds awful"; yet on the next page reminds us that Conrad is a great novelist because he has written great prose. To psychoanalytic interpretations of the scene in Heart of Darkness when Marlow flings his blood-stained shoes overboard, Watt calmly replies: "To a reader unaccustomed to wearing his shoes filled with warm blood it seems perfectly normal that Marlow should be 'morbidly anxious' to throw them overboard, even if they are new" (p. 239). Above all, the book presents us with a highly capable critic confronting a highly capable and sometimes inspired novelist. Watt is well acquainted with Conrad's writing and the large critical literature surrounding it. He begins with the man and argues from him to his work. His great success is in

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making us sense Conrad's complex personality and its relation to the art it created. To sum up that personality and that relation, Watt turns, fittingly, to the eighteenth century and Dr. Johnson: "Neither Johnson nor Conrad wrote directly about their inner lives, and in each case it is only our subliminal sense of great energies at play to keep turbulent and destructive personal feelings under control which makes us feel that we are in touch with one of the great heroes of the wars of the mind" (p. 25).

NOTES

- ¹ Quoted by Norman Sherry in *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), p. 265.
- ² E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (1936; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 156.
- ³ Jocelyn Baines, Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960), p. 50.
- ⁴ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979). Page references to this edition are given in parentheses.
- ⁵ G. Jean-Aubry, ed., Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters (London: Heinemann, 1927), II, p. 288.
- ⁶ Frederick Karl, Joseph Conrad: the Three Lives (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 17.
- ⁷ Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), I, p. 208.

- ⁹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963), p. 182.
- ¹⁰ C. T. Watts, ed., Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. 65.
- ¹¹ Lord Jim, p. 313. I have used the Memorial edition of The Collected Works of Joseph Conrad, 23 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924-1926).
- ¹² The Mirror of the Sea, p. 135.
- ¹³ Lord Jim, pp. 50 and 93.
- ¹⁴ R. A. Gekoski, *Conrad: the Moral World of the Novelist* (London: Paul Elek, 1978).
- ¹⁵ Heart of Darkness, p. 51.
- ¹⁶ Nostromo, p. 379.
- ¹⁷ Heart of Darkness, p. 48.

⁸ Baines, p. 24.