

CHAPTER I

Joseph Conrad: alienation and commitment

The doubts of the critics about the whole history-of-ideas approach are understandable enough: one way of not experiencing *King Lear* is to underline a few passages containing recognizable ideas, and to make the gratifying reflexion that the Great Chain of Being is really there. The search for such portable intellectual contents as can be prised loose from a work of imagination is likely to deflect attention from what it can most characteristically yield, in exchange for a few abstract ideas whose natures and inter-relationships are much more exactly stated in formal philosophy. And if we cannot base our literary judgements on philosophical criteria, we must be equally on our guard against the criteria of the historian of ideas, which naturally place most value on literary works which are ideologically representative; whereas the greatest authors actually seem not so much to reflect the intellectual system of their age as to express more or less directly its inherent contradictions, or the very partial nature of its capacity for dealing with the facts of experience. This seems to be true of Chaucer and Shakespeare; and it tends to become truer as we come down to the modern world, in which no single intellectual system has commanded anything like general acceptance.

All these are familiar objections; and as regards criticism of modern literature they have been reinforced by a new form of philosophy's old objections to the cognitive validity of art – by the symbolist aesthetic's rejection of all forms of abstraction and conceptualization. The ancient notion was that ideas were the natural and proper inhabitants of man's mind; T. S. Eliot's resounding paradox that 'Henry James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it' transformed them into dangerous ruffians threatening the artist with a fate worse than death.

The alarm, we can now agree, was exaggerated; indeed, the recent tendency for much literary criticism to add moral to formal analysis might well proceed further, and make inquiry into intellectual backgrounds an essential, though not a dominating or exclusive, part of its critical

procedure. For instance, an understanding of Conrad's intellectual attitudes, and of their relation to the various ideological battlegrounds both of his own and of our time, seems to me to illuminate several literary problems which have not yet been satisfactorily answered, despite the increasing critical attention which his works have lately received. At the same time, the consideration of these problems seems to indicate that it is not in ideology as such, but in the relationship of systems of ideas to other things, things as various as personal experience or the expectations of the audience, that we are likely to find answers to literary questions.

The position of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) among his great contemporaries is unique in at least three respects. First, he has a much more varied audience: one finds his admirers not only in academic and literary circles, but among people in all stations of life. Secondly, Conrad's reputation, after a relative decline following his death in 1924, seems to have grown steadily ever since the Second World War; and it continues now, just as one detects a certain mounting impatience, just or unjust, against most of Conrad's literary peers – mainly against Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, but also, to some extent, against Yeats. The reasons for these two features of Conrad's literary appeal seem to be connected with a third and equally wellknown matter – his obscurity. For although the charge of obscurity against modern writers is not novel, it takes a very special form in the case of Conrad. E. M. Forster expressed it most memorably when he asked whether 'the secret casket of [Conrad's] genius' does not contain 'a vapour rather than a jewel', and went on to suggest that the vapour might come from 'the central chasm of his tremendous genius', a chasm which divided Conrad the seaman from Conrad the writer:

Together with these loyalties and prejudices and personal scruples, [Conrad] holds another ideal, a universal, the love of Truth. . . . So there are constant discrepancies between his nearer and his further vision, and here would seem to be the cause of his central obscurity. If he lived only in his experiences, never lifting his eyes to what lies beyond them: or if, having seen what lies beyond, he would subordinate his experiences to it – then in either case he would be easier to read.¹

The continual contradiction which Forster describes between the seer and seaman, between philosophy and experience, seems to offer a key to the three literary problems I have posed. For whereas Conrad's 'further vision' was very similar to that of his great contemporaries, his 'nearer vision', his actual range of experience, was not; and in his works the two perspectives combine in a way which seems directly related to

the varied nature of his audience, to the renewed topicality of his view of the world, and to the unresolved conflict of attitudes which underlies his obscurity.

Conrad's further vision was dominated by the characteristic despair of the late Victorian world-view, which originated in all those developments in nineteenth-century geology, astronomy, physics and chemistry which combined with industrialism to suggest that, so far from being the eternal setting created by God for his favourite, man, the natural world was merely the temporary and accidental result of purposeless physical processes. In one letter, written in 1897, Conrad used an appropriately industrial metaphor to express this notion of the universe as a determinist mechanism denying all man's aspirations towards progress and reform:

There is a – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. You come and say: 'This is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this – for instance – celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.' Will it? Alas, no! You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened. . . .

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. . . .²

In such a meaningless and transitory universe, there is no apparent reason why we should have any concern whatever with the lives of others, or even very much concern with our own:

The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful – but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life – utterly out of it. . . . In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement, for virtue, for knowledge and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances, as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men.³

What has been considered man's most precious gift, consciousness, is really, therefore, a curse:

What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins.⁴

In *Lord Jim* (1900), Stein contemplates a butterfly, and discourses like a discouraged version of the great evolutionist Alfred Wallace, on whom he was in part based:⁵

‘... so fragile! And so strong! And so exact! This is Nature – the balance of colossal forces. Every star is so – and every blade of grass stands so – and the mighty Kosmos in perfect equilibrium produces – this. This wonder; this masterpiece of Nature – the great artist!’

‘... And what of man?’ [Marlow asks]:

‘Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece,’ he said. . . . ‘Perhaps the artist was a little mad. Eh? . . . Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him.’⁶

Man, in fact, is Nature’s permanent alien; he must create his own order if he can. This, of course, was how the Victorians had come to think of human destiny; the religion of progress, in Tennyson’s words, called on man to

Move upward, working out the beast
 And let the ape and tiger die.

But that was not so easy, as Freud was to show; and also, at much the same time, Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Kurtz begins as a representative of all the highest aspirations of nineteenth-century individualism; he is an artist, an eloquent political speaker on the liberal side, an economic and social careerist; and his story enacts the most characteristic impulse of Victorian civilization, combining the economic exploitation of Africa with the great moral crusade of bringing light to the backward peoples of the world. But the jungle whispers ‘to [Kurtz] things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude’ (p. 131). His ‘forgotten and brutal instincts’ (p. 144) soon lead Kurtz to outdo the other colonial exploiters in sordid rapacity; he enslaves and massacres the surrounding tribes; and he ends up being worshipped as a God to whom human sacrifices are offered.

At the back of the great nineteenth-century dream was the assumption that man could be his own God. But to Disraeli’s question ‘Is man an ape or an angel?’, Kurtz’s fate seems to answer that we are never less likely to ‘let the ape and tiger die’ than when we imagine we are angels. Kurtz thought that ‘we whites . . . must necessarily appear to [the savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity’. But he ends his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ (p. 118).

For Conrad, then, man's hope for progress ignores the fact that the ape and tiger are not merely part of our evolutionary heritage, but are ontologically present in every individual. This goes beyond the usual assumptions of the most sceptical of Victorians, and it makes impossible the faith in the development of man's intellectual potentialities through education which characterized the main spokesmen of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Thus, when his reformer friend Cunninghame Graham wrote that his democratic ideal was the heroic sailor, Singleton, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1898), but a Singleton who has been educated, Conrad retorted:

I think Singleton with an education is impossible. . . . Then he would become conscious – and much smaller – and very unhappy. Now he is simple and great like an elemental force. Nothing can touch him but the curse of decay – the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars, one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe. Nothing else can touch him – he does not think.

Would you seriously wish to tell such a man 'Know thyself! Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream?' Would you?⁷

Knowledge merely makes the individual more conscious of the terrible disparity between actuality and aspiration: nor does man's love of his fellows afford any more secure a foundation for political and social reform. Such reform represents no more than – as Conrad put it in *Victory* (1915) – the conflict between 'gorge and disgorge' (p. 384); and man's own nature dooms his longing for fraternity; as Conrad asked: 'Frankly, what would you think of an effort to promote fraternity amongst people living in the same street, I don't even mention two neighbouring streets? Two ends of the same street. . . . What does fraternity mean? . . . Nothing unless the Cain–Abel business'.⁸

Conrad, then, shared with the Victorians their rejection of the religious, social and intellectual order of the past, but he also rejected, as completely as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence or Thomas Mann, the religion of progress with which they and the Edwardians had replaced it. This alienation from the prevailing intellectual perspectives both of the past and of his own time naturally did much to colour Conrad's picture both of his own selfhood and of his role as an author. I use the word 'alienation' because it seems to me the most comprehensive term to describe the two aspects of the process we are concerned with – the external or public, and the internal or private. We have already considered the public, the external ideological vision; but it

would, from a literary point of view, remain merely 'notional', as Newman put it, unless it were internalized: that it was in Conrad, we shall see.

The word 'alienation' has been used in a wide variety of ways,⁹ but its derivation and early usage make its main meaning reasonably clear. From *alius*, 'another', Latin developed the forms *alienus*, 'belonging to another country', and *alienatus*, 'estranged'. Our word 'alienation' thus bears the constant notion of being or feeling a stranger, an outsider. Alienation, as a translation of the German *Entfremdung*, was given philosophical currency early in the nineteenth century by Hegel, who used it to denote what he thought to be characteristic of the individual in the modern world, his sense of inward estrangements, of more or less conscious awareness that the inner being, the real 'I', was alienated from the 'me', the person as an object in society. Later, Marx transferred the idea to the economic plane; for Marx, man only loses his isolation and realizes himself as a person through his activities, through his work; but under capitalism, since the commodity and its cash value are primary, the individual, no longer in personal control of his labour, feels alienated from his work, and therefore from society and from himself.¹⁰

Conrad, I need hardly say, was neither a Hegelian nor a Marxist; but all his writings, and especially his letters, make it clear not only that his mind completely rejected the social and intellectual order of the day, but that his whole inner being seemed to have been deprived of meaning. There can surely be few expressions of such total estrangement from the natural world, from other people, from the writing process, and from the self, to equal this Conrad letter to Garnett:

I am like a man who has lost his gods. My efforts seem unrelated to anything in heaven and everything under heaven is impalpable to the touch like shapes of mist. Do you see how easy writing must be under such conditions? Do you see?

Even writing to a friend – to a person one has heard, touched, drank with, quarrelled with – does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion – the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt – and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of incertitudes.¹¹

But alienation, of course, is not the whole story: Conrad also gives us a sense of a much wider commitment to the main ethical, social and literary attitudes, both of the world at large and of the general reader, than do any others of his great contemporaries.

‘Commitment’ I take to be the secular equivalent of what prize-giving speakers call ‘dedication’ – a binding engagement of oneself to a course of action which transcends any purely personal advantage. And the question inevitably arises as to how a man with the general intellectual perspective sketched above can possibly commit himself to anything larger than his own personal interests.

The beginnings of an answer are probably to be found in Conrad’s life, which made alienation not an endless discovery demanding expression, but merely the initial premise. The initial premise because Conrad was, to begin with, an orphan; his mother died when he was seven, and his father when he was eleven. Then there was his nationality: as a Pole he belonged to a country which no longer existed, and whose people, Conrad wrote, had for a hundred years ‘been used to go to battle without illusions’.¹² Adolescence brought further estrangements: in France from 1874 to 1878, Conrad tried to realize his dream of a career at sea, but he achieved only failure, debts, an unhappy love affair, and, it now seems virtually certain, an attempt at suicide. But when, at the age of twenty, Conrad joined the crew of the English freighter *Mavis*, the premise of total alienation began to be undermined. Conrad’s successful struggle, under conditions, for the most part, of unbearable physical and psychological hardship, to rise from able-bodied seaman to captain, must have given him a sense of the unexpected possibilities and rewards of individual participation in the ordinary life of humanity. Conrad’s years at sea were everything for his career as a writer. Not because they gave him a subject – Conrad would surely be a major novelist quite apart from the sea stories; but because to the earlier perspective of every kind of alienation there was added a foreground of immediate experience which featured a series of the most direct personal and social commitments – to his career, to his fellow-seamen, to his adopted country. These commitments had the most far-reaching effects on Conrad’s attitude to his audience, on his role as a writer, and on his understanding of human life; and their importance was not diminished by the fact that they arose from attitudes which were in perpetual opposition to the larger view of the world which Conrad the seer had absorbed from his nineteenth-century heritage.

There is no very specific statement about the conflict in Conrad’s letters or essays, but its results appear very clearly in his views of his audience, and of his art, as well as in the novels. In the earliest extant letters alienation is the pervading theme, and there is very little about commitment; where the conflict of the two does occur, it is very much

from the point of view of alienation, as in an early letter to Madame Poradowska. We are condemned, Conrad wrote in 1894, to go through life accompanied by

the inseparable being forever at your side – master and slaves, victim and executioner – who suffers and causes suffering. That’s how it is! One must drag the ball and chain of one’s selfhood to the end. It is the price one pays for the devilish and divine privilege of thought; so that in this life it is only the elect who are convicts – a glorious band which comprehends and groans but which treads the earth amidst a multitude of phantoms with maniacal gestures, with idiotic grimaces. Which would you be: idiot or convict?¹³

The war within is an internal projection of the external conflict between the uncomprehending multitudes, the idiots, and the convicts whose intelligence and self-consciousness have condemned them to loneliness and alienation. The possibility of siding with the idiots, of course, is presented by Conrad only as a rhetorical question. In this, Conrad is echoing, not so much Hegel’s picture of alienation, as the familiar romantic dichotomy between the sensitive artist and the crass world outside and, more particularly, its later development, the division of the reading public into highbrow and lowbrow. These divisions must have been much more familiar to Conrad than to many of his English contemporaries, since he read such French writers as Flaubert and Baudelaire very early in his career, and for them the alienation of the writer from the bourgeois public was both more conscious and more absolute than for any English writer of the Victorian period.

Unlike Flaubert and Baudelaire, however, Conrad had no private means, and so as soon as he began his career as an author the problem of finding a public became immediate. When his first literary adviser, Edward Garnett, urged Conrad to follow his own path as a writer and disregard the multitude, Conrad retorted: ‘But I *won’t* live in an attic! I’m past that, you understand? I *won’t* live in an attic!’ On the other hand, keeping out of attics unfortunately seemed feasible only for such popular writers as Rider Haggard, and when Garnett mentioned his work, Conrad commented: ‘too horrible for words’.¹⁴

Conrad’s financial dependence on public favour must often have reinforced his sense of separateness. On the one hand, he was forced by economic necessity to degrade himself – as he once put it, ‘all my art has become artfulness in exploiting agents and publishers’;¹⁵ on the other hand, his inner self remained aloof and proudly refused to accept the role of authorship as society defined it. We find Conrad on one

occasion declining to send his photograph to his publisher, though he added with sardonic magnanimity, 'if I were a pretty actress or a first-rate athlete, I wouldn't deprive an aching democracy of a legitimate satisfaction'.¹⁶ When, for advertising purposes, Algernon Methuen requested a description of *The Secret Agent*, which his firm was publishing, Conrad replied disdainfully, 'I've a very definite idea of what I tried to do and a fairly correct one (I hope) of what I *have* done. But it isn't a matter for a bookseller's ear. I don't think he would understand: I don't think many readers will. But that's not my affair.'¹⁷

What his readers thought was not his affair. That, at least, is one of the postures of authorship which Conrad adopted. But there was another.

How a writer comes to form an idea of his audience is no doubt a complicated and highly idiosyncratic matter; but the starting point must always be the people the writer has actually talked to and heard talk. In Conrad's case, when he became an author virtually everyone he had heard talk English was a seaman; and although collectively they were part of the mass public he scorned, yet many of them were people he respected as individuals. This may be part of the reason why when Conrad speaks of the reading public, as in this letter to John Galsworthy, his sardonic mockery is qualified by the sense that, however fatuous, the reading public is, after all, composed of human beings:

A public is not to be found in a class, caste, clique or type. The public is (or are?) individuals. . . . And no artist can give it what it wants because humanity doesn't know what it wants. But it will swallow everything. It will swallow Hall Caine and John Galsworthy, Victor Hugo and Martin Tupper. It is an ostrich, a clown, a giant, a bottomless sack. It is sublime. It has apparently no eyes and no entrails, like a slug, and yet it can weep and suffer.¹⁸

There is no sense here, such as one finds in many other modern authors, that the writer must make a conscious choice of a public, and set his sights either at the literary élite or at the masses who have to be written down to. Conrad the seer viewed both with the same jaded scepticism, and he chose neither. Still, the humbler side of his double vision reminded him that the target of his scorn could also weep and suffer; and so he retained sufficient faith in a 'direct appeal to mankind' to write for a public comprising readers as different as his later literary friends and his former shipmates. After nearly twenty years of discouraging struggle, Conrad's residual commitment to mankind considered as an audience bore fruit when *Chance* (1913) became a best-seller: this response, Conrad wrote in his 'Author's Note',

gave me a considerable amount of pleasure, because what I had always feared most was drifting unconsciously into the position of a writer for a limited coterie; a position which would have been odious to me as throwing a doubt on the soundness of my belief in the solidarity of all mankind in simple ideas and sincere emotions. . . . I had managed to please a number of minds busy attending to their own very real affairs. (pp. viii–ix)

The checks which the committed seaman imposed on the alienated writer in his attitude to his audience also affected Conrad's general literary outlook; and this despite his awareness, as he put it in the 'Familiar Preface' to *A Personal Record* (1912), that 'as in political so in literary action a man wins friends for himself mostly by the passion of his prejudices and by the consistent narrowness of his outlook'. Most obviously, Conrad's training at sea ran counter to any intransigent expression of his inner alienation. ' . . . to be a great magician', he wrote in the same preface, 'one must surrender to occult and irresponsible powers, either outside or within one's breast.' But this direction, he continued, was not for him, because his sea training had strengthened his resolve to 'keep good hold on the one thing really mine . . . that full possession of myself which is the first condition of good service'; and Conrad concluded that the conscience must sometimes 'say nay to the temptations' of the author: 'the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity, and in the end coming to despise truth itself as something too cold, too blunt for his purpose – as, in fact, not good enough for his insistent emotion'.

As for literary doctrine, Conrad's disenchantment with the accepted literary modes was with him from the beginning of his career as a writer. He expressed it most fully and most eloquently in the famous preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. None of the 'temporary formulas of [the artist's] craft' is reliable, Conrad begins: 'they all: Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism (which, like the poor, is exceedingly difficult to get rid of), all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him' (pp. x–xi).

All the conceptual formulae, whether of literature or of science or of philosophy, are much too unreliable a basis for the writer: he must depend on those primary facts of the experience which he shares with mankind at large. So the positives of the nearer vision, of ultimate commitment, somehow enabled Conrad to bypass the findings of the alienated intellect, and to convert the most esoteric of literary doctrines – Art for Art's sake – into the most universal: