

CONRAD AND IMPRESSIONISM

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INTRODUCTION

Objects of consciousness in Conrad's impressionist world

“The unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth.”

A Personal Record

I

In this book, I investigate the far-reaching effects of impressionism in the works of Joseph Conrad. In particular, I look at the sources and implications of his impressionism in order to argue for a consistent link between his literary technique, philosophical presuppositions, and sociopolitical views. The same core ideas concerning the nature of human existence and human experience run throughout his works. In the process of investigating these issues, I present a generally unified Conrad that contrasts with the fragmented Conrad popular in some circles. Furthermore, I posit a much-needed definition of literary impressionism based upon philosophical groundings rather than upon the visual arts. In this way, I hope to demonstrate literary impressionism's broad power and significant influence and by so doing argue for a much more important role for this movement in literary history than is generally accorded it.

Running in the background of this study will be an attempt to show that Conrad's narrative techniques and philosophical inquiries result in part from the intellectual environment in which he wrote. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that my reading of Conrad is either an attempt at cultural studies or intellectual history. Instead, the intellectual and cultural environment is a means of orienting Conrad's works and a backdrop for the philosophical investigations in which I will be engaging. Furthermore, although this book will be a philosophical investigation into epistemological processes and their sociopolitical implications

in Conrad's works, I do not systematically apply the ideas of any specific philosophical school of thought nor the philosophical ideas of any specific thinker (although the views of certain philosophers or schools of philosophy may occasionally inform my argument). Instead, I try to uncover the underlying philosophical presuppositions and their implications in impressionism in general and in Conrad's impressionism in particular. I will then try to follow through with these philosophical conclusions to discover the effects of Conrad's impressionist concerns on yet larger philosophical issues afoot in his works.

The ultimate goal of this book will be to demonstrate that the implications of Conrad's impressionist narrative technique lead not only to questions about his narratology and artistic representation but also to broader questions concerning his views on western civilization, the nature of the universe, and the meaning of human existence. In the end, I believe that these questions arise as much from the narrative techniques Conrad employs as they do from the subject matter he investigates. Conrad's techniques represent the way human beings obtain knowledge, and therefore his narrative techniques function both in a practical manner to move the narrative along and in a philosophical manner to identify epistemological processes, which then in turn lead to important social, political, and ethical concerns.

To begin, I define literary impressionism and outline its origins, context, and implications, thereby establishing the groundwork for a more extended discussion of Conrad's works themselves. The middle chapters focus on what I call *objects of consciousness*, each chapter investigating different objects of consciousness and their relationship to knowledge throughout Conrad's works. Among these objects of consciousness, I will discuss perception of events, physical objects, and human subjects, as well as the human experience of time and space. During the course of these investigations, I look at the various permutations related to each object of consciousness based upon its appearance in Conrad's works. These central chapters each revolve around one of Conrad's major works ("Heart of Darkness," *Lord Jim*, and *The Secret Agent*) as a kind of touchstone; at the same time, I also discuss the particular issues engaged by each chapter throughout Conrad's works in general. In addition, I look at the implications of these investigations, as each inquiry also considers the relationship between a particular object of consciousness and the popularized view of western civilization. Throughout Conrad's writings, objects of consciousness are either a product of western views or they resemble and function as do western

views – or both. Finally, these investigations conclude with a discussion of the nature of Conrad's universe, because it is linked to his ideas concerning western civilization. To arrive at such conclusions, I synthesize my previous discussion of Conrad's impressionism and demonstrate how impressionist technique and epistemology are linked such that they encompass both individual and cultural concerns. I hope to show that Conrad's impressionism leads to a view of western civilization, the nature of the universe, and the meaning of human existence that is consistently connected to and has its origins in Conrad's impressionist theory. In this way, theory and technique merge to form a unified whole.

II

Conrad noted the impossibility of achieving the kind of objective truth many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought. Throughout his writings, he rejects attempts to universalize truth and demonstrates that human experience is always individual. Both his philosophical concerns and narrative techniques point to an epistemology that presents human experience and knowledge originating from a particular source in space and time.

In defining literary impressionism, I will look to the underlying philosophical presuppositions and issues the movement raises rather than to impressionist representations in the visual arts. Too closely associating literary and visual impressionism, together with difficulties in defining impressionist theory, have produced a long list of impressionist writers that seems to include most well-known authors writing between 1875 and 1925 – and beyond. However, by looking to impressionism's philosophical groundings and by clearly defining impressionist epistemology itself, confusion can be reduced concerning which writers are impressionist and which are not. In short, I will argue that impressionism saw all phenomena filtering through the medium of human consciousness at a particular place and time, thereby representing knowledge as an individual rather than a universal experience. In addition to defining impressionism, I will also look at some of the techniques impressionist writers employ in order to represent their philosophical ideas. In particular, I look at Conrad's impressionism based upon the definition I establish and identify some of the shortcomings of previous commentaries. These shortcomings include the views that Conrad's impressionist literature focused on surface rather than

depth, that impressionism was a technique Conrad employed only early on in his career, that his impressionism imitated methods from the visual arts, and that it dealt solely with visual perception. In contrast, I will argue that each of these views does not accurately represent Conrad's impressionism.

I will then look at perception of events, physical objects, and human subjects, as well as the human experience of time and, to a lesser degree, space. Concerning physical objects and events, I investigate human interaction with external objects and events in the form of sensory perception as well as the way these phenomena impress themselves upon consciousness such that each perceptual experience is unique. Conrad sees perception as contextualized, with the perceptual event occurring at a specific point in space and time. Such an event consists of subject and object as well as the physical circumstances of the perceptual event and the perceiver's personal and public past. As a result, perception occurs such that perceiver, perceived, and surrounding circumstances blur to produce an experience that is unique to each perceptual instance. Conrad's view of the interaction between subject and object also has important implications for the way human beings acquire knowledge. Knowledge becomes an individual phenomenon rather than a universal one. Each person gains knowledge through interaction with objects of consciousness, and one person's knowledge is never exactly the same as another's, nor even exactly the same as one's own at a different point in space and time.

Closely associated with perception of events and physical objects is perception of human subjects, and accordingly I will also focus my argument on the phenomenon of human subjectivity; in particular, I consider knowledge of self and others. In so doing, I argue that Conrad blurs the boundaries between self and other (between subject and object as it were) such that knowledge of self can come through knowledge of other and knowledge of other can come through knowledge of self. Human subjectivity exists within the context of self, other, and their surrounding circumstances. No clear distinction exists between self and other for Conrad, and in looking at the other and its relationship to the self, Conrad shows that others help to clarify the self either by similarity or by contrast. In this way, the self learns from others both what it is and what it is not. In addition to knowledge of self through knowledge of others, subjective knowledge may also come through cultural conditions and through investigation into one's self.

Along with subjects, objects, and events, I will also look at Conrad's investigation into the human experience of time and its relationship to knowledge. Conrad considers the way human beings experience time in an individual and contextualized manner. In the process, he blurs distinctions between time and human subjectivity (again between subject and object). In investigating these phenomena, Conrad deals with human time (time as human beings experience it), mechanical time (time as a clock measures it), and narrative time (time as represented in narration). The direct relationship between human time and mechanical time is important to Conrad because he uses the contrast between the two as the clearest example of the individual nature of objects of consciousness. Conrad demonstrates how human time is always at odds with the movement of a clock. Furthermore, each individual's experience of time is unique and cannot be synchronized with that of others except by means of mechanical time's intervention. Conrad also uses narrative time to emphasize the subjectivity of human temporal experience so that his impressionist narrative methods are meant to represent the way human beings actually experience time.

Each of these inquiries leads to two important conclusions. First, Conrad demonstrates that knowledge can never (or almost never) be certain. Second, his emphasis on the individuality of the epistemological process brings into question all attempts to universalize human experience. As a result, western civilization in particular comes under Conrad's scrutiny, and since the popular view of western civilization at the time conceived it to be based upon an absolute foundation, Conrad's epistemology strikes directly at that foundation. Therefore, each investigation of objects of consciousness – whether physical objects, human subjects, events, space, or time – demonstrates the ultimate uncertainty of knowledge and approaches the conflict between this uncertainty and the perceived certainty of western civilization. These questions also lead to two unpleasant logical possibilities for Conrad: epistemological solipsism and ethical anarchy. Uncomfortable with both positions, Conrad rejects moral and intellectual nihilism by focusing on his belief in the certainty of human subjectivity, and in fact employs the very source of the problem – human subjectivity itself – as its solution and in the process creates meaning for human existence.

In this way, my investigation into Conrad's impressionist world will come full circle. I begin with the uncertainty and individuality of human experience in Conrad's works and end with that same phenomenon.

Along the way, though, I try to demonstrate that all facets of Conrad's works are linked. His epistemological inquiries lead to an uncertainty that questions the perceived certainty of western civilization that then leads to questions concerning the nature of the universe and the meaning of human existence. In the end, Conrad arrives at a kind of certainty through uncertainty.