

## *Introduction*

The re-evaluation of Joseph Conrad's work in the second half of this century has uncovered in his texts complex narrational forms and startling perceptions of the darkness in Western consciousness. That scholarly enterprise has discarded, apparently for good, several simplistic labels that earlier, less-refined approaches had attached to his fiction. Conrad's admission to the modernist pantheon, however, has not substantially redefined the earlier casting of the writer as a mature sailor who had spent his formative years in a world foreign to literary circles. The very assumptions which have made possible Conrad's re-evaluation are largely grounded on the notion that the valuable parts of his texts have to be rescued from their author's tampering with the product of his creative imagination. As a result, the comments he makes about his own art in his fiction, letters and essays are dismissed as perfunctory self-defenses. According to Douglas Hewitt, for example, Conrad seems to be "unaware of what qualities make him a great novelist."<sup>1</sup> Reasoning along these lines, critics have felt that in assessing Conrad's greatness they were formulating for the first time the theoretical implications of his artistic choices.

In the long run, however, the assumptions which have guided Conrad's reassessment have actually impeded understanding of the complexity of his work. The dismissal of the theoretical relevance of Conrad's comments about his work has frustrated the kind of discussion by which other modernist writers have gained considerably. Henry James, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce all introduced critical terms which have shaped the very notion of the modern novel.<sup>2</sup> Their reflections on their craft have provided ever new contexts for the rereading of their novels because their speculations tally with the theoretical assumptions they themselves helped to establish. Joyce, in particular, understood clearly that the "*ad hoc*

genre" he created entailed "an *ad hoc* critical tradition." With that understanding in mind, he enlisted Valery Larbaud's aid in putting "the phrase 'interior monologue' into circulation, and many sequences cleared up when the readers knew that was what to call them. He also urged Eliot to circulate a phrase coined in conversation, 'two plane,' but Eliot never got around to it."<sup>3</sup> The reading pattern thus given currency has proved to be intellectually stimulating because it has made possible a conversation in which critics and their subjects share the same language. But when, as in Conrad's case, the ideas the author suggests for interpreting his novels are "honor" and "fidelity" – hardly the stuff of current fashion – his statements of literary intention have not come to be valued as contributing to critical discussion of the modern novel.

Conrad, like Joyce, recognized the important assistance a critic can provide for the shaping of an appropriate response to the artist's work. In 1923, while Richard Curle was preparing a review of the Uniform Edition of his works for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Conrad sent his friend a letter in which he "suggests" what he would like to read in an article on himself. He is worried about "how the public mind fastens on externals";<sup>4</sup> and, to counteract "the danger of precise classification, either in the realm of exotism or of the sea" (*LL II*, 320), he wishes to point out what is peculiar to his work. In an offhand manner, he proposes as an opening for the article some "general observation on authors and their material, how they transform it from particular to general, and appeal to universal emotions by the temperamental handling of personal experience. You might also say that not everybody can do that" (*LL II*, 321). Conrad is vindicating here the originality of his literary achievement, by indicating in this "appeal" the personal form of expression which he has worked to develop throughout his career as artist: he never separated the moral implications of the commitment to memory which underlies his "handling of personal experience" from his aesthetic concern about the effectiveness of a medium aimed at touching "universal emotions." But this last effort to make explicit his literary intention did not meet with success. Curle certainly was not an appropriate mouthpiece for such a rejection of biographical criticism, as Conrad's barely camouflaged displeasure at his friend's unperceptive reviews makes plain enough. But, even if Curle had been a Valery Larbaud and had served as a more effective broker for the critical terms sug-

*Introduction*

3

gested, what reception could notions such as “universal emotions” and “temperamental handling” have had among, say, the Bloomsbury coterie or among the Imagist poets? Obviously, Conrad does not use, here or in any other piece, a readily identifiable theoretical language. And this is the main reason why his ideas about fiction have not attracted much critical interest.

Given the critics' lack of interest in the ideas Conrad articulates in his fictional and non-fictional writings, the recent marked decline in the number of scholarly works devoted to him comes as no surprise. A statistical analysis of this decline brings David Leon Higdon to consider the possibility that “Conrad simply no longer [occupies] the central position in modernism we once believed.”<sup>5</sup> Or is it that “modernism” is not as comprehensive a term as “we once believed,” leaving Conradian criticism to find its own way to the recognition of Conrad's originality?

Samuel Hynes' “Conrad and Ford: Two Rye Revolutionists”<sup>6</sup> is emblematic of the problems that Conrad's formulation of his convictions raises for an historian of ideas; and of why, as a consequence, the writer is made to seem like a lightweight in comparison with authors such as Henry James. Hynes, as the author of a well-known scholarly work about the intellectual environment Conrad lived in, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*,<sup>7</sup> is well qualified to judge the value of Conrad's position in a cultural context. The minatory conclusion he draws regarding the value of Conrad's thought is therefore particularly damaging: “though Conrad was an emotionally complex man, he was intellectually simple. His aesthetic principles, like his philosophical principles, were few and plain: a half-page of note paper would contain all the ideas he had” (49). By contrast, Hynes reckons that a theoretical conception of the novel is “illuminated” by the Jamesian notion of art as pure “artifact, the unique creation of the considering mind” (51). Conrad is incapable of such theorizing, because, for him, “art was subject to the same pressures and uncertainties as life, and was to be lived in the same way. Consequently his thoughts about fiction are thoughts about life – interesting for what they reveal about Conrad's mind at work, but not generally illuminating of the novel as a genre” (51). Hynes' distinction between “thoughts about life,” significant only as biographical information, and ideas, which have theoretical value only if expressed according to an already recognized system, suggests an extremely mechanical conception of

## 4 CONRAD'S FICTION AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE

the novel. New insights and a new language resulting from changes in the novel genre, deriving from its interacting with the "pressures and uncertainties of life," seem not to have theoretical status.

The theoretical assumption underlying Hynes' approach becomes evident when he tries to come to terms with Conrad's particular form of expression. While the critic finds that the "forms of Conrad's novels are . . . difficult and obscure by intention," he defends such an intention even against James' famous stricture against *Chance*: "Conrad had set out to render experience as he perceived it, with all the limitations and difficulties of perception built into it." Hynes, then, recognizes it was no accident that Conrad built that limit of perception which characterizes stream of consciousness novels and much of twentieth-century poetry into his narrative forms. But that recognition does not alter his assumption, since, for him, "the central point about Conrad as a thinker-about-fiction [is] that his forms emerged from his vision of things, and not from theories" (51). By setting in opposition theories and "vision of things," Hynes effectively diminishes the value of his own insights. As an historian of ideas, he does not allow space for critical ideas which have no direct and obvious reference to established philosophical or aesthetic tradition. He elects to use Henry James' literary criticism as a crystal-like "lens" (49), and this despite the fact that the American writer's prefaces have led only to an impossible standard for the evaluation of novels.<sup>8</sup> What Hynes misses is the opportunity to interpret the theoretical implications which Conrad's representation of his "vision of things" has for the idea of the novel.

Hynes, at least, does address Conrad's ideas, if only to dismiss them as theoretically irrelevant. Other critics, more often than not, emphasize the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in Conrad's comments on his work to justify their reluctance to engage the ideas he set out in his non-fictional writings. The gradual dissociation of contemporary critical expectations from the traces of the author's living mind at work in Conrad's tales originates with the tendency to distinguish the value of these tales from the ideas at work in them. However, the record of the attempts made in the past to separate Conrad's intellectual powers from his worth as a novelist suggests that his critics' rejection of his ideas springs from a deeply entrenched resistance to the novels themselves.

E. M. Forster's scathing review, in 1921, of *Notes on Life and*

*Introduction*

5

*Letters*, the only collection of essays Conrad published during his lifetime, foreshadows later critiques of Conrad's "philosophy": "These essays," Forster writes, "do suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel."<sup>9</sup> The wide range of the responses these remarks have invited – from laudatory confirmations to disdainful rejections of his "infamous evaluation"<sup>10</sup> – suggests that Forster has touched on something vital in the effect which Conrad's fiction has on the reader. Forster, in fact, is playing on the disquieting effect produced by much of Conrad's work in order to attack his critical language. And, rather than addressing what Conrad actually says, he offers with this rationalization an easy way out from the issues raised. A "heart of darkness" does not exist: Conrad simply does not know what he is talking about.

The sentence which follows the remark regarding mistiness confirms that Forster's response to Conrad's ideas is influenced by his reading of the latter's fiction. Conrad, it would seem, does not have a creed, only "opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with the stars, and therefore easily mistaken for a creed."<sup>11</sup> The language Conrad uses to express his ideas so fits the seaman persona projected in the works which Forster privileges that all possible difficulties in interpreting that language can be easily resolved by referring to the author's intellectual simplicity.

When, in 1948, F. R. Leavis gave a decisive impulse to Conrad's re-evaluation with *The Great Tradition*, Forster's assessment became useful for the screening of what was worth saving in the writer's work. Leavis' attitude is basically censorious, prompted as it is by his conviction that Conrad's obscurity is "a disconcerting weakness or vice" rather than "something simply and obviously deplorable."<sup>12</sup> He actually goes so far as to set the "good Conrad" (218) against the bad: the novels written between 1902 and 1915, "Typhoon" and *The Shadow Line* have virtue, the other works none.

Leavis objects in the first place to Conrad's use of Marlow to articulate his personal commentary in the fiction, which he sees as spoiling the concreteness of the impressionistic account. The workings of Conrad's rhetoric are ignored, and the possibility of a connection between the passages left unanalyzed and the ones deemed fit for critical evaluation is left unconsidered. Leavis uses Forster to

dismiss Conrad's indication of a further meaning beyond a physically concrete representation of events in "Heart of Darkness": Conrad, he considers, "is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means" (207). And again, like Forster, Leavis rests comfortably on the assumption that Conrad "was in some respects a simple soul" (209), without suspecting that the privatives in "Heart of Darkness" are an indication of the theoretical problems raised by a "realistic" rendition of a subjective experience.

The difference between Forster and Leavis is that the latter applies the former's categories to Conrad's fiction rather than to his essays. Thus, Forster's characterization of Conrad's "philosophy" evolves into, as it helps produce, a critique of what is worth reading in the writer's canon. Conrad's "genius," which, according to Leavis, "was a unique and happy union of seaman and writer" (217), is to be found in his straightforward, concrete rendition of physical reality. But Conrad, it is clear, ought not to dabble with more weighty matters. Leavis and other critics predisposed to "realism" censor those portions of the texts which do not meet the moral or aesthetic standards they have set up for the simple seaman turned writer. In the Marlow tales, however, the author's probing of the problematic aspects of his writing is the source of the text's ambiguities. To dismiss these ambiguities such critics juxtapose Conrad's vigorous, seaman-like prose to its vague and obscure *doppelgänger*, and thus refuse to interpret Marlow's commentary.

Leavis' "re-evaluation" was followed, in 1952, by Douglas Hewitt's "reassessment." The critic set out to establish the centrality of the texts themselves in opposition to symbolic interpretations, and his study is certainly one of the most successful attempts to synthesize the symbolic and literal meanings of Conrad's tales. Hewitt, like Leavis, feels that it is necessary to separate the good from the bad Conrad. However, he is more concerned with the unreliability of the artist's autocriticism than with expunging portions of single texts. As he writes in *Conrad: A Reassessment*, his study "grew very largely from reflection on the marked inferiority of most of Conrad's later works to his earlier ones and on the unhelpfulness of his own comments in prefaces and letters."<sup>13</sup> The decline in intellectual and creative power that he finds in Conrad's works is simply a more comprehensive application of Forster's and Leavis' approach.

*Introduction*

7

Later, in the preface to the 1975 edition, Hewitt explains why he does not “want to disclaim” his “share of paternity” of the “Achievement-and-Divide school of Conrad criticism.” Back in 1952 it had seemed important to point out Conrad’s decline in the second half of his career as writer so as to “emphasise the nature of his achievement”; and still today, “to contrast the good and the bad remains a useful way of defining the nature of the good.”<sup>14</sup> Hewitt’s repeated emphasis on the positive side of his achievement-and-divide hypothesis tacitly acknowledges that it has been used to undermine the integrity and intelligence of Conrad’s works. But he does not seem to realize why his own work has given place to a negative perception of Conrad himself. In fact, as a justification of his “reassessment,” he writes in the same 1975 preface that he had concentrated on “the possible reasons” for the decline only because “Conrad was often misunderstood . . . he often appeared to misunderstand in retrospect what was valuable in his own work, and . . . it was necessary, therefore, to free our view of him both from many of his own comments and also from inferior works.”<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, later critics used the achievement-and-divide theory without Hewitt’s respect toward the author, giving a psychological interpretation of Conrad’s comments: the author was dissembling, covering up the decline of his creativity, when, in later years, he tried to explain his literary intention.<sup>16</sup> Hewitt wanted to root in “the literal world” the “symbolic and metaphorical effects” of Conrad’s texts, in opposition to “the strange logic of archetypes”<sup>17</sup> at work in so many Freudian and Jungian interpretations. Ironically, however, the achievement-and-divide theory provided common ground for “realist” critics and the symbolist critics Hewitt was reacting against: a shared disregard for the conscious portion of Conrad’s fictional language.

Critics who have traced the emergence of unconscious material in the imaginative process have made a great contribution to the understanding of Conrad’s works. The best Freudian work on Conrad, Bernard C. Meyer’s *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (1967),<sup>18</sup> recommends itself by the consistency of its logical argument even for readers who do not share its theoretical postulates. Freudian criticism working on a “clinical” notion of subconsciousness defines for itself the limits beyond which a symbolic interpretation based on an assumed model of mental processes should not go. It is worth remembering, though, that, according to the Freudian

model, the unconscious material does not emerge directly from a dream, but from the patient's rendering of that dream in the waking state.<sup>19</sup> It is the patient's interpretation of his dream – his associating – that allows the translation of dream images into words. If so, it is not the individuation of a certain primordial image that leads to a “preconscious” intention on the writer's side. The emergence of material from the author's subconsciousness is traceable in the literal surface of a text, which is created by the interplay between unconscious material and the interpretation of that material in its given rhetorical shape.<sup>20</sup>

When, as in many symbolic and archetypal readings, the interconnection between conscious and unconscious production is utterly uprooted from its linguistic representation, abstract notions are substituted for linguistic processes as the source of literary creation. Once a critic argues, for example, the possibility that “the primal plot may operate in a work of art not only without the artist's conscious knowledge but almost against his will,”<sup>21</sup> he is freed from any obligation to demonstrate in terms of the text itself the difference between conscious and unconscious portions of the fictional language. It is because most commentators have felt that their readings did not have to be held to Conrad's own remarks that the concerns voiced by the authorial strain in the texts have not raised any doubts as to the validity of so many a priori assumptions.

Critics attentive to the theoretical implications of their own imaginative responses to the tales have been compelled to acknowledge the difficulty of reconciling universal categories with Conrad's texts. The classic formulation of the dilemma which the personal authorial strain poses for a critic can be found in the first lines of Albert J. Guerard's *Conrad the Novelist* (1958):

The purest criticism attends only to the text, which it conceives as floating in a timeless vacuum: a text and meaning immutable, created by no flesh-and-blood writer and without flesh-and-blood readers in mind. This book cannot hope to achieve such purity. For Joseph Conrad was one of the most subjective and most personal of English novelists.<sup>22</sup>

The same tension between theoretical purity and fidelity to the actual reading experience is apparent in Ian Watt's *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979). Watt recognizes in his preface the “difficulties and dangers of biographical criticism.” But, he argues, “the



*Introduction*

9

justification for its use in the present case is that although Conrad was not a directly autobiographical writer, his fictional world is an intensely personal one."<sup>23</sup> Neither Watt nor Guerard, though, relies on biographical criticism to interpret Conrad's tales. If they launch their studies by acknowledging the personal strain resonant in Conrad's fiction, it is because neither attempts to explain away on theoretical grounds the effect peculiar to his texts. Rather, they adapt their critical assumptions to the task of interpreting the living tension that the author has imprinted on his fiction.

A critic participates in the creation of a text's meaning only by reacting to the textual language, even though by so doing he or she historicizes that purely verbal structure, referring it to the literary conventions and critical expectations of a new community of readers. But if the critic's reading counteracts the presence of the living mind at work in the original text, by opposing to the effect of this presence a critical language referable first of all to his or her own preconceptions, criticism becomes a vain contest over a dead body of words.<sup>24</sup> This is arguably what has happened in Conradian studies. Important questions have remained unanswered, even unasked, because commentators have been perhaps too daunted by the "intentional fallacy" to come to terms with what is particular to Conrad's art: the author's presence in the text, active both as a voice and as a conscious manipulator of different kinds of discourses.

An awareness of the particular quality of Conrad's critical language is necessary if his critics are more fully to engage his ideas and assess critically that sense of moral seriousness which his personal voice evokes.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Virginia Woolf gets as close as possible to explaining her response to this voice when she writes that, in Conrad's prose, "the beauty of surface has always a fibre of morality within."<sup>26</sup> Her spatial metaphor makes plain why it is so problematic to transform this response into a critical evaluation. Since the "fibre of morality" lies somewhere beyond the reader's analytical power, and its effect can be evaluated only in aesthetic terms, these same moral values would seem beyond the reach of literary criticism. A critical language which can synthesize the "fibre" within with the "beauty" on the surface would seem not to exist.

However, Conrad did in fact attempt to articulate such a

language. Woolf's insight does not lead to a critical evaluation of his fictional language because it distinguishes the reader's moral response from the aesthetic. Conrad's narrative and linguistic choices, instead, were designed to reach the source of an emotional response the existence of which was, for him, a moral postulate. This approach is reflected in the form he adopted to discuss his literary purpose: a synthesis of the moral and aesthetic aspects of his view of fiction through a metaphorical mode of expression. This book is intended to uncover and engage the theoretical implications of this metaphorical discourse by linking the expression of Conrad's own convictions with the appeal he makes to the readers in his tales.

The distinction often made between the value of Conrad's novels and the significance of the ideas at work in them is based on notions of theory and writing which do not take into account Conrad's own approach. Conrad's literary theory is, first and foremost, the expression of an author's interpretation of his own writing. It is in the heat of creation that he finds answers to theoretical issues, only to go on subsequently to test them in different forms and verbal structures.<sup>27</sup> The frame narrative structure, his authorial commentaries or, in general, the "personal" presence he projects through his rhetorical statements, all set in the foreground those segments of the fictional language in which he articulates his critical discourse.<sup>28</sup> In particular, in the works which immediately concern the present study, Conrad builds an intellectual drama into the fictional language of his tales, and uses his authorial strain to direct the reader's attention toward the theoretical implications of this drama. The very effect he was aiming at in these works was based on a critical discussion designed to involve the reader.

Conrad's statements about his art are largely glosses on discoveries he made about his medium as he tried to create an effect which would prompt in his readers an instinctive recognition of a common set of values. Though "there can be no fellowship with a great multitude whose voice is a shout," he once wrote, "every mute individual of it can and does make his appeal straight to a heart aware of our common fate."<sup>29</sup> The fact that, as Zdzisław Najder notes, Conrad "seems to be a sort of self-translating author: a writer who conveys the experiences and conventions of one culture in the language of another"<sup>30</sup> makes this recognition particularly problematic. The convictions he tried to remain faithful to