

ESSAYS ON CONRAD

Ian Watt has long been acknowledged as one of the finest of post-war literary critics. *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) is still the landmark account of the way in which realist fiction developed in the eighteenth century and Watt's work on Conrad has been enormously influential. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979) was to have been followed by a volume addressing Conrad's later work, but the material for this long-awaited second volume remains in essay form. It is these essays, as Frank Kermode points out in his foreword, which form the nucleus of *Essays on Conrad*, Watt's own philosophy, as well as his insight into Conrad's work, was shaped by his experiences as a prisoner of war on the River Kwai. His personal and moving account of these experiences forms part of his famous essay '“The Bridge over the River Kwai” as myth' which completes this essential collection.

IAN WATT is Professor Emeritus at Stanford University. He is author of *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979) and *Myths of Modern Individualism* (1996). Born in 1917, he was educated at Dover County School for Boys and St John's College, Cambridge. In the Second World War he was a lieutenant in the Fifth Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. Captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore, he was a prisoner of war on the River Kwai for three and a half years. His subsequent teaching career took him from Cambridge to the University of California at Berkeley (1952–62), the University of East Anglia (1962–4) and Stanford University, where he has been Professor of English since 1964.

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Foreword

Frank Kermode

Readers of the final chapter of this book may find it surprising that the man who spent years labouring on the River Kwai should have returned after the war to an inconceivably different way of life and immediately embarked on a distinguished academic career. Little more than a decade later he published *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957). After the war years many of Watt's contemporaries, even if they had not spent them in painful captivity, found it difficult to adjust their lives to more sedate civilian routines. What readers of this collection as a whole will observe is that the strength of mind – the character – displayed in the final chapter also informs Watt's critical writing. The persistence of this quality goes some way to explaining Watt's devotion, over many years, to Conrad – an honourable stoicism that shuns illusion without being an enemy of pleasure, especially the pleasure of fine technical and aesthetic discriminations.

In *The Rise of the Novel* Watt maintained that realism, as he defined it, was the quality that distinguished the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from all previous fiction. Before that period there were of course thousands of fictions, but the novel, as we know it, became possible only when the general acceptance of certain social, economic and philosophical assumptions, and the coming into existence of a literate, middle-class and predominantly Protestant audience, made possible such extraordinary works as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). Watt discriminates between the kind of realism exemplified by Defoe, with his unmatched power to persuade readers by minute presentation of detail that what they are reading is true, and a richer realism that concerns itself also with personality and civilized values generally. This variety of realism is essential to the kind of writing that we agree to call the novel. It is not merely a matter of making the narrative seem authentic as to local and period detail; it is also a matter of establishing the authenticity, the complex art and humanity, of the work as a whole.

Watt's view of the rise of the novel has often been contested, most recently and most emphatically by Margaret Anne Doody in her vast book *The True Story of the Novel* (1996). Her title itself indicates dissent from Watt, whose version of that story is, she claims, untrue. Her argument is that the novel has a continuous history of 2,000 years; that form of fiction for which Watt reserves the appellation 'novel' cannot, by his own criteria of realism, or indeed by any other criteria, be distinguished from the romance, a category into which most of that earlier writing is conventionally placed. That the English invented the novel in the eighteenth century is 'a literary lie'. Ms Doody is a strong feminist, and might want to add that the claim is also a masculine lie. The interest of her remarkable book, in the present context, is that she needs to tell the whole history of fiction in the West, and assert that its genius is entirely female, in order to undermine the forty-year-old contentions of Watt. I do not believe she succeeds.

It is not a simple coincidence that Doody's book belongs to the modern era of 'magic realism'. It seems unlikely that works in that mode, much admired of late, would meet Watt's criteria, and although I am only guessing I will say I believe he would not admire them. Doubtless it should be admitted that more permissive notions of realism now prevail both in practice and in literary theory, and it would not be beyond the wit of man (or woman) to devise reasons to show that this alteration of focus has been brought about by the social and economic changes in our world since 1957. Nevertheless *The Rise of the Novel* is a landmark, one of the very few works of modern literary criticism that may be said to have achieved classic status. As early as 1951 Watt published an important and provocative essay stressing the economic significance of *Robinson Crusoe*, so it can be said that for the better part of half a century practically any serious discussion of this book, and the eighteenth-century novel, has had to establish a relationship, even if questioning or dissenting, with Watt's work.

After resuming his interrupted career, he taught at UCLA and Harvard, at Cambridge and at the new University of East Anglia, before settling at Stanford, where he eventually became the first Director of the Stanford Humanities Center. A good deal of his published work has been on the period considered in his first book, but a vital supplement to Watt's bibliography is his work on Joseph Conrad, which culminated in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979). This exemplary work was to have been followed by another treating Conrad's writings in the twentieth century,

but it now appears, most regrettably, that we shall not see this second volume. However, the present collection contains a number of essays and lectures on Conrad, most of them on the later part of the novelist's career.

Watt has long been acknowledged to be among the finest and most learned of Conrad's expositors. The long and carefully researched chapter on Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, is a fine example of his powers as biographer and critic. His observations on Conrad's early influences, and on his command of English (a topic that still requires attention) has not, I think, been bettered. Always attentive to what other critics have to say, he can here be seen adjudicating between angry commentators, himself perfectly composed and conspicuously true to his own Conradian idea of virtue.

When Conrad writes of Singleton, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, that 'he steered with care', Watt comments: 'It is the climactic recognition of our utter and yet often forgotten dependence, night and day . . . on the labors of others' – and he adds that 'there is perhaps a moral for the critic here: for, in making us look up, briefly, to Singleton at the wheel, Conrad gives us a moment of vision in which, from the height of our modish attachment to ever-developing discriminations, we are compelled to affirm our endless, intricate, and not inglorious kinship with those who cannot write'. Another such exemplar is MacWhirr in *Typhoon*, a character both funny and admirable, and an instance of 'the paradoxical fact that superiors who are in many respects inept can nevertheless be very good at the job; indeed, their very lack of interest or skill in conversation and books, the main values of verbal culture, may even have left them freer to do in a more single-minded way the one thing that they have trained themselves to do'. One might say without much fear of contradiction that Watt learned this Conradian moral when in uniform or in the prison camp.

His fidelity to the spirit of the author, whom he tells us he first admired at the age of twelve, enables him, in the chapter on *Heart of Darkness*, to speak temperately on complex issues of colonialism, and, in the chapter 'Conrad, James and *Chance*', to settle the question of how the two great men stood on the vexed problem of James's disapproval of *Chance*. What is most striking is Watt's ability to *think* with Conrad, and he has that ability not only by reason of his literary intelligence but also from his conviction, strengthened at Kwai, that human society, horribly imperfect though it is, depends, if it is not to be even worse, on the devotion and courage of people honestly doing their jobs, whether commanding or commanded, whether writers or not.

And here one must glance with admiration at the chapter on the River Kwai. Watt is interested in the truth of that matter, but also in the myth that has been developed from it. What the world now thinks about the building of that bridge depends on a film that depends on, and departs from, a novel which is itself far from describing things as they really were. It seems that the Japanese had more prisoners than they could handle, and so the prisoners themselves took over the business of disciplined production. It is recorded that their lives were painful and close to desperation, but the point is made without reference to the writer's own discomforts, save in that he was one of them. They had to settle for the kind of life available. There was no chance of escape. They organized their own police force, conscious of a need for order of some kind. One officer, especially efficient, found ways to make their lot easier, and, inevitably, also expedited the building of the enemy railway bridge.

By chance a French writer came to hear about this episode, and based a novel on it. He seems to have represented it as primarily a comment on the way modern technology 'destroys human meanings and purposes'. And he began the transformation of the actual efficient officer into the character played by Alec Guinness in David Lean's movie. The film was wholly false to the situation of the prisoners; it was colonialist, it misrepresented the kind of bridge involved, and, contrary to the facts, blew it up. Watt was there; and he has since that bad time gone back to the bridge, and can say what happened subsequently to the railway. He prefers reality to myth, unlike the movie-makers and unlike their audiences.

Why did the myth take over? The answer is Conradian: 'the deep blindness of our culture both to the stubbornness of reality and to the continuities of history'. That blindness encouraged the public to accept the movie-fantasy of Nicholson's unconquerable British individualism, his triumph over his powerful but racially inferior captors. Watt believes our whole society is prone to distort the truth by such mythical thinking. It fails to observe that the world will not do its bidding, that the best and only decent form of conduct for the prisoners, as now for us, was 'work and restraint – two of Conrad's imperatives'. These imperatives have always operated powerfully in Watt's world, and are the enemies of self-indulgent myth. It is to be noted that he nowhere dwells on his own work and suffering; his concern is entirely with facts and false interpretations.

His interest in myth, and its part in the creation of undesirable social and individual fantasy, led to the writing of his most recent book, *Myths*

of Modern Individualism (1996), a study of Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe as myths that have acquired a special resonance in modern culture. Of course they did not have that function originally, but were recreated to suit a more modern and individualist sensibility than they at first possessed. One could read this new collection of essays as a sober and unillusioned defence of the principle of unmythicized reality as it can be studied in the novels of Conrad. He too has his fantasizing individualists – his Haldins, his nihilist professors, his corrupt anarchists – but he has also his MacWhirrs and Singletons, the men without conversation, who don't write and rarely read, but who command and are commanded, and do the work of the world. Like Conrad, Watt admires such men. Rarely has a critic shared so fully the virtues of his author.

Acknowledgements

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