

ESSAYS ON CONRAD

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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:

The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn. (p. viii)

At this point I can begin to answer the first question: the breadth of Conrad's appeal was made possible by the fact that, almost alone among his great contemporaries, he thought a broad appeal worth making; he was glad, he wrote in the 'Author's Note' to *Chance*, that 'apparently I have never sinned against the basic feelings and elementary convictions which make life possible to the mass of mankind' (p. x). This alone surely does much to account both for Conrad's decline in critical esteem during the twenties, and for the way he acquired a wider and more miscellaneous audience than his literary peers. If alienation had been the sum of his subjects and literary attitudes, Conrad might have captured the highbrow vote more quickly; but the wide variety of people whom he respected and admired, and their very various ways of looking at life, were always there as a constant check to the extremes of the vision of the isolated writer. Conrad's writings do not proclaim their author's radical separateness from the rest of mankind; their style does not flaunt his alienation like a banner announcing a certified Dark Knight of the Soul. It was characteristic of Conrad that he should praise the work of his friend Ford Madox Ford on the grounds that 'he does not stand on his head for the purpose of getting a new and striking view of his subject. Such a method of procedure may be in favour nowadays but I prefer the old way, with the feet on the ground.'¹⁹

On the other hand, of course, the alienation is still there; there is nothing promiscuous about Conrad's commitment; he is very far from what D. H. Lawrence called 'the vast evil of acquiescence'; and even in his most affirmative works the heroic, romantic or popular elements are always qualified by the general atmosphere – an atmosphere, to use Conrad's own phrase, of 'cold moral dusk'.²⁰ The tone of desperate alienation which one finds in Conrad's early letters is not directly expressed in the novels; but one can often recognize its muffled presence, whether in the defeated cadences of his rhetoric, or in the tendency of

the narrative progress to seem under the constant threat of enveloping torpor. Nevertheless, it seems broadly true that, in Conrad's most characteristic work, the negative voices of alienation are confronted and largely overcome by the possibilities of commitment, or, in Conrad's term, of solidarity.

What Conrad meant by solidarity is sufficiently evident from the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. In the terms of our argument we can see it as an intangible and undemonstrable but existent and widespread acceptance of common human obligations which somehow transcend the infinite individual differences of belief and purpose and taste. It is not a conscious motive, and it rarely becomes the dominating factor in human affairs; its existence seems to depend very largely upon the mere fact that, in the course of their different lives, most individuals find themselves faced with very similar circumstances; nevertheless, it is solidarity which gives both the individual and the collective life what little pattern of meaning can be discovered in it. Conrad's own experience, of course, tended to confirm this view of solidarity; and his most typical writing is concerned to present its achievements, to enact its discovery, or to assay its powers.

The theme of solidarity is most obvious in what are surely Conrad's most perfect, if not his most important works, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Typhoon*, *The Shadow-Line*. But in some form it also controls most of the other novels, which characteristically present the movement of the protagonist towards another person or persons; the movement is often incomplete, or too late to succeed; but, from Marlow's involvement in the fate of Kurtz and Lord Jim, to the sexual relationships of *Chance* and *Victory*, the reader's attention is usually engaged in following the fortunes of an isolated and alienated character towards others; and this quest eventually assumes both for the character and for the reader a much larger moral importance than that of the personal relationship as such.

In *Lord Jim*, for example, Marlow is presented with an apparent breakdown of his unquestioned belief in the values of solidarity when an unknown first mate, a young man, 'one of us', deserts his post and leaves the 800 passengers on the *Patna* to their fate; for no apparent cause Marlow discovers that his deepest being demands that he know:

Why I longed to go grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which, after all, concerned me no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct, I can't explain. You may call it an unhealthy curiosity if you like; but I have a distinct notion I wished to find something.

Perhaps, unconsciously, I hoped I would find that something, some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse. I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible – for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death – the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct. (p. 50)

The doubt can never be set at rest; but the concern remains, not only in *Lord Jim*, but in most of Conrad's novels. Of course, it takes different forms. In Conrad's later works, for example, the protagonist is often closer to our sense of the younger, the more sceptical, Conrad, as with Decoud, for example, or Heyst. There the concern for solidarity tends to an opposite pattern: the protagonist's moral crisis is not that the fixed standard of conduct is challenged, but that, to his surprise, the alienated protagonist encounters its overwhelming imperatives.

This movement from alienation towards commitment is rather rare in the other great modern writers. They tend, indeed, to equate the achievement of individuality with the process of alienation; the poetry of Eliot and Pound, for example, typically leads us away in revulsion from contemporary actuality; while the novels of Joyce and Lawrence tend to focus on the breaking of ties with family, class and country: both poets and the novelists leave us, not with a realization of man's crucial though problematic dependence on others, but with a sharpened awareness of individual separateness.

It is here, of course, that we may find one reason for the renewed interest in Conrad. For since the Second World War, the experience of a whole generation has brought it close to Conrad's personal position; partly because world history has played over so many of his themes in deafening tones; and partly because our habituation to alienation, reinforced by the vision of the other great modern writers, has inevitably brought us back to the dominating question in Conrad: alienation, yes, but how do we get out of it?

One can observe the recent convergence on this typical Conradian preoccupation in many different intellectual areas. Most directly, it can be seen in recent Conrad criticism, which, since Morton Dauwen Zabel's article 'Chance and Recognition' in 1945,²¹ has concentrated on Conrad as the master of the process of moral self-discovery leading to human commitment; most widely, we can turn to the extremely close parallel between this aspect of Conrad and the main philosophical and literary movement of the last two decades, Existentialism.

Existentialism, like Conrad, rejects all traditional philosophy as too theoretical, too concerned with cognitive problems treated in isolation from the actual personal existence. It attempts instead a full understanding of the individual confronting life; and this, as in Conrad, involves much attention to such themes as death, suicide, isolation, despair, courage and choosing to be. In each case the starting point is the alienated man who, believing, in Sartre's words, that 'there can no longer be any *a priori* good',²² or in Conrad's that there is 'no sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct', concludes that the whole external world and man's attempt to establish a valid relationship to it are equally absurd. The way out of the dilemma, apparently, is that, at a certain point, the existential hero, realizing that 'he is free *for nothing*',²³ comes out on the other side of despair to discover a more realistic kind of provisional commitment.

There are, of course, vital differences. Conrad does not see commitment as a single willed reversal occurring with dramatic clarity and violence in the individual consciousness; for him it is, rather, an endless process throughout history in which individuals are driven by circumstances into the traditional forms of human solidarity: are driven to accept the position that fidelity must govern the individual's relation to the outside world, while his inner self must be controlled by restraint and honour. This conservative and social ethic is certainly very different from the existentialist position, and embodies the main emphases of the most widely shared secular codes of behaviour over the ages. It is also rather closer to the philosophical materialism of Marx than to the basically subjective metaphysic of Existentialism, since Conrad sees solidarity as an eventual consequence of corporate activity. Thus Conrad begins his essay on 'Tradition' by quoting Leonardo da Vinci's 'Work is the law', and comments:

From the hard work of men are born the sympathetic consciousness of a common destiny, the fidelity to right practice which makes great craftsmen, the sense of right conduct which we may call honour, the devotion to our calling and the idealism which is not a misty, winged angel without eyes, but a divine figure of terrestrial aspect with a clear glance and with its feet resting firmly on the earth on which it was born.²⁴

The origins of solidarity, then, are derived from the economic necessities to which men find themselves involuntarily but inexorably exposed: as Conrad writes elsewhere:

Who can tell how a tradition comes into the world? We are children of the earth. It may be that the noblest tradition is but the offspring of material conditions, of the hard necessities besetting men's precarious lives. But once it has been born it becomes a spirit.²⁵

It is surely remarkable that Conrad's way of looking at the conditions of positive individual commitment would have such strong affinities with three such contradictory ideologies – the conservative, the existentialist and the Marxist. It helps, of course, to explain the present width of his appeal, but we are bound to return to Forster's view of the discrepancies between Conrad's nearer and his further vision, and to wonder if there is not some radical confusion in a position which leads in three such different directions; whether, in fact, Conrad's obscurity may not be an unavoidable result of his failure to establish any real connexion between the alienation he felt and the commitment he sought.

Conrad would probably have answered that his outlook was based on common elements of experience which were more enduring than any particular social or economic or intellectual system. He thought of his own age, he wrote in *Victory*, as one 'in which we are camped like bewildered travellers in a garish, unrestful hotel' (p. 3); and the best we could do at any time was to assume that in any given circumstance the direction of individual commitment would be sufficiently clear to anyone who, like Axel Heyst in *Victory*, finds that he cannot scorn 'any decent feeling' (p. 18). This, indeed, was close to the teaching of his uncle and guardian, Thaddeus Bobrowski, who once wrote to him: 'I have taken as my motto "*usque ad finem*", as my guide, the love of duty which circumstances define.'²⁶

The way people actually react to the circumstances of their lives – such seems to be Conrad's only justification for his view of solidarity. We would no doubt like more; but it is only fair to observe that the logical difficulties of demonstrating the validity of any ethical system are just as great either in traditional philosophy or in Existentialism; so that we must be careful not to condemn Conrad because his working assumptions echo the greatest of English empiricists, who in *Twelfth Night* gave Sir Andrew Aguecheek the immortal words: 'I have no exquisite reason for 't, but I have reason good enough.'

The reason good enough, we might now be tempted to add, is that the way things are with our poor old planet, the time has come for bifocals. Such, it appears, was Conrad's view, and he once justified the patent irrationality of this dual perspective on the simple grounds that it reflected the facts of common human experience:

Many a man has heard or read and believes that the earth goes round the sun; one small blob of mud among several others, spinning ridiculously with a wagging motion like a top about to fall. This is the Copernican system, and the man believes in the system without often knowing as much about it as its name. But while watching a sunset he sheds his belief; he sees the sun as a

small and useful object, the servant of his needs . . . sinking slowly behind a range of mountains, and then he holds the system of Ptolemy.²⁷

In the perspective of the history of ideas, the wheel has indeed come full circle: Conrad seems to accept an impasse to which his great contemporaries, more ambitious, and perhaps less deeply alienated from the possibilities of belief, tried to find solutions. Most of twentieth-century literature, for example, may, broadly speaking, be said to have an implicit programme; it urges a direction which, to put it simply, is based on an adherence to the ideology either of the future, or of the past, or of the supernatural world. But Conrad, as we have seen, had no belief in liberal reform, in the politics of the future to which Shaw, Wells and Galsworthy devoted so many of their writings; and he had equally little interest in the backward look, in the utopianism of the past which, in various forms, can be found in the thought of Yeats, Joyce, Pound and Eliot: Conrad speaks, for example, of 'the mustiness of the Middle Ages, that epoch when mankind tried to stand still in a monstrous illusion of final certitude attained in morals, intellect and conscience'.²⁸ Nor, finally, did Conrad find any appeal in supernatural transcendence: his objection to Christianity combined a Voltairean rejection of myth, superstition and hypocrisy, with a primary emphasis on the impracticality of Christian ideals; as he once wrote to Garnett:

I am not blind to [Christianity's] services, but the absurd oriental fable from which it starts irritates me. Great, improving, softening, compassionate it may be, but it has lent itself with amazing facility to cruel distortion and is the only religion which, with its impossible standards, has brought an infinity of anguish to innumerable souls – on this earth.²⁹

Conrad the seaman, then, could not allow the seer to make that leap out of the chaos of immediate reality which must precede the construction of any system. More willingly than most of his contemporaries, he followed Heyst in *Victory* and entered 'the broad, human path of inconsistencies' (p. 176). We, surely, can join Thomas Mann in admiring the 'refusal of a very much engaged intelligence to hang miserably in the air between contraries',³⁰ and to concentrate not on the illogicality, but on the achievements, of men who live their lives according to Ptolemy's erroneous notion that man is the centre of the universe. To do this, Conrad seems to argue, we must not be too demanding about the intellectual foundations of human needs; Marlow, for instance, probably speaks for Conrad when he says of Jim's need for a truth, or an illusion of it, to live by: 'I don't care how you call it, there is so little difference,

and the difference means so little' (p. 222). In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's final act is even more explicit: when he preserves the 'great and saving illusion' about the dead Kurtz which is enshrined in the Intended's 'mature capacity for fidelity' (pp. 159, 157), he enacts the notion that, once we have experienced the heart of darkness, we may be driven to the position that, in cases where fidelity is in conflict with truth, it is truth which should be sacrificed.

Commitment to human solidarity, of course, also implies that whatever disgust and doubt we experience at the spectacle of history, we must nevertheless feel that in some sense the past and the future of mankind are a part of ourselves; not as nostalgia, and not as programme, but as experienced reality, the kind of reality expressed by Emilia Gould in *Nostramo*, who thought that 'for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present' (pp. 520–1). Conrad's pessimism about the direction of contemporary history, shown in *Heart of Darkness*, for example, or in *Nostramo*, was logically incompatible with any optimism about the future of man; and yet even here the gloom was pierced by a moment of Ptolemaic affirmation.

In 1950 Conrad's greatest literary descendant, William Faulkner, seems to have had a passage of Conrad obscurely in mind when he declared in his Nobel Prize Address:

It is easy enough to say man is immortal simply because he will endure; that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.

The Conrad passage this seems to recall comes from a 1905 essay on Henry James; in it Conrad's further vision cannot but foresee disaster, and though the nearer vision appeals against the verdict, it does so in terms so qualified by the ironic distance of the seer that they underline how Faulkner, yielding to his own insistent emotion, finally protests too much:

When the last aqueduct shall have crumbled to pieces [wrote Conrad], the last airship fallen to the ground, the last blade of grass have died upon a dying earth, man, indomitable by his training in resistance to misery and pain, shall set this undiminished light of his eyes against the feeble glow of the sun. The artistic faculty, of which each of us has a minute grain, may find its voice in some individual of that last group, gifted with a power of expression and

courageous enough to interpret the ultimate experience of mankind in terms of his temperament, in terms of art . . . whether in austere exhortation or in a phrase of sardonic comment, who can guess?

For my own part, from a short and cursory acquaintance with my kind, I am inclined to think that the last utterance will formulate, strange as it may appear, some hope now to us utterly inconceivable. For mankind is delightful in its pride, its assurance, and its indomitable tenacity. It will sleep on the battlefield among its own dead, in the manner of an army having won a barren victory. It will not know when it is beaten.³¹

NOTES

- 1 'Joseph Conrad: a Note', *Abinger Harvest* (London, 1946), pp. 136-7.
- 2 G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (London, 1927), vol. 1, p. 216.
- 3 *Ibid.* 1, 222.
- 4 *Ibid.* 1, 226.
- 5 Cf. Florence Clemens, 'Conrad's Favourite Bedside Book', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 38 (1939), 305-15.
- 6 Dent Collected Edition (London, 1948), p. 208. Future references from Conrad are to this collection, unless otherwise stated.
- 7 *Life and Letters*, 1, 214-15.
- 8 *Ibid.* 1, 269.
- 9 Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Revolution* (New York, 1941), pp. 34-9, 246-7; Lewis Feuer, 'What is Alienation? the Career of a Concept', *New Politics*, 1 (1962), pp. 1-19; Melvin Seaman, 'On the Meaning of Alienation', *American Sociological Review*, 24 (1959), 783-91; and, more generally, Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York, 1953).
- 10 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 272-95.
- 11 *Letters from Conrad, 1895-1924*, ed. Edward Garnett (London, 1928), pp. 152-3.
- 12 *Ibid.* p. 216.
- 13 *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890-1920*, trans. and ed. J. A. Gee and P. J. Sturm (New Haven, 1940), p. 72.
- 14 *Letters from Conrad, 1895-1924*, p. xiii.
- 15 *Ibid.* p. 183.
- 16 *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum*, ed. William Blackburn (Durham, N.C., 1958), p. 171.
- 17 *Life and Letters*, II, 38.
- 18 *Ibid.* II, 121.
- 19 *Letters to Blackwood*, p. 114.
- 20 'A Glance at Two Books', *Last Essays*, p. 135.
- 21 *Sewanee Review*, 53 (1945), 1-23.
- 22 *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris, 1946), p. 35.
- 23 *Le sursis* (Paris, 1945), p. 286: 'Je suis libre pour rien.'
- 24 *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 194.

- 25 'Well Done', *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 183.
- 26 *Life and Letters*, I, 148.
- 27 'The Ascending Effort', *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 73-4.
- 28 'The Censor of Plays: an Appreciation', *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 76-7.
- 29 *Letters from Conrad, 1895-1924*, p. 265.
- 30 'Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*', in *Past Masters and Other Papers*, trans. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1933), p. 247.
- 31 'Henry James: an Appreciation', *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 13-14.