1

ANDREW PURSSELL

Making the Conrad Canon

In his 1905 essay 'Books', Conrad ponders the 'secret' of literary longevity: 'the formulas of art are dependent on things variable, unstable and untrustworthy, on human sympathies, on prejudices, on likes and dislikes, on the sense of virtue and the sense of propriety, on beliefs and theories that, indestructible in themselves, always change their form – often in the lifetime of one fleeting generation' (*NLL*, 11.1–6). Conrad would not achieve widespread success until the publication of *Chance* (1913–14), and these remarks can be read as an expression of mild frustration from an author whose popular appeal remained limited and whose most recent novel, *Nostromo* (1904), although later regarded as his undisputed masterpiece, had been coolly received by the critics.[1] Beyond this, Conrad's meditation on the precarious afterlife of the literary text also anticipated the oscillations of popular and critical taste that would continue to mark, and mar, the reputation of his works over the coming decades. Conrad achieved both popular and critical acclaim during his lifetime, but a period of sustained neglect came in the wake of his death in August 1924. This was followed by his dramatic rediscovery and canonization after the Second World War and, in turn, by the gradual recuperation of works excluded from the Conrad canon during the twentieth century's last decades, when the assumptions underlying its formation, and the formations of canons generally, began to be questioned and challenged.

Conrad's nebulous description of 'things variable' carries more than a trace of the 'misty' narrative method identified by his earliest reviewers, such as H. G. Wells, and confirmed by later ones, such as E. M. Forster.[2] However, in gesturing to those systems of valuation and revaluation in which a work is enmeshed on its entry into the literary marketplace, Conrad's 'things variable' is also strikingly attuned to modern theorizations of canon formation. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has shown, such variables might include the 'innumerable acts of evaluation' performed by those who 'publish the work, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and

imitate it'.[3] They might also encompass 'the highly specialized institutionalized activities of scholars, teachers, and academic or journalistic critics': those who give 'full-dress reviews and explicit rank-orderings, evaluations, and revaluations', who compile anthologies, write introductions, produce department curriculum lists, award literary prizes, and commission and publish articles about certain works; all 'have functions and effects that are significant in the production and maintenance … of literary value'.[4] More than this, the 'valuational history' of a literary work arguably precedes its publication, beginning in 'the author's either letting the work stand or ripping it up', and even before this, in 'the thousand individual acts of approval and revision, that constitute the entire process of literary composition'.[5] This is especially true of an aspirant writer of 'high' literature such as Conrad, whose third novel, *The Rescue* (1920), begun in 1896, lay abandoned for some twenty years and whose second, *The Sisters*, was abandoned altogether, and whose correspondence – such as the oft-cited letter dismissing 'The Lagoon' (1896) as 'secondhand Conradese' (*Letters*, I, 302) – is interleaved with innumerable judgements on works-in-progress. Similarly, Conrad's later Prefaces (or Author's Notes), several of which are marked by his refusal to reconsider or even remember particular works, offer a corresponding, if playful, public glimpse of the evaluative processes voiced privately in his letters.

The establishment of Conrad's 'literary value', self-evident today in his prevalence in international academe and in literary and popular culture more broadly, might therefore be traced back to the placing of his early short fiction in literary journals rather than popular magazines,[6] and to his early promotion by editors such as W. E. Henley, whose serialization of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) in the prestigious *New Review* announced Conrad as an author for a 'select, coterie audience'.[7] It might have factored in the award of literary prizes for his early short fiction (such as 1897's *Tales of Unrest*) and of monies by institutions such as the Royal Literary Fund in 1902 and the Royal Bounty Fund in 1905, or the purchasing of his manuscripts by the American collector John Quinn, whereby literary 'value' is more readily measured and monetized. It might even have influenced the early translation of his works into French, which was instrumental in establishing his fame abroad at a time when English 'had not yet reached its planetary hegemony'[8] and which led to the first sustained attempt to write his biography.[9] It might also encompass the early adoption of his works in academe, such as that of *Lord Jim* (1900) for the newly conceived 'Modern Novels' class at Yale in 1902, or the acknowledgement of his influence by contemporary writers and cultural arbiters, such as T. S. Eliot, whose 1925 poem 'The Hollow Men' takes its epigraph ('Mistah Kurtz – he dead') from

Heart of Darkness (1899), not to mention the publication of early surveys of his fiction by Hugh Clifford and Edward Garnett, which marked the first stirrings of Conrad criticism in Britain and abroad, and arguably the first soundings taken of his relation to the Western canon.[10] The interventions of Garnett, who in his role as a publisher's reader at Unwin's had helped place Conrad's fiction and as a reviewer and a critic had helped shape his early reception, are especially integral to the marking and transmission of Conrad's literary value. When the *Youth* volume was published in 1902, it was the title story that drew most of the plaudits until Garnett identified *Heart of Darkness* as 'the high-water mark of the author's talent',[11] and Conrad's subsequent remark to Garnett that 'The ruck takes its tone from you' (*Letters*, II, 468) suggestively underlines the influence of what Stanley Fish calls 'interpretive communities', those groups in a position to decide what is 'literature' and what is not.[12] Conrad's celebrated and controversial novella – the exclusion of the early Marlow narratives from F. R. Leavis's 'great tradition' aside – has regularly been placed at the forefront of Conrad's achievement ever since.

That Conrad was considered 'literature' is also consensually reflected in the appearance towards the end of his life of large-scale collected editions of his works, published by William Heinemann and J. M. Dent & Sons in Britain and by Doubleday, Page & Company in the United States. These editions marked a major stage both in the consolidation of his contemporary reputation and – crucially – in the preservation and transmission of a canon of his works for future generations of readers, with the American 'Sun-Dial' printing providing the *ur*-text of many subsequent popular print editions (including 'Dent's Uniform Edition' of 1923, reissued as 'Dent's Collected Edition' during the 1940s and early 1950s, later a standard text of reference in Conrad studies).[13] These editions were accompanied by a series of prefatory Author's Notes, all of which, excepting those accompanying *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), were produced for Dent's second English edition of his works between 1917 and 1920, when Conrad harboured the (unrealized) ambition of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. They were conceived as 'a fittingly prepared monument' to a career then nearing its end,[14] and with one eye on the posthumous legacy strived for in 'Books'. By this time, Conrad had achieved the kind of recognition sought after in 'Books', yet he remained aware more than ever that, as in 'Books', this recognition is subject to impermanence, as the Author's Note to *Tales of Unrest* (1897) underscores. In it, Conrad describes retiring his favoured steel pen as a memento of this early foray into short fiction, and the anecdote underlines that Conrad, in the present act of writing the preface, is likewise engaged in an act of memorialization. What happens

to the pen – thrown out of the window, along with its ink-encrusted double – is therefore significant. As Vivienne Rundle argues, 'Conrad's anecdote recounts the destruction or devaluing of a memento; it records the transformation *from value to insignificance*'.[15] Thus 'value', once ascribed, can be annulled, and this seems pertinent not only to the current project of memorialization, to which the preface belongs as a whole, but also to his later investiture in English literary studies as a modern 'classic'. As Frank Kermode put it, 'canons are replaced, condemned, or subjected to commentary. In any case, they change.'[16]

When Conrad attained canonical status in the 1940s and 1950s, neither the literary value of the text, nor the 'evaluative authority' of the canon that housed it, needed to be 'affirmed, asserted, or self-justified': 'it was simply assumed'.[17] The interrogative impulse suggested in the title of T. S. Eliot's 1945 essay 'What is a Classic?' did not stretch to a self-questioning of the politics of canon formation. Thus, whereas in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) Northrop Frye could argue the need to 'snip off and throw away' the evaluative practices that he found were irrelevant to 'real criticism',[18] he could also speak, like Eliot, of 'the existing monuments of literature', overlooking that the creation of such monuments was the product of, 'among other things, evaluative practices'.[19] Although Frye might have opposed the rank-ordering of Conrad's works begun in earnest by F. R. Leavis in Britain in the 1940s and continued by Thomas C. Moser and Albert J. Guerard in the United States throughout the 1950s, the underlying assumptions that allowed for such rank-orderings to be made remained untroubled: there could be no prejudicial 'value judgements', but there could, conversely, be 'masterpieces of literature'.[20]

These assumptions remained largely unquestioned until the late twentieth century and the emergence of critical practices such as feminism, deconstruction and postcolonialism, which, underlining the deepening politicization of academe, saw the canon as a 'highly selective instrument'[21] in which were reflected the systems of stratification and exclusion of the culture that produced it.[22] This led to a countermanding emphasis on the study of traditionally excluded authors and works. This debate over canon formation led, in turn, to a revival of the very figure of the author whose 'death' had only recently been announced by poststructuralism in the late 1960s: requiring a representative of a particular constituency or background, the canon became 'concerned, in the first instance, with *authors*, not texts'.[23] Such questions of 'representation' are particularly salient to Conrad given the overwhelming Anglicization of his achievement by a predominantly Anglophone community of critics (though this has been challenged over the years by the concerted attempt to reposition Conrad's French and, in particular, Polish

heritages). At the same time, critics such as Kermode, while acknowledging the canon's 'complicit[y] with power',[24] disputed the assumption that it is a 'load-bearing element of the existing power structure, and that by imposing radical change on [it] you can help to dismantle the existing power structure'.[25] The impact of any attempt at discharging the literary canon, like that of the French cannons fired into Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, will always to some degree be lessened by what Kermode calls 'the problem of value'.[26] For although its contents may be challenged and even changed, the canon remains central to the literary critical institution and to literary critical practice, since questions of 'value' remain fundamental to both, just as they do to literary practice more generally.

Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948) not only offered the first systematic, full-length construction of a Conrad canon; in addition, it recuperated Conrad to the tradition of the English novel, which for Leavis also included – and somewhat daringly, was *limited* to – Jane Austen, George Eliot and Henry James. At one level then, Leavis's 'great tradition', like later attempts to contest and 'capture' the canon,[27] was itself radical in impulse, offered in reaction, on the one hand, to a contemporary predilection in academe for Victorianism[28] and, on the other, to earlier influential discussions of the Western canon (notably T. S. Eliot's 1921 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent') which did not extend beyond poetry and drama. Leavis's 'great tradition' was – like all canons – a construct. It was also, despite the suggestion of longevity implicit in its title, a recent one. Like Garnett, Leavis regretted that the 'vogue' for Conrad during the 1920s had coincided with his 'inferior novels',[29] and that this vogue had quickly been replaced in the 1930s by a period of uncertain stocktaking and comparative neglect. There was much interest in Conrad after his death in 1924, underlined by the publication of a flood of reminiscences by his widow Jessie, Ford Madox Ford and Richard Curle, of volumes of his letters by Garnett and G. Jean-Aubry, and of unpublished novels, collaborations and scattered shorter works and essays, including *The Nature of a Crime* (1924), *Tales of Hearsay* (1925), *Suspense* (1925), *Last Essays* (1926) and *The Sisters* (1928).[30] Yet, in a significant sense, this interest in Conrad after his death had been generated *by* his death, and reflected less the monumentalization of Conrad's achievement than a period of extended obituary. Although these protectors of Conrad's reputation might have deemed him worthy of 'canonical' status, such a status needed to be anchored in, and authorized by, the kind of serious academic scholarship that had yet to emerge (the handful of studies to appear during the period 1930–40, by Granville Hicks, Gustav Morf and Edward Crankshaw, notwithstanding).[31] Rather, Conrad's entry into the canon began with the professionalization of interest in him in Britain and the United

States during the 1940s. This period saw the publication of landmark studies by John Dozier Gordan, M. C. Bradbrook and Morton D. Zabel, paving the way for Conrad's later passage into academe and preparing the ground for Leavis's widely influential and lasting intervention, whereby the conceptual contours of Conrad's 'canonicity' were first laid out.[32]

If Leavis's 'great tradition' was radical in reducing the English canon to four authors (and two women and two 'foreigners' at that), it was also radical in some of its revaluations of Conrad. For example, though *Heart of Darkness* was, 'by common consent, one of Conrad's best things', it was grouped, like most of his short fiction, among his 'minor' works.[33] Leavis felt that the novella's endless positing and withholding of 'significance', echoing Forster's earlier criticism, betrayed not the 'best' of Conrad but rather the worst excesses of 'the magazine-writer'.[34] As several critics have suggested, Leavis's interpretation betrays the mistrust of the empiricist – the classifier who is required to believe in the stability of his classifying categories – of the impressionistic aspects of Conrad's narrative method.[35] Conrad's 'major' works, meanwhile, included his popular breakthrough *Chance* (1913–14), whose success Garnett, among others, had damningly suggested had more to do with its aggressive marketing than with any inherent 'literary value'. Leavis's inclusion of *Chance* captures not only the dichotomy of Conrad as someone who 'desired popularity, yet shunned the writing of a popular novel',[36] but also a problem facing the early constructors of the Conrad canon, where traditionally the 'classic' and the 'popular' are held to be antithetical. This is typified by *Lord Jim*, which, though for most early critics it confirmed Conrad's 'arrival' on its publication in 1900,[37] was simultaneously excluded from and included in the first iterations of the Conrad canon produced in Britain and the United States – a discrepancy born, as Fredric Jameson has suggested, of the novel's straddling, like Conrad's fiction generally, 'of high literature [and] light reading and romance,' 'floating uncertainly between … "high" culture and mass culture'.[38] Thus, there is the Conrad who wrote the colonial exotic of 'The Lagoon' and 'Karain: A Memory' (1897), which drew early comparisons to popular authors such as H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and Louis Becke, and, at the same time, the Conrad whose *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), together with the literary manifesto enshrined in its Preface, simultaneously heralded his emergence as an author of 'challenging' fiction.[39] Such a generic straddling is necessarily problematic for the constructors of literary canons, since, as Kermode has argued, a 'classic' definition of what makes an author canonical is that they be 'distinguished from the rabble'.[40]

Conversely, more 'difficult' works, such as *Nostromo*, which eschews the conventions of plot construction, chronology, and narration, were more

readily packaged, and consensually regarded, as 'canonical'. Leavis accordingly placed *Nostromo* at the leading edge of a 'major' phase that also comprised *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911) and *Victory* (1915), with the partial inclusion of *The Shadow-Line* (1917). Conrad's debut and second novels *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and early short fiction such as 'Karain: A Memory' (1897) and 'Youth' (1902), were disregarded as studies in the Kipling-esque Eastern exotic of 'Conrad's earliest vein'.[41] Meanwhile his late works, including *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), *The Rescue* (1920), *The Rover* (1923) and *Suspense* (1925), were deemed collectively the products of a waning ability.

As all of this suggests, Leavis's preference was not just for the middle fiction but also for the novel over the short story. Conrad's short stories may have yielded greater financial rewards than his longer works thanks to the ever-burgeoning popularity of magazines in the late-Victorian and Edwardian literary marketplaces and, later, to the inflated sums paid for his magazine fiction following the publication of *Chance*; however, they were denied a corresponding literary value, and were, with the heavily qualified exception of the novella *Typhoon* (1902), excluded from the Leavis canon.[42] Leavis's generic preference perhaps would not have been recognized by Conrad, all of whose long fictions – apart from *The Sisters* and *The Rescue* – originated as short stories and who believed, moreover, that the 'intrinsic value of a work' had 'nothing to do with its length' (*Letters*, II, 49).[43] At the same time, Conrad's ambition since his unfinished second novel, *The Sisters*, had been to write a novel that would be considered part of the European tradition of the novel, and in *The Great Tradition* this ambition was belatedly realized. Leavis dismissed Conrad's popular reputation as 'the Prose Laureate of the Merchant Service', in a manoeuvre recalling Conrad's resentment at his abiding image as a purveyor of 'sea stuff' (*Letters*, VIII, 130), foregrounding instead the 'great novelist' whose 'great novels' transcended their topographical moorings.[44] He also threw out as irrelevant the longstanding (and for Conrad equally irksome) stress on the writer's 'foreignness': 'Conrad is among the very greatest novelists in the language – or any language'.[45]

Leavis's re-examination of Conrad first appeared as 'Revaluations: Joseph Conrad' in 1941 in *Scrutiny*, the critical journal launched in 1932 together with Q. D. Leavis. If *The Great Tradition* was to prove a widely influential and, for the next thirty years, inescapable work in Conrad criticism, its impact on Conrad studies can be set against the broader impact of the Leavises – together with their contemporaries at Cambridge, I. A. Richards, William Empson and L. C. Knights – on the fashioning of 'English' into a serious discipline in Britain in the years after Conrad's death. Leavis belonged to a group of critics who were trying to give English, then still a

relative upstart, the same weight as long-established neighbouring subjects, such as classics and philology. There is a particular logic, then, to the fact that the questions of 'value' surrounding its emergence as a serious discipline should carry over into its object of study – the literary text. Although the type of evaluative criticism practised by Leavis would gradually disappear during coming years, and although the contents – and even the existence – of the canon whose study he prescribed would later be questioned, 'the fact remains that English students in England today are "Leavisites" whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic intervention'.[46] As Terry Eagleton notes, Leavis 'redrew the map of English literature in ways from which criticism has never quite recovered. The main thoroughfares on this map ran through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson, the Jacobeans and Metaphysicals, Bunyan, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, George Eliot, Hopkins, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence. This *was* English literature.'[47] Leavis was engaged not only in recuperating Conrad to serious academic study, but also in producing a new cartography of English, one of whose principal landmarks was Conrad.

In the 1950s, the American critics Thomas C. Moser and Albert J. Guerard put forward the corresponding, and similarly influential, view that Conrad's late fiction represented a decline after the achievement of his earlier 'major' period, the high points of which were *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*. As with Leavis in Britain, they were spurred on by the seemingly moribund state of Conrad criticism in the United States. Guerard argued 'that the large majority of critics in America [at the end of the 1940s] did not read Conrad at all'.[48] By the end of the 1950s, however, Conrad's biographer Jocelyn Baines could be 'self-consciously writing the life of a man whose work was attaining "classic" status',[49] while both Guerard and Moser could agree – with an urgency belying its comparatively recent inclusion in *The Great Tradition* – that 'the time [had] come to drop *Victory* from the Conrad canon' altogether.[50]

As this suggests, Conrad's recovery from the margins of literary criticism in America, and his canonical status there, were by this point assured; what remained was to re-calibrate the canon of his works. Thus works included by Leavis – *Chance*, *Victory* and *The Shadow-Line* – were excluded, and works rejected by Leavis – notably *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* – were newly incorporated. Meanwhile, the wholesale dismissal of late Conrad and the early Malay novels was countered by the revaluation of his short fiction, with *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) marking the beginning of the 'major' Conrad, and 'The Secret Sharer' (1912) – 'the last first-rate Conrad' – the end.[51] Although the Leavis canon had been replaced, the evaluative and

historicizing aspects of his approach were, in effect, retained.[52] Equally, this canon was, like Leavis's, composed not in open concession to its provisionality but, rather, on the assumption that it 'would henceforth be recognized as the valid one'.[53] In other words, it was lined with the presumption that it possessed the same qualities of 'timelessness' and 'universality' as the texts included in it.

These critics, drawing upon and extending similar posthumous appraisals of Conrad by his friends John Galsworthy and Edward Garnett, and more recent critical views, such as that put forward by Douglas Hewitt,[54] together established the evaluative paradigm of 'achievement and decline'. Within this paradigm, much subsequent Conrad criticism would for the most part unquestioningly operate, including Jacques Berthoud's *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (1978), R. A. Gekoski's *Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist* (1978), Aaron Fogel's *Coercion to Speak* (1985), Suresh Raval's *The Art of Failure* (1986) and Jakob Lothe's *Conrad's Narrative Method* (1989), as well as the major biographies, Bernard C. Meyer's *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (1967) and Frederick R. Karl's *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979). That this paradigm should persist and remain prevalent (if no longer uncritically accepted) is because it is itself subject to the same forces as the literary texts on which it offers commentary – the same 'cultural-historical dynamics of endurance' through which a particular text achieves, maintains and preserves 'classic' status, by being 'more frequently read or recited', 'imitated, cited, commented upon, and so forth – in short, culturally re-produced' – than another.[55]

That is not to say there were not challenges to this paradigm. In the 1980s, Gary Geddes, building upon earlier criticism by Morton D. Zabel, John Palmer and Robert Secor, argued that the critics of the 1950s misunderstood Conrad's aesthetic aims in the late fiction through 'their predilection for fictional modes and techniques that were no longer of paramount importance to Conrad' and failed to recognize Conrad's evolving experimentation with the novel form and with new subjects.[56] In the late 1990s, Susan Jones argued that the popular view of Conrad as a male-oriented author who did not represent female experience or subjectivity or cater to women readers is not intrinsic to his fiction as a whole but rather a by-product of canon formation. In particular, the creation of Conrad's 'major phase' under the banner of Modernism during and after the 1950s 'privileged a narrow band of texts that focused on male experience'.[57] As Moser's Mr Jones-like disinclination towards Conrad's women ('the lowest common denominator')[58] suggests, these critics 'promoted those works as modernist in which women feature less prominently, making these texts paradigmatic of his "genius"'.[59] The recent interest in Conrad's continuing engagement with contemporary

models of popular fiction and with popular culture more broadly, and the attendant interest in his 'uncanonical' works, has led to a further decentring of the traditional canon.[60]

Chinua Achebe's well-known attack on *Heart of Darkness* during the mid-1970s is, in many ways, also an implicit attack on the received canon of Conrad's works and remains a key intervention for its anticipation of a shift in critical interest during the 1980s and 1990s towards issues of culture, race and colonialism following the appearance of Edward Said's path-breaking *Orientalism* (1978) and of a corresponding interrogation of the problematic relation of the European literary canon to imperialism.[61] In a 1975 address given at the University of Massachusetts, provocatively entitled 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', Achebe argued that the novella reduced Africa 'to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind', and that Conrad himself was 'a thoroughgoing racist'. He went on to question the work's position as 'perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel [*sic*] in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities'.[62] Achebe's 'most commonly prescribed' gestures to the particular context in which Conrad was being read and studied in the United States at the time, when the psychoanalytical approach of the likes of Moser and Guerard and of later critics, such as Bernard C. Meyer and Paul Kirschner, was prevalent.[63] Moreover, Guerard had written the introduction to the 1950 New American Library edition of *Heart of Darkness*, the psychological approach of which 'de-Africanizes' the novella and ignores the topical and political specificity of its original reception, and, as Robert Hampson notes, this popular cheap edition is likely to have been widely used by the American students taking the courses mentioned by Achebe.[64] In other words, because it approached *Heart of Darkness* from a singularly psychological perspective – and thus *made it* about 'the break-up of one petty European mind' – it is to this American context and a received interpretation of Conrad's novella, as much as the novella itself, that Achebe responds.[65]

In addition, Achebe's 'most commonly prescribed' suggests the academic apparatus through which *Heart of Darkness*, a fixture of anthologies of Conrad ever since the appearance of Zabel's *The Portable Conrad* (1947), had acquired its current canonical value. As Smith underlines, 'the repeated inclusion of a particular work in literary anthologies', and 'its repeated appearance on reading lists' and in university curricula, together 'have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of a population of particular readers … while at the same time shaping and supplying the very interests in relation to which they will experience the work' and, moreover, experience it 'as valuable'.[66] Such a 'prescription', of course, also grows out