

# Conrad's Romanticism

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## Epilogue

### Conrad and Modern English Fiction

T. S. Eliot borrowed famously from *Heart of Darkness* in his epigraph to "The Hollow Men": *Mistah Kurtz—he dead*. And however serviceable this borrowing may have been, it can also be said to crystallize the partial and limiting view of Conrad's work that this book has wished to qualify. To insist, as I have tried to do, on the way in which Conrad's major fiction describes and deeply values our fragile but genuine human connections is not to deny Conrad his melancholy. But it is to imply that the largely unqualified despair in Eliot's early poetry constitutes a special rather than a representative instance of the modernist imagination. Indeed, as I read and reread Conrad, fortifying my sense of his deep sympathies with that anti-apocalyptic strain in Romanticism that Lionel Trilling describes in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis"<sup>1</sup> and that is dramatized so powerfully in poems like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Keats's "To Autumn," I came increasingly to see that my notions about Conrad could be applied in some degree to James and to the major English novelists who immediately follow them.

There is a large irony in the fact that our revised understanding of the intimate links between the Romantics and the early modern poets has not been extended to the novelists of the same period. We have come to see that despite their aggressive insistence on their own distance from the nineteenth century, the modern poets were the heirs and continuers of the very tradition they claimed to subvert. But the related notion that the central figures in

the great modern novels may not be counterparts of J. Alfred Prufrock has yet to be widely acknowledged.

Though other influences are also involved, it is a remarkable tribute to Eliot's immense authority that the prevailing understanding of modern fiction should continue to center on the themes of barrenness and despair. In the famous review of *Ulysses*—paradoxically, an effort to defend Joyce's book from Richard Aldington's attack on its alleged perversity and formlessness—Eliot praises what he calls Joyce's "mythical method": a method, he says, that gives shape and significance "to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history."<sup>2</sup> This is not, of course, a neutral critical description but a signal instance of a writer-critic reading his own practices and perceptions into the work of another. Embedded in Eliot's sentence, as in the essay as a whole, is the assumption that Joyce shared his sense of the world's "futility" and that Joyce's technical innovations embody just such a hopeless and crisis-ridden view. This association of technical innovativeness with a vision of despair dominated the Joyce scholarship until fairly recently, and continues, I think, to be largely characteristic of the general attitude toward writers like Conrad, Woolf, and Ford Madox Ford.

Gloom and apocalypse are, in any case, recurring themes for some of the most important critics of modern fiction. Erich Auerbach, for example, at the conclusion of what remains perhaps the single most impressive analysis of the essential techniques of modern fiction, speaks of the "air of vague and hopeless sadness" in Virginia Woolf's novels, of Joyce's "blatant and painful cynicism," of a "certain atmosphere of universal doom" and "hopelessness" that pervades modernist fiction generally.<sup>3</sup> And Irving Howe, a consistent and important champion of modernism, has repeatedly stressed its extremist and nihilistic

impulses. "The 'modern,'" Howe summarizes in a recent book, "as it refers to both history and literature, signifies extreme situations and radical solutions. It summons images of war and revolution, experiment and disaster, apocalypse and skepticism; images of rebellion, disenchantment and nothingness."<sup>4</sup> Although this fearful catalogue may correspond in some degree to the work of Continental modernists, it seems to me to apply in the English tradition only to certain extremist and unrepresentative figures like the early Eliot.

Though I have no wish to deny modern fiction's recurring insistence on the radically problematic and even estranging aspects of experience, I cannot feel that Howe's, or Auerbach's, emphasis takes account of the powerfully antiapocalyptic temper of the great modern English novels, their shared respect for what Conrad calls "the irremediable life of the earth as it is." Ellmann's sense of this quality in Joyce has a brilliant conciseness: "Joyce's discovery, so humanistic that he would have been embarrassed to disclose it out of context, was that the ordinary is the extraordinary."<sup>5</sup> This Joycean impulse to recover and to celebrate the ordinary has roots deep in Romanticism, of course, and is widely shared not only by Conrad but by other modern English writers as well. It is central, for instance, in Ford, whose great and still undervalued tetralogy is in part a meditation on the antiapocalyptic character of our individual lives. Against a backdrop of the most decisive public and political events, *Parade's End* shows us characters whose natures change only minimally; and whose desire to alter or to transform themselves is satisfied only ambiguously and incompletely. (This is why Tietjens himself is largely absent from the pages of the concluding volume of the tetralogy, having been drawn away from his simple country retreat and his new life as an antique dealer back to Groby, the ancestral home from

which he had imagined himself to be finally free.) Ford's largest theme, in fact, might be said to be the disjunction between the enormous political eruptions that the society he describes is experiencing and the far more minimal and ordinary alterations that occur in the lives of his characters. This theme is elaborated most fully in the career of his protagonist, who in the course of his education—*Parade's End*, like many of the great English novels of the period, is a *bildungsroman* but about an adult—must come to terms with the simplest and most elemental facts about himself, must acknowledge that he is unhappy, that being a Tietjens of Groby does not exempt him from pain or simple human need or even—during the war—ambition for advancement. This small and basic insight Ford sees as a remarkable act of will and moral heroism. Just so, I think, in Joyce, Bloom's increasing capacity simply to confront directly the fact of Molly's infidelity and his own partial responsibility for it is a crucial drama of the book. Bloom changes little in *Ulysses*, advances only to a rich equanimity concerning the partialness of life, and the novel insists in every possible way on the ordinariness and simplicity of his consolations.

This emphasis on the ordinary, the simple human thing, is crucial, too, in Virginia Woolf, who finds in the most elementary human gatherings and undertakings—parties, dinners, moments of intimacy in conversation, public pageants that draw people briefly out of their separateness—a fragile but real counterforce to the fact that time passes and nothing endures but the neutral indifferent sea.

Even Lawrence, who loves apocalypse, has a way of acknowledging, if only in his best books, the world's resistance to the imagination of crisis and transformation. Lawrence, it would seem to me, is in fact at his most Romantic in those books—*Women in Love* far above all—in

which the spirit's yearning for transcendence is mocked and frustrated, so that Lawrence is then able, like the Romantic poets of the century before him, to tell the truth not only about the yearning but also about what really happens to it in the world. Birkin weeping before Gerald's corpse—he had earlier said one oughtn't to waste tears on the dead—and Birkin in the last pages of the novel, returned to the England, to the very roof, he had thought to put behind him in his journey into fullness—this Birkin lives in a partial, indecisive world of simple human intimacies that is not entirely at odds with the world of Joyce or Woolf or Ford Madox Ford.

One way of clarifying these matters is to suggest that J. Alfred Prufrock, or Gregor Samsa, is a far less characteristic modernist figure than James's Strether, who disembarks in Europe to find himself in a new world of overwhelming complexity and nuance. If traditional moral assumptions and old stabilities are called into question for Strether, and if he feels the loss of such assurances acutely, he is conscious at the same time of the challenge and the variousness of the world he has entered. His position is endangered and precarious, but he has much to see and little inclination to despair. Strether can serve, I think, as an emblem not only for many of the protagonists of modern English fiction but also for the makers of it: for their shared sense of the difficulties, even the terrors, but also the excitements of the world they wished to render in art.

The formulations about the nature of modern fiction offered us by Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford seem to me far more accurate and helpful than Eliot's review of Joyce. In Woolf's two major essays on modern fiction and in the extended reflections on fictional technique scattered through Ford's memoirs and other books, there is a remarkable accord. Both writers suggest that life as they

see and understand it had not been adequately rendered in earlier novels, largely because older fictional methods are called into question by the modern awareness of the complexities of the inner life and by a recognition of the ways in which one's subjective vision selects and colors experience. Both, in their own ways, and Conrad, James, Lawrence, and Joyce in theirs, tried to devise techniques that would do justice to the new complexity they saw before them. They are all, except for Lawrence, suspicious of apocalypse. "Let us not take it for granted," Woolf writes, echoing many passages in Ford, "that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small." And they reject conventional versions of plot and of literary structure. Here is Woolf speaking, then Ford:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, . . . the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, . . . there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style. . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?<sup>6</sup>

We agreed that the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind. A novel must therefore not be a narration, a report. Life does not

say to you: In 1914 my next door neighbour, Mr. Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox's green aluminium paint. . . . If you think about the matter you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr. Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will then try to remember the year of that occurrence and you will fix it as August 1914 because having had the foresight to bear the municipal stock of the city of Liège you were able to afford a first-class season ticket for the first time in your life. You will remember Mr. Slack ... again [in] ... his garden, this time with a pale, weaselly-faced fellow, who touched his cap from time to time. Mr. Slack will point to his house-wall several times at different points, the weaselly fellow touching his cap at each pointing. Some days after, coming back from business you will have observed against Mr. Slack's wall. . . . At this point you will remember that you were then the manager of the fresh-fish branch of Messrs. Catlin and Clovis in Fenchurch Street. . . . What a change since then! Millicent had not yet put her hair up. . . . You will remember how Millicent's hair looked, rather pale and burnished in plaits. You will remember how it now looks, henna'd ... You remember some of the things said by means of which Millicent has made you cringe—and her expression! . . . Cox's Aluminium Paint! . . . You remember the half empty tin that Mr. Slack showed you ...

And, if that is how the building of your neighbour's greenhouse comes back to you, just imagine how it will be with your love-affairs that are so much more complicated. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Both passages seem to me remarkably clear explanations for the unconventional methods of modern fiction. Both adhere firmly to a mimetic conception of literature, appealing directly to the real world, to the way things are or seem to us to be. And in neither passage is there the suggestion that the complexity of this reality is a cue for

despair. The modern novelists realize, of course, that nihilism may be a logical consequence of the perception that the world's significance is subjective and private, and they give us characters—like Decoud, or Mr. Ramsay, or Stephen Dedalus—who are tortured and sometimes destroyed by this recognition. But being novelists and not metaphysicians they live with muddle and inconsistency more readily than some of their characters, and their “working assumptions,” as Ian Watt has written of Conrad, “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.’”<sup>8</sup>

The harshness but also the beauty of modern fiction, its tough honesty but also its odd exuberance, have an illuminating parallel in the writings of Freud. The Freud I have in mind is the stoic humanist who emerges from some of Lionel Trilling's essays and, most impressively, from Philip Rieff's great book.<sup>9</sup> Like the modern novelists who were, roughly, his contemporaries, this Freud is aware of the definitive inwardness of men, of their estrangement from themselves and from their fellows, of the tyranny of the trivial and the quotidian. But, again like the novelists, Freud's sense of our grave human limits leads not to despair but to a recognition of man's resilience and his capacity for that tough-minded candor which can lead to a minimal self-mastery and even, sometimes, to a kind of secular reverence for things as they are:

How [did Bloom enter the bed]?

With circumspection, as invariably when entering an abode (his own or not his own): with solicitude, the snake-spiral springs of the mattress being old, the brass quoits and pendent viper radii loose and tremulous under stress and strain: prudently, as entering a lair or ambush of lust or adder: lightly, the less to disturb: reverently, the bed of

conception and of birth, of consummation of marriage and of breach of marriage, of sleep and of death.

Both Freud and these writers speak in their different ways especially of the essential human labor of perception, of seeing the world and the self clearly. They are antagonistic to lies and deception. Warily, mainly by implication and sometimes with terrible obliqueness the writers affirm the tough-minded clarity of Mrs. Ramsay:

It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord.

But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. She looked up over her knitting . . . purifying out of existence that lie, any lie.

Freud's book about this particular lie, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), focuses, like the novelists, on the theme of seeing and growing:

True, man will then [having renounced religion] find himself in a difficult situation. He will have to confess his utter helplessness and his insignificant part in the working of the universe; he will have to confess that he is no longer the centre of creation, no longer the object of the tender care of a benevolent providence. He will be in the same position as the child who has left the home where he was so warm and comfortable. But, after all, is it not the destiny of childishness to be overcome? Man cannot remain a child for ever; he must venture at last into the hostile world.<sup>10</sup>

That these generalizations are fitted to Conrad I think is beyond question. Yet I would not insist on them too exclusively. For there is something quaint, old-fashioned about him, and one feels toward his work in some degree

as his friends seem to have felt about his person: that he was uneasy not only in that place of exile whose language he appropriated and greatly honored, but also in the time in which he lived. There is a rich, simple nostalgia in him, and a decorousness and reticence not at all modern. He is different from Joyce and Woolf and his friend Ford, even less at home with them, finally, than the older James. The Singleton of modern literature, he stands nearer to Wordsworth than to Joyce.

Something of his special quality may be suggested by Walter Allen's distinction between two classes of novelists, the sophisticated and the naive:

The sophisticated novelist is one who is aware, in the foreground of his consciousness, of his special relation as novelist to his subject-matter or to his readers, often, indeed, to both. The naive novelist, on the other hand, is much more plainly the lineal descendant of the primitive story-teller. He takes his audience's interest for granted; he knows they want to hear a story. "Take my word for it, this is the way it happened," is his attitude.<sup>11</sup>

What is striking about Conrad, of course, is the extent to which he fits both of Allen's groupings. (So, too, he would seem to unite both the "drama" and the "romance" of Stevenson's famous definition: "Drama is the poetry of conduct, romance the poetry of circumstance.")<sup>12</sup> It is scarcely possible to imagine a more self-conscious writer than Conrad, to imagine anyone more aware of his special relation to his material and to his audience. Yet he is, like any writer of adventure fiction, clearly descended from the "primitive story-teller." Indeed, in *Lord Jim* and elsewhere both Conrad and Marlow presume upon and subtly exploit their audience's patience: "In regard to the listeners' endurance," Conrad writes in an author's note, "the

postulate must be accepted that the story *was* interesting. It is the necessary preliminary assumption" (*Lord Jim*, p. vii).

Ford Madox Ford understood the mixed character of Conrad's fiction, and focused on it in a comparison between his collaborator and two of his famous contemporaries, James and Stephen Crane. James's people, Ford tells us, attend tea parties that are "debating circles of a splendid aloofness, of an immense human sympathy," while Crane is interested in

physical life, in wars, in slums, in Western saloons, in a world where the "gun" was the final argument. The life that Conrad gives you is somewhere halfway between the two; it is dominated—but less dominated—by the revolver than that of Stephen Crane, and dominated, but less dominated, by the moral scruple than that of James.<sup>13</sup>

This judgment—like most of Ford's literary opinions—is particularly acute, for it is clear that in novel after novel Conrad tries to mingle the sophisticated and the primitive, tries to tell great old-fashioned stories complexly and fully. His subject matter is consistently that of the popular adventure story, his plots are nearly always potentially melodramatic, his rhetoric is always listing toward ornateness and excess. Yet his important work, far from succumbing to the simplification and banality inherent in these things, retrieves from them a rare and austere seriousness. And Conrad accomplishes this work of discovery and rescue, I hope the foregoing has shown, not by denying extravagance but by using it. Although, as I have argued, a principal concern of Conrad's narrative strategies is to deflect our attention away from such extravagance, his successful work never finally denies—is never

finally afraid to make use of—the acts and gestures and circumstances that are characteristic of Stevenson and Kipling and Rider Haggard.

“I remember,” writes Lionel Trilling, “with what a smile of saying something daring and unacceptable John Erskine told an undergraduate class that some day we would understand that plot and melodrama were good things for a novel to have and that *Bleak House* was a very good novel indeed.”<sup>14</sup> One wants, I think, to say something of the same for Conrad, but with the emphasis upon his bloody combats and natural disasters, his pirate battles (as in the conclusion of *Lord Jim*) and his threatening seas (as in *Typhoon* and *The Shadow-Line*).

To say this is to reinforce Ford's estimate of Conrad, an estimate that implicitly clarifies Conrad's complex, mediating role in the development of modern fiction. Ford recalls that James described *Romance* as “an immense English Plum Cake which he kept at his bedside for a fortnight and of which he ate nightly a slice.”<sup>15</sup> If James did not say that, he ought to have, for the remark's typically Jamesian mixture of courtesy and condescension suggests exactly how alien and “unserious” such a book must have appeared to the writer Conrad addressed in his letters as “très cher maître.”<sup>16</sup>

Though Conrad is frequently (and justly) compared to James, from one angle there is no important modern novelist who less resembles him. For Conrad's complex narrative strategies examine not nuances of gesture, nor even, essentially, moral subtleties—even Marlow, after all, admits that Jim's case is “simple”—but crucial problems of conduct. These problems are profoundly moral and psychological, of course, but if they threaten psychic disintegration, the urgency with which they do so is a consequence primarily of the fact that these dilemmas of conduct also promise literal annihilation. The illusion,

the mistake, even (most frighteningly) the mischance of calm or storm over which man has no control—these things can not only maim or undermine a man's sense of himself and his commitments in life, they can, quite simply, kill him. The threat of death or disintegration in Conrad's fiction is nearly always double: it is both spiritual or moral or psychological *and* at the same time palpably physical, something you feel on your pulses, something that happens *out there*, and happens to others outside yourself to whom you are bound by the ties of community:

When the time came the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.

It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation.<sup>17</sup>

I take this passage to be representative of the double appeal of Conrad's finest work, which is modern and Romantic simultaneously. The spiritual, the interior testing mirrors the pressing physical ordeal that precedes and triggers it. And in what he himself would call this “purposely mingled resonance”—in this balance between the claims of external disaster and of psychic collapse, between the deed and the words that describe and evaluate the deed—we must see, I think, Conrad's lonely distinction.