

THE RETICENCE OF JOSEPH CONRAD

"He starts as if to make a philosophic statement about the Universe and breaks off with a gruff disclaimer" (E. M. Forster).

It is a fair generalization to say that modern novels, that is, novels written during the past twenty-five years, invite the reader to a discussion of the writer's personality. It is Conrad's reticence, above all, that places him as the last English traditional novelist, at the end of the line running from Fielding through Dickens.

It is unfortunate that Conrad's reticence, his effort at impersonality, should lead to a belief that he has no emotions to reveal. For in popular estimation *Typhoon* ranks as Conrad's greatest novel, and Conrad himself has come to be considered as a sort of McWhirr—a methodical sea-dog of settled convictions, but unaccountably gifted with a romantic imagination which enabled him to write sea-stories. And although it is good to see Conrad being republished at all, I hope it will not seem ungracious to Messrs Dent if I register my misgivings at their recent republication of *Typhoon*⁽¹⁾, and wish that they had chosen one of his novels (say, *Heart of Darkness*) which invited speculation as to Conrad's personality and which was more central in his achievement.

What makes *Typhoon* an unrepresentative novel is the absence of Conrad's pervasive irony, and it is Conrad's irony which links him to Fielding and Dickens. Irony in literature is the unpersonalizing factor, the artistic solvent, of the various "negative" emotions, principally disgust and fear. In Conrad, as in Dickens, irony is the solvent of a terror of things which manifests itself in a savage violence and hysteria.

The macabre violence of the death of Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist*, the nightmare side of Carker in *Dombey and Son*, the sudden collapse of the Clenham house in *Little Dorrit*, and the sadistic description of the beating of Alfred Lamble in *Our Mutual Friend* are instances on the surface of Dickens which have their counterpart in the nervous energy of the prose.

In Conrad there is an arbitrary nihilism in the destruction of the ammunition ship in *The Rescue*, the death of Captain Anthony in *Chance*, the burning of Heyst's bungalow in *Victory*, and the death of Décond in *Nostromo*.

Décond and Captain Anthony are nearer to self-portraits of Conrad than McWhirr or Captain Mitchell. The isolation, the moral disin-

(1) *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *Typhoon* and *The Shadow Line*, reprinted in one volume in the Everyman series. Other recent reprints are *Lord Jim*, also in the Everyman series, and two volumes of short stories, *Twixt Land and Sea Tales* and *Tales of Hearsay and Last Essays*, in the Penguin series.

heritance, self-involved, of Décond is a theme recurrent in Conrad. The tragedy of Razumov, in *Under Western Eyes*, is his isolation, his inability to make contact with the outside world, and it is symbolic that he is rendered stone-deaf, deprived of even the contact of sound, by the society with whom he was unable to communicate.

The preoccupation with loneliness in Conrad goes with a curious recurrence of the déjà theme. One is with oneself, or with something very like, but not quite oneself. The spectral figure of the old captain dogs the achievement of the hero of *The Rescue*, the picture of Heyst's father dominates Heyst himself in *Victory*, and the atmosphere of his predecessor's cabin haunts the hero of *The Shadow Line*.

These are a few of the external manifestations of the impression of what I might call suppressed hysteria that one gets from an extensive reading of Conrad. The description of Brierley in *Lord Jim* is an instance of the suddenness with which this occasionally breaks out:

I have never defined to myself this attraction, but there were moments when I envied him. The sting of life could do no more to his complacent soul than the scratch of a pin to the smooth surface of a rock. This was enviable. As I looked at him, flanking on one side the unassuming pale faced magistrate who presided at the enquiry, self satisfaction presented to me and to the world a surface as hard as granite. He committed suicide shortly afterwards.

When I was a child one of the practical jokes that you could buy was a walnut, which, when you tried to crack it, turned out to be made of spongy rubber. The same feeling of physical deception and revulsion is dominant in Conrad. What seems to be solid turns soft at the touch. The Brierleys, the Lord Jims, the Nostromos, the seemingly normal natural men, turn out to be failures: Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is scarcely flesh and blood, only a voice.

The outside world, then, is false and hollow, but one cannot escape it, as Lord Jim and Heyst would try to do, for the "destructive element" is there too, within oneself: our selves, no more than our island paradises, are not inviolable. That is why *Typhoon* is great, but so unrepresentative of Conrad, for it is an assertion against the facts of his own experience—an assertion that there is a hard core within, corresponding to the external behaviour of McWhirr, the man guided by routine and duty. *Typhoon* is Conrad's only "success-story," for even the hero's success in *The Shadow Line* is marred by the unaccountable defection of Ransome, "the reasonable man."

I would re-emphasize the connection between Conrad and Dickens, because it is more critically fruitful than the frequent association of Conrad with Flaubert. The aims and methods of Flaubert, his concentration in the novel on "style," have been nowhere beneficial,

least of all to himself, as his stunted output testifies. "Style" is not the keynote of Conrad, but rather "energy," almost hysterical energy, the dominant quality also of Dickens. The curious resemblances between *Chance* and *Little Dorrit* would bear this out, especially the similarity between "the Great de Banal" and Dorrit père, and the pervading sense of the prison-house atmosphere:

For my part I know so little of prisons that I haven't the faintest notion how one leaves them. It seems as abominable an operation as the other, the shutting up with its mental suggestions of bang, snap, crash and the empty silence outside—where an instant before you were—you *were*—and now no longer are. Perfectly devilish. And the release! I don't know which is worse. How do they do it? Pull the string, door flies open, man flies through: Out you go! Adios! And in the space where a second before you were not, in the silent space there is a figure going away, limping. Why limping? I don't know; that's how I see it. One has a notion of a maiming, crippling process; of the individual coming back damaged in some subtle way.

At first glance it would be difficult to pronounce with sureness whether this is Conrad or Dickens—actually it is Conrad. The murky London of *Chance* and *The Secret Agent* and the grotesque characterization of the revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* are also Dickensian.

The distinction between Dickens and Conrad is the distinction between the Victorian and the modern—Conrad's greater self-awareness requiring a correspondingly greater self-control. That is the keynote of his three greatest novels, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*—"negative," hysterical emotions controlled and impersonalized. Anyone who still doubts the radically disordered nature of Conrad's personality has only to read Mrs Conrad's brief memoir of her husband.⁽²⁾ But as a novelist Conrad owes his greatness to being a "modern" and yet a traditionalist. For as it is almost taken for granted that the novel nowadays should be devoted to self-exhibition, or at least self-exploration, it is salutary to reflect that Conrad's unique position, though partly due to historical accident, was due also to his strength of will as a novelist.

ANTHONY BIRRELL.

Acknowledgments: This article is no more than a footnote to Dr F. R. Leavis's articles on Conrad in *Scrutiny*, which have forcibly scouted the conception of Conrad as "the Kipling of the South Seas" and have established his reputation as a serious novelist. Although I have not had opportunity of recent reference to them, my debt is obvious. For a fuller discussion of the "negative emotions" in literature, see the article of that name by Edgell Rickword in *Towards Standards of Criticism* (Wishart) and *The Irony of Swift* by Dr F. R. Leavis in *Determinations* (Chatto & Windus). Edmund Wilson's article on Dickens in *The Wound and the Bow* brings out well the pathological basis of Dickens's violence.

(2) *Conrad as I Knew Him*, by Jessie Conrad.