

# **“The Nature of Conrad’s Pessimism”**

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In all of his major works, Conrad places his characters in ethical dilemmas and then stands back and says, “Look! Why did this happen? What should be done?” It is primarily in this deliberate arrangement of ethical problems and their outcome that Conrad most clearly displays his view of life.

Jocelyn Baines remarks, “The essence of his art lies in the construction of a setting where a complex state of mind can be presented with the fullest emotional and dramatic effect.”<sup>1</sup> If this presentation were accompanied by analysis, one might conclude that Conrad’s interest was psychological rather than philosophical. But there is little analysis; rather the emphasis is on the “construction” and the presentation. For example, in “Heart of Darkness” no explanation is offered for the evil that enters Kurtz other than that he provided a suitably hollow receptacle for it, so that we are led to consider the nature of evil in the universe rather than the psychology or circumstances peculiar to one man.

In Victory, Conrad shows us Heyst’s stubborn scepticism invaded by love, but then followed by murder, suicide and chaos. We are prevented by Conrad’s deliberate arrangement of events from holding to traditional moral values: even those characters who are faithful and hardworking come to catastrophic ends. Such a manipulation of destiny implies a fixed set of attitudes on the part of the writer.

It may be worthwhile at the outset to describe in general terms what I believe that outlook was. I shall then go on to treat of the elements that comprise that outlook, and in the concluding section summarise my view of his attitudes.

In order broadly to relate Conrad’s views to those of established modes of thought, we may say that he was a pessimist with a catastrophic view of the universe, whose philosophy of action (or more accurately, defence) partook of Cynicism and Stoicism. His ethical views bear some resemblance to those of certain Christian–dualist writers (e.g., Dostoevsky, Melville, Hawthorne), and his perception of the visible world, and of Man, was deeply Manichaeian.

To Conrad, the difference between appearance and reality was that the former represents man's false view of the world as benevolent, such a view being born of and sustained by human weakness: sympathy, imagination, intellectualisation. Thus man fabricates an unreal world of appearances and is trapped within that world by his own illusions and pretences, whereas in reality there is no benevolent force operating. In the real world – the “destructive element,” as Stein terms it in Lord Jim – the forces that exist are evil. The little good that exists is the goodness of simple human virtue, but by the exercise of such virtue man can expect no reward. Love, friendship, happiness, pleasure, success, are all illusions man has constructed to mask the ugly reality of existence. In the end there is no loving God, no ultimate God, no salvation, no redemption, no perfectibility, no real progress, but only surcease into death. Most weakening is the practice of the Christian virtues of love, faith, hope and charity: man lives perpetually in a state of moral isolation.

Against the evil forces of the universe man has few weapons, and these are only defensive, less weapons than armour. Solidarity is one, and others are fidelity, hard work and honour. But the chief protection against evil is knowledge (gnosis), which is achieved through the successful passing of tests. Men can be ranked in a gnostic hierarchy by the measure of knowledge they display of the true nature of the universe and human illusion. Also operating in man's favour, for his guidance, is an ethical coding of light and dark elements which sometimes in Conrad seems more than merely symbolic.

The simple and unreflective man has the best chance of survival in this hostile world, but his is a triumph of ignorance. For the perceptive man, who must always be on his guard, nature is at best indifferent (and when it is passive it is only resting), but more often actively malevolent. As such, nature is the principal instrument of evil against mankind, and part of it is the process of reproduction itself (perpetuated by the enervating illusion of love), which increases the tormenting materiality of life.

Because every man is in reality isolated, and because human contact only breeds as well as feeds on illusion, man's best policy – if he is perceptive – is to live ascetically. The perceptive onlooker's only reasonable position is to derive some ironic pleasure from the mere spectacle before him.

It will readily be seen that, in view of these attitudes, Conrad's general outlook as thus described was absurdly out of line with the thinking and beliefs of his contemporaries. Indeed, one is hard pressed to think of any writer with whom he bears comparison, although there is close proximity to (and an undoubted influence from) the views of Schopenhauer. Such views are particularly inimical to those schooled in the Greek Hellenistic philosophical, or the Judaeo-Christian religious, tradition. Nevertheless, one recognises that the elements of such an outlook are rooted in this very tradition, even though their fusion would seem to be unique to Conrad.

That Conrad was a pessimist is not always agreed. There exists a group of critics who see him in romantic terms, and persist in finding in his works a note of romantic optimism. Even F.R. Leavis finds the end of Victory "unequivocally – a victory of life."<sup>2</sup> But the majority of modern critics do agree on Conrad's pessimism while disagreeing on the nature and sources of it. Interpretations depend on a bewildering variety of theories, ranging from the Freudian-Jungian to the socio-political. What they do not do, however, is attempt to explain the nature of Conrad's pessimism.

To label a writer a pessimist is usually to use the word in its loose, everyday sense: to say that he looks consistently on the dark or gloomy side of life. And such usage, even implying as it does a simplistic reversal of optimism, is normally adequate. But when we examine in detail a writer's basic philosophy of life some stricter definition is obviously required.

In its philosophical definition, pessimism is primarily the belief that reality is essentially evil. That is the extreme position of a pessimist, and the one which I believe Conrad held. The less extreme philosophical doctrine is that the 'evils' of life outweigh the happiness it affords. That is the more popular sense of the word when it is used of Conrad, and in this definition what is meant by 'evils' is in truth unhappiness rather than evil; thus there is implied no view of the universe as having a 'character' at all.

In literature, pessimism is primarily the view that the universe is intrinsically either evil or indifferent, and that life is consequently futile. This view is closely related to the primary philosophical definition given above. Related to the less extreme philosophical definition is the view that there is an inevitable preponderance of unhappiness over happiness in life.

The strict definition, in both philosophical and literary usage, is absolute, constant, and cosmic: the universe is seen as being at the mercy of a malignant – or at least uncaring – force (cf. Gloucester's speech in King Lear, IV.1.37: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.") Alternatively, it is seen as being driven by a blind, directionless, and irrational will, as in the writings of Von Hartman and Schopenhauer. Of these two views, it might be said that Thomas Hardy held the latter view and Conrad the former. In Conrad's view there is an acceptance of the active power of evil: it supposes a malevolent direction which at its worst is far from blind.

"Retrospective pessimism" – the doctrine that the world is undergoing an inevitable process of degeneration (cf. Spengler) – while far more common in literature than either of the forms of absolute cosmic pessimism, should not concern us but for the fact that it is held to be applicable to Conrad by those critics who feel that he was motivated by a nostalgic yearning for the past.

Closest to Conrad's view are the 'melancholy romantics,' such as Baudelaire and De Vigny. Hardy, on the other hand, adhered to a type of stoicism which emphasised the irony of human fate, and, unlike Conrad, he indicates a measure of benefit, pride or satisfaction in suffering.

Melville is sometimes linked with Conrad as a cosmic pessimist, and a comparison of their views may help to distinguish the nature of Conrad's pessimism. Like Conrad, Melville, "was concerned because he was unable to express all he meant, or even to bare all his deepest thoughts."<sup>3</sup> But his method of resolving this difficulty was as different from Conrad's as was the essential nature of his early pessimism. Conrad never hesitated over choosing a view of life, while in Moby Dick Melville surveys six possible conceptions of the nature of evil and the universe:

1. The transcendental view uniting God, man and nature in mutual perfection in a benevolent universe;
2. The Christian Dualist view that the universe is controlled by a benevolent God or force that permits evil in man and nature;
3. The Manichaeian view that good and evil forces are at war perpetually for universal control, with evil the more powerful;
4. The view that the universe or God is essentially evil;
5. The view that the universe is chaotic;
6. The view that the universe is orderly but godless, and is therefore indifferent to man.

Having weighed these possibilities in Moby Dick, Melville appears to waver between the second and the sixth, whereas Conrad's view was essentially the third, which is not incompatible with any of the final three. Melville put his fears about the truth of the sixth possibility most clearly in a letter to Hawthorne: "The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch."<sup>4</sup> Similar suspicions of a mechanistic deity appear later in the writings of G.B. Shaw and W.B. Yeats, as well as Conrad. The letter to Hawthorne was written in 1851, the year Moby Dick was published. Forty years later, with Billy Budd, it became clear that Melville's early pessimism had turned into tragic optimism. In that work Claggart, the personification of evil, triumphs but his death is sudden and he is forgotten; Captain Vere similarly dies and is forgotten, but Billy continues to be remembered. Melville seems to be saying that neither man nor nature can completely destroy the good, so the existence of good and evil can be accepted in the confidence that only the good is immortal.

Conrad's conclusions are uniformly the reverse of Melville's in Billy Budd. Indeed, it is those characters who are most good, or most innocent, who are most quickly forgotten. Stevie, Freya, Lena, Captain Anthony, Mrs. Gould, Antonia, Captain Mitchell, Singleton, all are rewarded by being forgotten. They meet the fate of Mr. Baker, the "model chief mate," who returns to find that "no one waited for him ashore . . . mother dead, father and two brothers drowned . . . sister married and unfriendly."<sup>5</sup> Evil wins, in this world and forever. As Jocelyn Baines remarks, ". . . it is useless to look for consolation in his work. It concedes no hope; the fate of those undisdained by destiny . . . is tragic, and triumph inevitably brings death."<sup>6</sup>

In comparing Conrad with Melville, one must acknowledge Melville's great reluctance to disbelieve in God and the truth of Christian doctrines. Conrad had no such difficulty. Christianity was "distasteful" to him: "I am not blind to its 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."<sup>7</sup> On another occasion he wrote, "It's strange how I always, from the age of fourteen, disliked the Christian religion, its doctrines, ceremonies and festivals."<sup>8</sup> But such disbelief was not wholly negative, for Conrad confessed to a "deep-seated sense of fatality governing this

man-inhabited world.”<sup>9</sup> Evil existed as a force in the world, and Conrad plainly believed both in its power and in the necessity for man to oppose it in his own interest. His conception of man’s ‘religious duty’ was simply the awareness of and opposition to evil.

Against man in his deadly struggle is the fact of his isolation. Most of Conrad’s characters are what Melville, in describing the crew of the ‘Pequod,’ called “isolatoes ... not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each isolate living on the separate continent of his own.”<sup>10</sup> Such a state is the antithesis of Donne’s ‘No man is an island.’ Adam Gillon, in his study of isolation in Conrad’s novels, says: “Thrown upon himself, the isolated man forever faces an impassable wall that separates him even from the people who stand closest to him.”<sup>11</sup> And Baines agrees that “... there is no invariable element that is either the cause of misfortune or else an essential ingredient of the tragedy: the emotional and moral isolation of the individual.”<sup>12</sup>

However, it is possible to agree that isolation is “an essential ingredient of the tragedy” while vehemently disagreeing that it is ever “the cause of misfortune” in Conrad. As a fact of the human condition, isolation may contribute to misfortune, but when Baines and Gillon insist on the importance of the theme of isolation they fail to see the larger picture: isolation may be a regrettable condition, but it is one that is incapable of alteration.

Of all Conrad’s protagonists, only Axel Heyst in Victory intentionally isolates himself. In all other cases the characters are isolated by the nature of their circumstances, either physically or psychologically. Heyst’s total and voluntary withdrawal from the world to a life of solitary asceticism is not the cause of his destruction. His doubt about the correctness of his action contributes to his unease, but it is his brief surrender of isolation that destroys him. His moment of weakness in sympathising with and then rescuing Lena brings as a direct consequence all the evils that befall him, and it is clear that had he continued to heed his father’s advice he might well have survived. That this has been so seldom perceived in Conrad criticism is due to a reluctance to admit to so deeply anti-social a conclusion. The point is reinforced by the example of Razumov, in Under Western Eyes, whose isolation is shattered by Victor Haldin. All Razumov, like Heyst, had wanted was to be left alone. The consequence of his fatal weakness in sympathising with Haldin is suffering and death.

It is too often overlooked when dealing with the isolated condition of Conrad's characters that none of any importance complains of his condition; indeed, some of the noblest, like Lord Jim, who "had no dealings but with himself," are loftily above such a concern. Conrad accepts the walls that separate people as natural, and at times of benefit. In particular, it is noticeable that 'pairs' of characters never break through to one another. Jim remains "inscrutable at heart" even to Marlow. Impenetrable barriers separate Alan Harvey and his wife in "The Return," and other couples are similarly alienated from each other: Yanko Goorall and Amy Foster, the Goulds, Heyst and Lena, the Verlocs, and Captain Anthony and Flora. But such isolation, however tragic, is inevitable. It is this theme of 'unconnectedness' that is at the centre of E.M. Forster's novels, but with Forster isolation is far from inevitable, provided there is a willingness to commune between people with "developed hearts." No such communion, or even communication, is allowed for by Conrad. When it appears to exist, as in Nostromo between Emilia and Charles Gould, it is proved to be merely an illusion, a self-deception.

Adam Gillon claims further that "Conrad's lonely heroes are an affirmation of human solidarity . . . man's isolation proves that no person with a conscience can live by himself."<sup>13</sup> What Gillon does not notice is that having a conscience – in the sense that Heyst and Razumov exercised theirs so fatally – is not a necessary requirement of the Conrad hero. When Jim allows Gentleman Brown to escape he has no thought of what may follow that decision, if not in Patusan then in the world outside Patusan. There is no evidence to support the view of Conrad's heroes as affirmations of human solidarity, for it is plain that the isolated, the men of conscience, and the men of no conscience, all are made to perish without reward. Although Conrad claimed to hope in his work to ". . . awaken that feeling of unavoidable solidarity,"<sup>14</sup> in practice he proclaimed the fact of isolation as inevitable. His wish was at odds with his outlook. And even the wish may be doubted in view of Conrad's picture of his fellow man:

L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. Le crime est une condition nécessaire de l'existence organisée. La société est essentiellement criminelle, – ou elle n'existerait pas. C'est l'égoïsme qui sauve tout, – absolument tout, – tout ce que nous abhorrons, tout ce que nous aimons.<sup>15</sup>

By its very nature, Conrad's outlook required him to be suspicious of all human progress, and especially of political or social progress. Living at a

time when most writers, and many of his friends, believed ardently in one political creed or another, Conrad adopted an attitude of aloofness. That the reasons for this attitude were moral rather than artistic is obvious from his letters to Cunninghame Graham and Wells. To Wells the social reformer Conrad wrote, "You don't care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not."<sup>16</sup> His pessimism prevented him from believing in social or political improvement. To those critics who nevertheless insist on reading into Conrad's works a political message, a suitable caution is provided by Joseph Retinger, a fellow Pole living in England, who wrote:

When it came to the principles of governing mankind he was not a very moral person, I am afraid, and with Montesquieu he shrugged his shoulders at the thought of a Chinese Mandarin killed thousands of miles away . . . he had no faith in politics as a factor which might bring any substantial reward to suffering humanity, because, he reasoned, politics cannot change human nature, which alone is the origin of good and evil.<sup>17</sup>

If we exclude the non-fictional pieces Conrad was pressed into writing, such as "Autocracy and War," the prevalent note in the "political" works, Under Western Eyes, and The Secret Agent, and the short stories "Heart of Darkness" and "An Outpost of Progress," is one of unflinching scepticism: human, social and political perfectibility are treated ironically as illusions: ridiculous at best and dangerous, as in The Secret Agent, at worst.

As an extension of such scepticism, Conrad also clearly questioned man's passionate attachment to life itself. Eighteen of his characters, most of them major, commit suicide: either out of despair when faced by the true nature of reality, or in offering themselves as a sacrifice to an ethical ideal, or simply by choosing to stop living. Conrad himself, as we now know, attempted suicide in Marseilles in 1878, and he is rivalled only by Ibsen in the number of suicides in his works. Never is there any hint of condemnation of suicides in Conrad; rather, one may easily see in his attitudes towards it a positive attraction, and there is in this none of the careless disdain for life that one finds in Sartre and Camus. The suicide of Axel Heyst is born of a repugnance for life, and a desire to end the illusions of living.

Few Conrad scholars have failed to notice the strangeness of his attitudes towards nature and physical love. In treating of the latter, most have analysed



Conrad's attitude as springing from a reticence compounded of prudishness and a distaste for the vulgar. Thomas Moser, however, believes that to Conrad love was the 'uncongenial subject,' and the bête noire of his artistic struggle. Moser notices that Conrad, particularly in the early works, sets his love scenes in natural backgrounds that exude either death and decay or sinister growth. Moser does not relate the association of passion and repellent nature to Conrad's outlook on life - rather, he sees the symptoms of a troubled psyche, and claims that "the inappropriate imagery used in connection with lovers suggests that their creator is so seriously confused that he cannot carry out his artistic intentions."<sup>18</sup>

One doubts that Conrad would have agreed that his imagery was "inappropriate." On the contrary, it was highly appropriate to his view of reality as essentially evil, and love as an illusory condition leading in its sexual aspect to a multiplication of earthly materia. This attitude is also not confined to the early works, or to those set in the tropics: in The Secret Agent the natural background is uniformly sinister and squalid, and in "The Sisters" manuscript, when Conrad describes in detail Stephen's retreat in Passy he speaks of the trees in the garden growing "as if in a dungeon . . . fragile and menaced by fertile grass which sprang up vigorous and conquering over the desolate remnant of beauty."<sup>19</sup>

Given that "impassable walls" exist between people, and that love is an illusion, and that this illusion is in fact enfeebling, it follows that sensual passion will be viewed as corrupting, and relegated to the order of things to be avoided. Both nature and love are treated as acceptable by Conrad only when they are passive. Activity signifies the presence of a malevolent force.

But if Conrad's outlook was made up of the above attitudes, his was nevertheless not a counsel of despair. Some few men, the Marlows and Steins of this world, achieve a level of perception that finally allows them to enjoy their passage on earth: they manage to come to terms with "a universe whose amazing spectacle is a moral end in itself."<sup>20</sup>

Such men stand in Conrad's books at the top of an ethical hierarchy. Baines writes of this fact with some degree of bafflement, "It is a strange theory that destiny should be reserved only for the elect . . . but that seems to be Conrad's contention in Lord Jim."<sup>21</sup> The elect can, as in Lord Jim, serve as instruction to other men of 'fine conscience.' "Perception and power,"

says the Athenian stranger in The Laws of Plato, "are not these two opposed in respect to ease and difficulty?" What is remarkable about the elect in Conrad's work is that their achievement is always a heightened perception, whereas other more worldly men seek only power. Perception of the true nature of reality, and oneself, leads Conrad's elect to a faith in the necessity of a few simple truths: man must be faithful above all to himself, and to the ideal standard that he sets up for himself. If that standard requires him also to be faithful to one or more others, then it is also part of his moral obligation to be so. The elect are armed with an instinctive sense of honour, and with the practical ability to devote themselves to particular tasks. In "Heart of Darkness," what prevents Marlow from succumbing to the evil projected by the dying Kurtz is his determined hard work in repairing and piloting the steamer. Thus the practical code of behaviour advocated by Conrad combines some of the elements of medieval chivalry with others of a Calvinist hue. Both the code itself, and the system of its transmission from gnostic elect to auditor, derive mainly from Conrad's uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski. In Bobrowski's letters, and especially in those addressed to "My Dear Pessimist," one finds a distillation of the philosophy of Stein in Lord Jim, culminating in the Bobrowski-Stein motto "Usque ad finem."

The 'answer' that Conrad provides implies always the question, "Why should men behave like this?" And that question is answerable only in terms of Conrad's own, highly individual perception of the visible world. Unless we are to hold that Conrad's vocabulary was very limited, we must concede that his insistence on images of light and darkness was intentional, and that his choice of imagery expressed (whether consciously or unconsciously) his view of the world. Many other writers have seemed also to view the world in light and dark terms, and many have employed such a symbolism in their works. But few have done this so obsessively, or at the apparent expense of style, or so consistently as Conrad does. His association of light and white images with Good, and dark and black images with Evil, amounts to a step well beyond the device of symbolic language: it indicates a possible conviction that they are literally the same - that light is Good, and darkness is Evil, rather than their being only representational.

It might be maintained that Conrad, as a result of his long years at sea and in the tropics, was morbidly sensitive to effects of gradations of light (as apparently the painter Daumier was), but this would scarcely account for the obvious ethical significance of light and dark imagery in his works. In "Heart

of Darkness," when Kurtz is brought aboard the steamer, Marlow says, "His was an impenetrable darkness . . . one evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes."<sup>22</sup> This is followed several paragraphs later, after the announcement of "Mistah Kurtz - he dead," with the puzzling summation of Marlow's feeling: he says, a propos of nothing and immediately after a remark on his loss of appetite, "There was a lamp in there - light, don't you know - and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark."<sup>23</sup> We can make nothing of such passages as these, and they are many, if we maintain a sophisticated literary distance from what Conrad seems to be saying, if we search pedantically for what the symbolic representations of light and darkness "stand for." In short, they may not symbolise, but be Good and Evil, and in such a Manichaen reading of the text the difficulty vanishes.

To return in this brief overview of Conrad's outlook to the nature of his absolute and cosmic pessimism, we may summarise his attitudes as follows:

Conrad seems to have viewed the world as composed of two elements: (1) Reality, or evil, as expressed in materiality, nature, and human fallibility; (2) Illusion - the 'dream' of life, as manifested in (a) the surface illusions of happiness, pleasure, success, and (b) the enfeebling illusions of love, sympathy, intellectualisation, and imagination.

Perched on the horns of his fate, man's life is a continual struggle against catastrophic annihilation that may come from within (Illusion) or without (Reality).

The end of life for men of 'fine conscience' is an ascetic detachment from it, and an attitude towards it of 'cold unconcern.' For such men, the only lasting satisfaction is that of having enjoyed the spectacle of existence while defending oneself: the simple enjoyment of the exhilaration of the chase that is life. The ideal state of perception or true gnosis is never fully attainable, but remains fixed as a goal in the minds of the elect and the potentially elect; the path towards it is singleminded attention to honour, fidelity and the practice of 'simple virtue.'

At the lowest level of this ethical hierarchy is the mass of humanity, which has neither the ambition nor the natural equipment for spiritual quest. But Conrad distinguishes three categories of ordinary (non-elect) mankind:

1. The instinctively good, who are unreflecting men of simple virtue (e.g., Singleton, MacWhirr, and Captain Whalley), and whom Conrad renders in imagery that is uniformly light or white;
2. The bulk of mankind which goes its way unheedingly, in connection with whom there is a neutral rendering, a mixture of light and dark;
3. The instinctively evil, who are virtually agents for the force of darkness, and who are always rendered in dark or black imagery (e.g., Heemskirk, Gentleman Brown, Kurtz), both in its physical and psychological aspects.

Finally, isolation is a natural condition of existence, both in its physical and psychological aspects.

Thus Conrad's pessimism, founded on the doctrine that reality is essentially evil, is far more thorough-going than the pessimism of Hardy or de Maupassant. The course of action he seems to advocate, while having much in common with the Cynical-Stoic tradition, differs from that advocated by Voltaire or Ibsen in its defensive character, and in its mocking of any possibility of transcending the difficulties of life. His dualism is pagan and absolute, thus separating him from the Christian Dualist writers, such as Dostoevsky, Melville and Hawthorne.

This is, it must be said, a different Joseph Conrad from the writer we have long been familiar with. In this view, it is no longer tenable to dismiss the descriptions of nature as 'purple patches,' or to sidestep the issue of his 'adjectival insistence' as his narrative becomes ever more densely philosophical. The Conrad that emerges when we recognise the uncompromising, and unique, form of his pessimism may prove to be less congenial than the Conrad we thought we knew. There are indeed elements in his outlook which are profoundly antisocial and even anti-life, but we should recognise that they spring from venerable sources. They have none of that taint that attaches to the works of, say, Céline and Genet, whose anti-humanity was the expression of active rebellion against the very society that produced them. At the very least, we may be able at last to use "that portentous term, philosophy"<sup>24</sup> of Conrad, as it always deserved to be used, in our continuing attempt to unravel the meaning of his works.

## NOTES

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