

**POSTCOLONIAL CONRAD**  
PARADOXES OF EMPIRE

TERRY COLLITS

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**Terry Collits**

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# Preface

I have spent the past four years writing this book. At the millennium a centenary study of Joseph Conrad's colonial novels seemed not only appropriate but also a way for me to bring together thoughts accumulated over many years. These had often been formed, I realized, in response to changing conditions both in the world and in the ways in which literary texts were discussed in universities.

The process of writing this book, I discovered, was both complex and collective, and took two particular forms. First I enjoyed generous encouragement and input from colleagues and friends. Then in revisiting now remote times and places, I remembered various discussions, debates, seminars and supervisions – some pleasurable, others annoying, all passionate. These interacted productively with more recent comments on my work from critical readers and conference respondents.

The first three people I want to thank were all products of that 'Cambridge English' which occupies a substantial part of the book. They provided me with a vicarious experience of that influential institution. Very soon after undertaking this project I received strong support and advice from Terry Eagleton, with whom I have long had fine points of agreement and disagreement about Conrad. He read and commented in detail on two early drafts, and provided substantial input that was warm, constructive and sometimes exacting. Perhaps sympathetic to a diffident would-be writer, Howard Jacobson insisted that I should go ahead with the book, and gave me help and advice for making it a palpable reality. Much earlier, when I was an undergraduate of his at the University of Sydney in the 'Sixties', Howard had introduced me to the sheer pleasure of reading Conrad's writing. Another close friend and peerless reader of Jane Austen, John Wiltshire, had come (like Howard) straight from Downing College, Cambridge to a lecturing appointment in Sydney in the 1960s. His influence in my undergraduate career was decisive. One of the pleasant side-effects of writing this book was the opportunity it

gave me to enjoy once more with John serious discussions about literature, this time at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

The form of the book, however, derives mainly from my experiences in the English Department of the University of Melbourne in the 1980s. Like many students and colleagues at Melbourne in that decade, I benefited from the encouragement, advice and knowledge of Simon During, who joined that Department in 1982. We needed confidence to negotiate those new discourses that were beginning to impinge on the humanities. Teachers and students alike had to completely rethink the terms of their discipline, and often abandon or radically change proven and successful habits of talking and thinking about books and ideas. In 1978, Howard Felperin had been appointed to the Robert Wallace Chair of English at Melbourne previously occupied by the Leavisite S. L. Goldberg. As a result of Howard's appointment, the University of Melbourne housed the first 'traditional' English Department in Australia to engage seriously with critical theory. Much of my discussion of Conrad's novels of imperialism is shadowed by the narrative of the disciplinary changes, at once threatening and exciting, that happened at Melbourne.

More recently, Leela Gandhi and Pauline Nestor joined the group of people who – quite independently of one another – told me I should 'write more'. Along with Dick Freadman and Jenny Gribble, who were my first Australian readers, they helped to instil the self-belief I needed in order to sustain this project. Since then I have enjoyed the disinterested encouragement and advice of Conradian and postcolonial scholars further afield. They make up a kind of international club I hope to belong to. Their UK members include, first and foremost, Keith Carrabine, as well as Robert Hampson, Allan Simmons, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and Gurminder Bhambra; in France, Anne Luyat above all, and then (partly through her firmly persuasive 'interventions'), Jacques Darras, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, Nathalie Martinière, and Véronique Pauly; in the United States, Peter Mallios, who showed me that at least one American shares my warm affection for *Victory*; and in India, Udaya Kumar, Sambudha Sen, C. Vijayashree and M. Asaduddin, in whose company I have rehearsed sections of the book over the past three years, and who (with many others) have provided the most stimulating milieu for academic exchange I have enjoyed for a long time. I would particularly like to thank my son, Brendan Muller, not only for helping me to navigate Paris but also for hours of conversation about new world orders and related matters.

My biggest intellectual debt is to the wonderful students I have taught. Postgraduate supervisions and undergraduate classes both at Melbourne and at La Trobe have generated most of the ideas in this book. Sometimes when reading their written work I begrudged the fact that my

students had more time than I did to keep abreast of theory. Secretly harbouring a desire to have a go myself, I would occasionally resent giving them feedback. In overcoming those frustrations, I recognized that two postgraduate students in particular taught me more about postcolonialism than I managed to teach them. In their different ways, Andrew McCann at Melbourne and Ira Raja at La Trobe also took me to India, and opened up the imperial horizon that I needed to comprehend properly the field I was venturing into.

No one has contributed as directly to the making of this book as my former colleague at Melbourne, Ken Ruthven. I have been fortunate to receive the tireless attention and eagle-eyed intelligence of the best sub-editor I could think of. Through the gruelling last stages of the book, Ken became much more than an editor: he was my ideal reader, teacher and moral supporter at those moments when the project might have stalled.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my wife and partner, Tessa Jones, and not only for the obvious reasons why writers often thank those closest to them. I have certainly learnt just how much domestic forbearance, support and joint commitment it takes for a sizeable book to be written. But I also owe Tessa thanks for a very special favour. From her own professional base as a psychologist, she introduced me to Jacques Lacan by once encouraging me to attend a seminar given by Russell Grigg. Lasting the best part of a year, it was devoted to reading slowly Lacan's seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. That brought me into contact with the Melbourne-based Australian Centre for Psychoanalysis. After that, Tessa regularly provided me with intriguing suggestions in response to such questions as why, in *Lord Jim*, Brierly commits suicide but Jim doesn't. This book would not have taken the directions it has without those interventions. Its shortcomings – of which I am acutely aware – are entirely my own responsibility.

# Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of parts of some of the chapters appeared in the following journals or books: Chapter 4 in *Arena* (70, 1985); Chapters 4 and 9 in *Textual Practice* (volume 3, number 3, 1989); Chapter 4 in *Southern Review* (volume 22, number 2, 1989); Chapter 5 in C. Tiffin and A. Lawson, editors, *De-Scribing Empire* (1994); Introduction and Chapter 6 in *L'Époque Conradienne* (volume 29, 2003); Chapter 6 in *International Journal of the Humanities* (volume 1, 2003); Chapter 7 in *L'Époque Conradienne* (volume 30, 2004); Chapter 8 in *The Conradian* (volume 29, number 2, 2004). I would like to thank the editors and/or publishers for permission to draw on this material.

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from Joseph Conrad's writings are from the Collected Edition (1946–55) and indicated simply by page numbers. Those from Sigmund Freud are from the Standard Edition (1953–74) and indicated by SE and the appropriate volume and page numbers.

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# Introduction

## The Conradian moment

In 1948 Bertolt Brecht urged us to ‘drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own’ (Brecht 1964: 190). Nearly half a century later, however, Slavoj Žižek was to declare that ‘there is more truth in the later efficacy of a text, in the series of its subsequent readings, than in its supposedly “original” meaning’ (Žižek 1989: 214). This book will address the hermeneutic problem framed by these two statements: from our perspective in the present, what is the best way of relating to writings from the past? More specifically, it will engage with some serious problems of literary interpretation and evaluation that have arisen in postcolonial studies. This seemingly straightforward enterprise, however, quickly encounters difficulties. For a start, ‘interpretation’ and ‘evaluation’ have been intensely, even bitterly, contested categories for at least eighty years, which is virtually the whole time during which ‘English’ has purported to be an academic discipline. And ‘postcolonialism’ itself is already stricken with a definitional and ethical self-consciousness – about its aims, methods and locations – that could prove permanently disabling. Nor is the task made easier by focusing on Joseph Conrad, who not only wrote in the colonial period (and was thus subject to all of its unresolved contradictions), but is also one of the West’s canonical authors. More seriously, one of Africa’s most famous postcolonial novelists, Chinua Achebe, has plausibly labelled him a racist. In this respect, the very notion of a ‘postcolonial Conrad’ sounds paradoxical in the extreme.

In the early stages of what came to be called postcolonialism, Conrad was continuously invoked, either for praise or blame, as central to the enterprise. For a time *Heart of Darkness* was treated almost as an ur-text in the new disciplinary field. Conrad’s canonical status was probably enhanced rather than damaged by those controversies, though nowadays he is not cited quite so often in postcolonial criticism. Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, continues to generate voluminous publications. Yet it

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drifts a little unsteadily, anxious about the authenticity and relevance of its presumed 'politics'.

This book does not pretend to resolve all those problems. Its more modest aim is to survey the shifting contexts in which Conrad has been read for more than a century. By relocating his novels of imperialism in the discursive field of postcolonial studies we can review the terms and conditions of political criticism in our own time. We now know that a different place awaited Conrad after F. R. Leavis had located him in *The Great Tradition* (1948). It seems a good time to ask what kind of life awaits Conrad beyond the cultural politics of the late twentieth century.

The first impression conveyed in everyday uses of the term 'moment' is of something ephemeral, fleeting and elusive – however poignant or potent it might also happen to be. Literary historians use the term to name a significant turning point marked by a grand design and a particular figure who is the agent of change. An early example of this now fashionable usage is Patrick Cruttwell's *The Shakespearean Moment* (1954) whose subtitle (*and its place in the poetry of the 17th century*) captures perfectly this dual function (Cruttwell 1960: 1). Cruttwell's Shakespeare is not merely a great poet but the one who made a difference to the literary and cultural possibilities of the century that followed. A century after Conrad's novels first appeared, it is now possible to assign to their author a place in twentieth-century literature which is structurally similar to the one Cruttwell granted Shakespeare in the seventeenth – leaving aside for the purposes of this exercise the evaluative question of their relative stature.

Cruttwell's mid-century book on Shakespeare sharply reminds us of those institutional and cultural changes that have radically affected the ways in which canonical writers are currently read in universities. Those seismic shifts have so altered the conditions of reading and interpretation that no centenary study of Conrad's colonial novels can avoid the problem posed by different interpretations of his fictions at radically different moments. We can no longer assume, as Cruttwell did, that the novels 'themselves' are the natural focus of study. Both the historicism of Brecht and Žižek's hermeneutic inclusiveness arise from a common recognition that texts change over time, so that we have long since lost the unitary notion of 'the text itself'. Texts too have their moments, and however variegated are the patterns these changes have left, their accumulation gradually comes to constitute an interpretative tradition. The present study therefore will not only re-read Conrad's colonial novels ('themselves') but also map and analyse the interpretative tradition they have generated. By deploying all the meanings and ambiguities in current uses of the term 'moment', it will argue the importance of being critically aware of other and sometimes neglected moments in the reception of Conrad's fiction.

Like other writers whose literary reputations extended significantly beyond their own lives, Conrad has been read so radically differently at different times that it is tempting to talk of different Conrads. The differences may derive as much from the reader's angle of perception as from intrinsic qualities of the novels. One way of dealing with such hermeneutic challenges is to situate Conrad's intriguing texts in other histories of reception and interventionist reading. No other novelist of his time was affected so drastically as Conrad was by those shifting academic, literary, political, cultural and global changes across the twentieth century. His colonial novels represent – at the very moment of high imperialism – the most significant encounter recorded in canonical literature between Europe and Europe's Other.

### **The elusive object**

Rather than attempting a comprehensive and chronological survey of Conrad's reputation in the twentieth century, I intend to examine four distinct moments in the reception of his fiction which are arguably four different aspects of the Conradian moment, more widely understood. The first is the originary moment, the time when the novels were first published. As Žižek reminds us, however, to seek the imagined pure communication between pristine text and perfectly placed first reader is, to say the least, a problematical endeavour. Strictly speaking, such a moment either does not exist or, if it does, cannot be recovered. Nevertheless, the historicizing ambition of most Conrad studies, this one included, is to recover that lost time. The second moment to be considered is Conrad's canonization as one of England's great writers. Championed from the late 1930s by F. R. Leavis, who was to become by mid-century the most influential literary critic in the English-speaking world, Conrad achieved posthumous academic recognition at a time when his reputation in the places where 'serious literature' was valued was beginning to wane. The third moment was an effect of the cultural turmoil of the 'Sixties', which was characterized by wars of National Liberation, revolutionary hope (sexual in the West, political/cultural in the East), and a French-inspired epistemology known as critical theory. These were just some of the 'events' that produced the postcolonial moment of a writer now perceived to be ambivalent about colonialism: was Conrad for or against European imperialism, and in his representation of non-European peoples was he even-handed or in fact deeply racist? Finally there is the shadowy and reflective present moment, marked by attempts like my own to absorb the accumulated discoveries of the interpretative tradition and to negotiate Conrad anew.

If the mutually contradictory remarks of Brecht and Žižek are read dialectically (against one another rather than as cancelling one another

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out), they present complementary perspectives on a single problem: namely, the status of different meanings assigned at different times to the same literary text.<sup>1</sup> It raises questions of validity and truth while acknowledging that a range of plausible meanings might be assigned to a particular text. Brecht is arguing (perhaps surprisingly) *against* a fashion for modernizing productions of older dramas, on the grounds that they occlude one of the chief pleasures of such works, which derive from the differences produced by their historical distance from us. Žižek, on the other hand, invokes Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to release that plenitude of meaning and truth in a writer's work that is proscribed by a hermeneutic tradition that prioritizes some original and irretrievable truth.

This is clearly not a recent problem. Located in different halves of the twentieth century, both writers raise questions of historicity that did not require the theoretical revolution of the 1960s for their enunciation. They were present, for example, in T. S. Eliot's famous observation in 1919 about the 'historical sense', a faculty which 'involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (T. S. Eliot 1932: 14). Unavoidably, they will dog my own project. If we were to hold strictly to Žižek's dictum we might expect to discover more important truths in postcolonial interpretations of Conrad than his novels could have exhibited in their imagined originary moments – or even (dare we say) than Conrad himself could have dreamed of. Brecht, on the other hand, might then make us wonder whether postcolonial critiques of Conrad are merely a recent but no less disturbing instance of that relentless erasure of the pastness of the past which weakens our historical sense and leads to a dangerous blandness. For readers of Conrad nowadays the difficulty is compounded by the rapid changes during the twentieth century to the discourses in which the dialectics of past and present were debated. These touched the root of Conradian thematics.

In the very last year of the century, a remarkable event occurred that neatly illustrates this difficulty. This was the screening of a veritable postcolonial film of Jane Austen's classic novel, *Mansfield Park* (1814). Theoretically, the simplest problem posed by the movie is the old chestnut about whether or not the film is 'true to' Austen's novel. This question, however, does not assume a rigid notion of truth. Literary critics have long recognized that *Mansfield Park* deals with complex shifts in the class formation of Britain on the eve of its imperial greatness. It even came to address the fact that the Antiguan estates owned by Sir Thomas Bertram and worked by slaves constitute the stubbornly material foundations of all those anxieties about morals and manners that preoccupy the novel.<sup>2</sup> The interpretative tradition of Austen's novel was thus not radically affected by the important shift in the 1960s from historically and politically neutral discussions of moral values in Jane

Austen (the F. R. Leavis tradition) to the historically specific analysis of values advocated by Raymond Williams.<sup>3</sup> For a start, each approach could claim to be justified by the novel 'itself'. *Mansfield Park* certainly alludes to such controversial contemporary problems as the slave trade; on the other hand, the fact that these references are perfunctory and marginal might be seen to validate older and less avowedly political readings, which aim at fidelity to the novel's own perceived balance of forces. From their different points of view, both historicists and idealists could claim to be avoiding the distortions of anachronism.<sup>4</sup>

What is certain is that neither Leavis' nor Williams' discussions of Austen in any way foreshadowed the 1999 film's interpretation of *Mansfield Park*. It is notoriously difficult to compare a novel with the film version of it. But even allowing for the fact that the sexual revolution made visible what Austen merely alluded to – though, importantly, she did so: Austen was no Victorian – the film's two climactic scenes are so shocking as to take interpretation to the edge of plausibility. That is provided we regard the movie as a version of Austen's novel and not something else. The first of these scenes is Fanny Price's discovery of obscene sketches made by her cousin Tom of his own and his father's experiences with black women in Antigua: is this the dark underside to the strict and normative moral code of *Mansfield Park*? The second is Fanny's personal encounter with the trauma of sex, when she inadvertently opens a bedroom door and gets a back view of her wooer, Henry Crawford, bonking – no other word quite catches the effect – her married cousin, Maria Bertram.<sup>5</sup> My verbal summary of these scenes produces, of course, a further distancing, not only from the novel 'itself' (which records neither of them) but also from interpretations supportive of the view that this film is decidedly *not* 'Jane Austen'. For one thing, talk about 'dark undersides' and 'the trauma of sex' evokes anachronistically the psychoanalytic literature of the twentieth century. Such terms raise the question of what value there can be in positing the existence of a textual unconscious in a novel written nearly one hundred years before Sigmund Freud produced that category of thought. Without invoking Freud's own metaphorical allusions to the 'dark continent' of feminine sexuality, it might still be possible to argue that what the movie of *Mansfield Park* reveals as the dark and obscene underside of Austen's novel is none other than Conrad's 'heart of darkness', whose central metaphor entered twentieth-century culture world-wide. Such a bizarre reading would unexpectedly support Leavis' claim that the great tradition of the English novel stretches from Austen to Conrad.

One critic who did entertain such thoughts about Austen's novel was Edward Said, whose writings instigated the third Conradian moment. Said regards the Atlantic slave trade as directly relevant to Austen. In pursuit of 'a fascinatingly expanded dimension' to *Mansfield Park*, Said

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takes his historical bearings from the colonial context of Austen's England, and his cultural critique from what came to be known as postcolonialism (Said 1993: 100). He makes explicit the political implications of such re-readings: 'Perhaps then Austen, and pre-imperialist novels generally, will appear to be more implicated in the rationale for imperialistic expansion than at first sight they have been' (ibid.). Those 'implications' would eventually dominate the third phase of Conrad's twentieth-century journey, and determine his place in the postcolonial world.

Such matters create major problems for literary historians at the turn of the millennium. That my chosen author is not Austen but Conrad – the yoking of whose name to imperialist expansion is no longer even remotely controversial – does not settle the hermeneutic problem raised by Žižek. Literary scholars have long been divided on the status of the 'text itself'. In 1864 Matthew Arnold opened his famous essay on 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' by naming as the most basic aim of criticism and of most other knowledge 'to see the object as in itself it really is' (Arnold 1964: 9). The extreme essentialism of this stance may now seem breathtaking. Yet Arnold's belief that the proper object of critical contemplation is the literary text in its integrity still determines most empirical studies of Conrad's work and, more negatively, encourages the growling conservative impatience with newfangledness of every kind.<sup>6</sup>

The American Marxist Fredric Jameson is a literary theorist and historian whose writings exhibit an extraordinary openness to new discourses, whether they are political, aesthetic, or academic. Conveniently for my purposes, Jameson has also written one of the most impressive essays on Conrad. He argues that the question of literary history and interpretation involves choosing between two options. 'As the traditional dialectic teaches us', he writes,

the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more tangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things.

(Jameson 1981: 9)

Here the hermeneutic difficulty is not so much resolved as put to one side by Jameson's tactic. Because *The Political Unconscious* chooses the 'path of the subject', it seeks to understand Conrad by working its way through those dense filters of interpretative practices and ideological discourses in whose swirls the novels 'themselves' are endlessly caught. Yet for all his deftness in admitting that his selection of categories and

materials is somewhat arbitrary, Jameson neatly sidesteps the problem of the ontological status of Conrad's novels as objects for analysis.

For Žižek, the irresolvable problem created by Jameson's distinction highlights the need for a radical realignment of those objects that are designated literary works. In terms of the Lacanian orientation Žižek writes from, the adjustment he proposes corresponds with the shift from an Enlightenment conception of the object of knowledge to the new 'subject-object' of psychoanalysis. He counters the supposedly 'naïve reading' which claims 'immediate access to the true meaning' of a text by arguing that such a moment does not exist (Žižek 1989: 213–15). The fact is that, right from the start, 'a number of mutually exclusive readings claiming access to the true meaning' always co-exist. He does not simply deny the existence of an original true meaning; he goes on to argue that the interpretative tradition itself offers a way through the impasse of mutually exclusive possibilities. His formulation is worth quoting in full:

[T]his problem of the 'true', 'original' meaning of *Antigone* – that is, the status of *Antigone*-'in-itself', independent of the string of its historical efficacy – is ultimately a pseudo-problem: to resume the fundamental principle of Gadamer's hermeneutics, there is more truth in the later efficacy of a text, in the series of its subsequent readings, than in its supposedly 'original' meaning.

(ibid.: 214)

A happy inconsistency about Jameson complicates the debate that I have represented somewhat misleadingly as a matter of opposite sides. For one of the best examples of Žižek's proposition is none other than Jameson's own comprehensive 'metacommentary' on *Lord Jim* in *The Political Unconscious*. By any measure, Conrad's text is here the primary object of analysis, although not as something that lies outside history. He discusses *Lord Jim* in terms of categories that were contemporaneous with the moment of the novel's composition, such as Max Weber's analysis of reification. But his interpretative repertoire also includes other discourses unavailable to Conrad's first readers, such as the narratological theories of A. J. Greimas (Greimas 1987). Jameson does not exactly aim to see the object (Conrad's novel) 'as in itself it really is'; nor does he ignore the historicity of Conrad's text in order to make it the occasion of a freewheeling meditation on the nature of things. Jameson's rigorous method requires him to historicize not only the text but also the interpretative codes and methodologies that inform its reading. Those codes themselves thereby become objects for critique, resulting in an ever more inclusive practice of cultural hermeneutics. My construction of Conrad has been deeply influenced by the methodology of Jameson's project in *The Political Unconscious*.

Žižek's restatement of Gadamer's proposition concerning the nature of textual interpretation also incorporates a structure of analysis derived from the French Freudian, Jacques Lacan. From a Lacanian perspective, that elusive and always-out-of-reach moment of pristine meaning which still entices literary scholars is uncannily like the lost object of desire, which is driven into the unconscious when the Oedipal conflict is resolved. That resolution (which is also a repression) is in Freud's account our moment of access into language, meaning and culture. As Žižek argues, the idea of a pre-existent and pristine meaning that escapes the vicissitudes of interpretation, like that other object of desire, lingers only as a lost illusion.<sup>7</sup>

One way of testing this theory is to examine Conrad's record of his own early experience of authorship with the Lacanian account in mind. A significant anecdote in this respect is recorded in Conrad's autobiographical *A Personal Record* (1912) touching these very problematics (15–18). It is the story of his first reader, who appears to be that impossibly naïve (yet percipient) reader Žižek thinks does not exist. Conrad relates how, for a number of years, he had carted the manuscript of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, around with him, even on the famous Congo journey that provided the material for *Heart of Darkness*. But not until he voyages to Australia as Captain of the *Torrens* does he find among the passengers his first reader of the novel: a somewhat spectral 'young Cambridge man' to whom Conrad had nervously shown his manuscript. The would-be writer of fiction had to wait several days for the judgement that would confirm or deny his literary ambition. Eventually the manuscript is returned:

He tendered it to me with a steady look but without a word. I took it in silence. He sat down on the couch and still said nothing. I opened and shut a drawer under my desk, on which a filled-up log-slate lay wide open in its wooden frame waiting to be copied into the sort of book I was accustomed to write with care, the ship's log-book. I turned my back squarely on the desk. And even then Jacques never offered a word. "Well, what do you say?" I asked at last. "Is it worth finishing?" This question expressed exactly the whole of my thoughts.

"Distinctly," he answered in his sedate veiled voice, and then coughed a little.

"Were you interested?" I inquired further, almost in a whisper.

"Very much!"

(16–17)

That's all we are given. Like the Freudian unconscious, or 'falling in love', this pristine first reading remains opaque. Conrad's well-chosen