



# Essays on Conrad

**Ian Watt**

*foreword by*  
**Frank Kermode**

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# ESSAYS ON CONRAD

IAN WATT

*Stanford University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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This collection first published by Cambridge University Press 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Set in 11/12.5 pt Baskerville No. 2 [GC]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Watt, Ian P.

Essays on Conrad / Ian Watt.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 78007 1 - ISBN 0 521 78387 9 (paperback)

1. Conrad, Joseph, 1857-1924 - Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PR6005.O4 Z9232 2000

823'.912-dc21 99-056318

ISBN 0 521 78007 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 78387 9 paperback

## Foreword

Frank Kermode

Readers of the final chapter of this book may find it surprising that the man who spent years labouring on the River Kwai should have returned after the war to an inconceivably different way of life and immediately embarked on a distinguished academic career. Little more than a decade later he published *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957). After the war years many of Watt's contemporaries, even if they had not spent them in painful captivity, found it difficult to adjust their lives to more sedate civilian routines. What readers of this collection as a whole will observe is that the strength of mind – the character – displayed in the final chapter also informs Watt's critical writing. The persistence of this quality goes some way to explaining Watt's devotion, over many years, to Conrad – an honourable stoicism that shuns illusion without being an enemy of pleasure, especially the pleasure of fine technical and aesthetic discriminations.

In *The Rise of the Novel* Watt maintained that realism, as he defined it, was the quality that distinguished the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from all previous fiction. Before that period there were of course thousands of fictions, but the novel, as we know it, became possible only when the general acceptance of certain social, economic and philosophical assumptions, and the coming into existence of a literate, middle-class and predominantly Protestant audience, made possible such extraordinary works as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). Watt discriminates between the kind of realism exemplified by Defoe, with his unmatched power to persuade readers by minute presentation of detail that what they are reading is true, and a richer realism that concerns itself also with personality and civilized values generally. This variety of realism is essential to the kind of writing that we agree to call the novel. It is not merely a matter of making the narrative seem authentic as to local and period detail; it is also a matter of establishing the authenticity, the complex art and humanity, of the work as a whole.

Watt's view of the rise of the novel has often been contested, most recently and most emphatically by Margaret Anne Doody in her vast book *The True Story of the Novel* (1996). Her title itself indicates dissent from Watt, whose version of that story is, she claims, untrue. Her argument is that the novel has a continuous history of 2,000 years; that form of fiction for which Watt reserves the appellation 'novel' cannot, by his own criteria of realism, or indeed by any other criteria, be distinguished from the romance, a category into which most of that earlier writing is conventionally placed. That the English invented the novel in the eighteenth century is 'a literary lie'. Ms Doody is a strong feminist, and might want to add that the claim is also a masculine lie. The interest of her remarkable book, in the present context, is that she needs to tell the whole history of fiction in the West, and assert that its genius is entirely female, in order to undermine the forty-year-old contentions of Watt. I do not believe she succeeds.

It is not a simple coincidence that Doody's book belongs to the modern era of 'magic realism'. It seems unlikely that works in that mode, much admired of late, would meet Watt's criteria, and although I am only guessing I will say I believe he would not admire them. Doubtless it should be admitted that more permissive notions of realism now prevail both in practice and in literary theory, and it would not be beyond the wit of man (or woman) to devise reasons to show that this alteration of focus has been brought about by the social and economic changes in our world since 1957. Nevertheless *The Rise of the Novel* is a landmark, one of the very few works of modern literary criticism that may be said to have achieved classic status. As early as 1951 Watt published an important and provocative essay stressing the economic significance of *Robinson Crusoe*, so it can be said that for the better part of half a century practically any serious discussion of this book, and the eighteenth-century novel, has had to establish a relationship, even if questioning or dissenting, with Watt's work.

After resuming his interrupted career, he taught at UCLA and Harvard, at Cambridge and at the new University of East Anglia, before settling at Stanford, where he eventually became the first Director of the Stanford Humanities Center. A good deal of his published work has been on the period considered in his first book, but a vital supplement to Watt's bibliography is his work on Joseph Conrad, which culminated in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979). This exemplary work was to have been followed by another treating Conrad's writings in the twentieth century,

but it now appears, most regrettably, that we shall not see this second volume. However, the present collection contains a number of essays and lectures on Conrad, most of them on the later part of the novelist's career.

Watt has long been acknowledged to be among the finest and most learned of Conrad's expositors. The long and carefully researched chapter on Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, is a fine example of his powers as biographer and critic. His observations on Conrad's early influences, and on his command of English (a topic that still requires attention) has not, I think, been bettered. Always attentive to what other critics have to say, he can here be seen adjudicating between angry commentators, himself perfectly composed and conspicuously true to his own Conradian idea of virtue.

When Conrad writes of Singleton, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, that 'he steered with care', Watt comments: 'It is the climactic recognition of our utter and yet often forgotten dependence, night and day . . . on the labors of others' – and he adds that 'there is perhaps a moral for the critic here: for, in making us look up, briefly, to Singleton at the wheel, Conrad gives us a moment of vision in which, from the height of our modish attachment to ever-developing discriminations, we are compelled to affirm our endless, intricate, and not inglorious kinship with those who cannot write'. Another such exemplar is MacWhirr in *Typhoon*, a character both funny and admirable, and an instance of 'the paradoxical fact that superiors who are in many respects inept can nevertheless be very good at the job; indeed, their very lack of interest or skill in conversation and books, the main values of verbal culture, may even have left them freer to do in a more single-minded way the one thing that they have trained themselves to do'. One might say without much fear of contradiction that Watt learned this Conradian moral when in uniform or in the prison camp.

His fidelity to the spirit of the author, whom he tells us he first admired at the age of twelve, enables him, in the chapter on *Heart of Darkness*, to speak temperately on complex issues of colonialism, and, in the chapter 'Conrad, James and *Chance*', to settle the question of how the two great men stood on the vexed problem of James's disapproval of *Chance*. What is most striking is Watt's ability to *think* with Conrad, and he has that ability not only by reason of his literary intelligence but also from his conviction, strengthened at Kwai, that human society, horribly imperfect though it is, depends, if it is not to be even worse, on the devotion and courage of people honestly doing their jobs, whether commanding or commanded, whether writers or not.

And here one must glance with admiration at the chapter on the River Kwai. Watt is interested in the truth of that matter, but also in the myth that has been developed from it. What the world now thinks about the building of that bridge depends on a film that depends on, and departs from, a novel which is itself far from describing things as they really were. It seems that the Japanese had more prisoners than they could handle, and so the prisoners themselves took over the business of disciplined production. It is recorded that their lives were painful and close to desperation, but the point is made without reference to the writer's own discomforts, save in that he was one of them. They had to settle for the kind of life available. There was no chance of escape. They organized their own police force, conscious of a need for order of some kind. One officer, especially efficient, found ways to make their lot easier, and, inevitably, also expedited the building of the enemy railway bridge.

By chance a French writer came to hear about this episode, and based a novel on it. He seems to have represented it as primarily a comment on the way modern technology 'destroys human meanings and purposes'. And he began the transformation of the actual efficient officer into the character played by Alec Guinness in David Lean's movie. The film was wholly false to the situation of the prisoners; it was colonialist, it misrepresented the kind of bridge involved, and, contrary to the facts, blew it up. Watt was there; and he has since that bad time gone back to the bridge, and can say what happened subsequently to the railway. He prefers reality to myth, unlike the movie-makers and unlike their audiences.

Why did the myth take over? The answer is Conradian: 'the deep blindness of our culture both to the stubbornness of reality and to the continuities of history'. That blindness encouraged the public to accept the movie-fantasy of Nicholson's unconquerable British individualism, his triumph over his powerful but racially inferior captors. Watt believes our whole society is prone to distort the truth by such mythical thinking. It fails to observe that the world will not do its bidding, that the best and only decent form of conduct for the prisoners, as now for us, was 'work and restraint – two of Conrad's imperatives'. These imperatives have always operated powerfully in Watt's world, and are the enemies of self-indulgent myth. It is to be noted that he nowhere dwells on his own work and suffering; his concern is entirely with facts and false interpretations.

His interest in myth, and its part in the creation of undesirable social and individual fantasy, led to the writing of his most recent book, *Myths*

of *Modern Individualism* (1996), a study of Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe as myths that have acquired a special resonance in modern culture. Of course they did not have that function originally, but were recreated to suit a more modern and individualist sensibility than they at first possessed. One could read this new collection of essays as a sober and unillusioned defence of the principle of unmythicized reality as it can be studied in the novels of Conrad. He too has his fantasizing individualists – his Haldins, his nihilist professors, his corrupt anarchists – but he has also his MacWhirrs and Singletons, the men without conversation, who don't write and rarely read, but who command and are commanded, and do the work of the world. Like Conrad, Watt admires such men. Rarely has a critic shared so fully the virtues of his author.



## *Acknowledgements*

Copyright in all essays rests with Ian Watt. His essays are reproduced from the following sources: 'Joseph Conrad: alienation and commitment' (Cambridge University Press); the introduction to *Almayer's Folly* (ed. Ian Watt, Cambridge University Press); 'Conrad criticism and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*' (*Nineteenth-Century Fiction*); 'Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the critics' (*North Dakota Quarterly*); 'Comedy and Humour in *Typhoon*' (Murisa International); 'The political and social background of *The Secret Agent*' (The Macmillan Press); the introduction to 'The Secret Sharer' (The Limited Editions Club); 'Conrad, James and *Chance*' (Methuen & Co.); 'Story and idea in Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*' (*Critical Quarterly*); 'The decline of the decline: notes on Conrad's reputation' (*Stanford Slavic Studies*); 'Around Conrad's grave in the Canterbury cemetery – a retrospect' (Radopi, Amsterdam); '"The Bridge over the River Kwai" as myth' (*Berkshire Review*).

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## CHAPTER I

### *Joseph Conrad: alienation and commitment*

The doubts of the critics about the whole history-of-ideas approach are understandable enough: one way of not experiencing *King Lear* is to underline a few passages containing recognizable ideas, and to make the gratifying reflexion that the Great Chain of Being is really there. The search for such portable intellectual contents as can be prised loose from a work of imagination is likely to deflect attention from what it can most characteristically yield, in exchange for a few abstract ideas whose natures and inter-relationships are much more exactly stated in formal philosophy. And if we cannot base our literary judgements on philosophical criteria, we must be equally on our guard against the criteria of the historian of ideas, which naturally place most value on literary works which are ideologically representative; whereas the greatest authors actually seem not so much to reflect the intellectual system of their age as to express more or less directly its inherent contradictions, or the very partial nature of its capacity for dealing with the facts of experience. This seems to be true of Chaucer and Shakespeare; and it tends to become truer as we come down to the modern world, in which no single intellectual system has commanded anything like general acceptance.

All these are familiar objections; and as regards criticism of modern literature they have been reinforced by a new form of philosophy's old objections to the cognitive validity of art – by the symbolist aesthetic's rejection of all forms of abstraction and conceptualization. The ancient notion was that ideas were the natural and proper inhabitants of man's mind; T. S. Eliot's resounding paradox that 'Henry James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it' transformed them into dangerous ruffians threatening the artist with a fate worse than death.

The alarm, we can now agree, was exaggerated; indeed, the recent tendency for much literary criticism to add moral to formal analysis might well proceed further, and make inquiry into intellectual backgrounds an essential, though not a dominating or exclusive, part of its critical

procedure. For instance, an understanding of Conrad's intellectual attitudes, and of their relation to the various ideological battlegrounds both of his own and of our time, seems to me to illuminate several literary problems which have not yet been satisfactorily answered, despite the increasing critical attention which his works have lately received. At the same time, the consideration of these problems seems to indicate that it is not in ideology as such, but in the relationship of systems of ideas to other things, things as various as personal experience or the expectations of the audience, that we are likely to find answers to literary questions.

The position of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) among his great contemporaries is unique in at least three respects. First, he has a much more varied audience: one finds his admirers not only in academic and literary circles, but among people in all stations of life. Secondly, Conrad's reputation, after a relative decline following his death in 1924, seems to have grown steadily ever since the Second World War; and it continues now, just as one detects a certain mounting impatience, just or unjust, against most of Conrad's literary peers - mainly against Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, but also, to some extent, against Yeats. The reasons for these two features of Conrad's literary appeal seem to be connected with a third and equally wellknown matter - his obscurity. For although the charge of obscurity against modern writers is not novel, it takes a very special form in the case of Conrad. E. M. Forster expressed it most memorably when he asked whether 'the secret casket of [Conrad's] genius' does not contain 'a vapour rather than a jewel', and went on to suggest that the vapour might come from 'the central chasm of his tremendous genius', a chasm which divided Conrad the seaman from Conrad the writer:

Together with these loyalties and prejudices and personal scruples, [Conrad] holds another ideal, a universal, the love of Truth. . . . So there are constant discrepancies between his nearer and his further vision, and here would seem to be the cause of his central obscurity. If he lived only in his experiences, never lifting his eyes to what lies beyond them: or if, having seen what lies beyond, he would subordinate his experiences to it - then in either case he would be easier to read.<sup>1</sup>

The continual contradiction which Forster describes between the seer and seaman, between philosophy and experience, seems to offer a key to the three literary problems I have posed. For whereas Conrad's 'further vision' was very similar to that of his great contemporaries, his 'nearer vision', his actual range of experience, was not; and in his works the two perspectives combine in a way which seems directly related to

the varied nature of his audience, to the renewed topicality of his view of the world, and to the unresolved conflict of attitudes which underlies his obscurity.

Conrad's further vision was dominated by the characteristic despair of the late Victorian world-view, which originated in all those developments in nineteenth-century geology, astronomy, physics and chemistry which combined with industrialism to suggest that, so far from being the eternal setting created by God for his favourite, man, the natural world was merely the temporary and accidental result of purposeless physical processes. In one letter, written in 1897, Conrad used an appropriately industrial metaphor to express this notion of the universe as a determinist mechanism denying all man's aspirations towards progress and reform:

There is a – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. You come and say: 'This is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this – for instance – celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.' Will it? Alas, no! You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened. . . .

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In such a meaningless and transitory universe, there is no apparent reason why we should have any concern whatever with the lives of others, or even very much concern with our own:

The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful – but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life – utterly out of it. . . . In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement, for virtue, for knowledge and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances, as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men.<sup>3</sup>

What has been considered man's most precious gift, consciousness, is really, therefore, a curse:

What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins.<sup>4</sup>

In *Lord Jim* (1900), Stein contemplates a butterfly, and discourses like a discouraged version of the great evolutionist Alfred Wallace, on whom he was in part based:<sup>5</sup>

'... so fragile! And so strong! And so exact! This is Nature – the balance of colossal forces. Every star is so – and every blade of grass stands so – and the mighty Kosmos in perfect equilibrium produces – this. This wonder; this masterpiece of Nature – the great artist!'

'... And what of man?' [Marlow asks]:

'Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece,' he said. ... 'Perhaps the artist was a little mad. Eh? ... Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him.'<sup>6</sup>

Man, in fact, is Nature's permanent alien; he must create his own order if he can. This, of course, was how the Victorians had come to think of human destiny; the religion of progress, in Tennyson's words, called on man to

Move upward, working out the beast  
And let the ape and tiger die.

But that was not so easy, as Freud was to show; and also, at much the same time, Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Kurtz begins as a representative of all the highest aspirations of nineteenth-century individualism; he is an artist, an eloquent political speaker on the liberal side, an economic and social careerist; and his story enacts the most characteristic impulse of Victorian civilization, combining the economic exploitation of Africa with the great moral crusade of bringing light to the backward peoples of the world. But the jungle whispers 'to [Kurtz] things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude' (p. 131). His 'forgotten and brutal instincts' (p. 144) soon lead Kurtz to outdo the other colonial exploiters in sordid rapacity; he enslaves and massacres the surrounding tribes; and he ends up being worshipped as a God to whom human sacrifices are offered.

At the back of the great nineteenth-century dream was the assumption that man could be his own God. But to Disraeli's question 'Is man an ape or an angel?', Kurtz's fate seems to answer that we are never less likely to 'let the ape and tiger die' than when we imagine we are angels. Kurtz thought that 'we whites ... must necessarily appear to [the savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity'. But he ends his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' (p. 118).

For Conrad, then, man's hope for progress ignores the fact that the ape and tiger are not merely part of our evolutionary heritage, but are ontologically present in every individual. This goes beyond the usual assumptions of the most sceptical of Victorians, and it makes impossible the faith in the development of man's intellectual potentialities through education which characterized the main spokesmen of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Thus, when his reformer friend Cunningham Graham wrote that his democratic ideal was the heroic sailor, Singleton, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1898), but a Singleton who has been educated, Conrad retorted:

I think Singleton with an education is impossible. . . . Then he would become conscious – and much smaller – and very unhappy. Now he is simple and great like an elemental force. Nothing can touch him but the curse of decay – the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars, one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen darkness over the whole universe. Nothing else can touch him – he does not think.

Would you seriously wish to tell such a man 'Know thyself! Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream?' Would you?

Knowledge merely makes the individual more conscious of the terrible disparity between actuality and aspiration: nor does man's love of his fellows afford any more secure a foundation for political and social reform. Such reform represents no more than – as Conrad put it in *Victory* (1915) – the conflict between 'gorge and disgorge' (p. 384); and man's own nature dooms his longing for fraternity; as Conrad asked: 'Frankly, what would you think of an effort to promote fraternity amongst people living in the same street, I don't even mention two neighbouring streets? Two ends of the same street. . . . What does fraternity mean? . . . Nothing unless the Cain-Abel business'.<sup>8</sup>

Conrad, then, shared with the Victorians their rejection of the religious, social and intellectual order of the past, but he also rejected, as completely as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence or Thomas Mann, the religion of progress with which they and the Edwardians had replaced it. This alienation from the prevailing intellectual perspectives both of the past and of his own time naturally did much to colour Conrad's picture both of his own selfhood and of his role as an author. I use the word 'alienation' because it seems to me the most comprehensive term to describe the two aspects of the process we are concerned with – the external or public, and the internal or private. We have already considered the public, the external ideological vision; but it

would, from a literary point of view, remain merely 'notional', as Newman put it, unless it were internalized: that it was in Conrad, we shall see.

The word 'alienation' has been used in a wide variety of ways,<sup>9</sup> but its derivation and early usage make its main meaning reasonably clear. From *alius*, 'another', Latin developed the forms *alienus*, 'belonging to another country', and *alienatus*, 'estranged'. Our word 'alienation' thus bears the constant notion of being or feeling a stranger, an outsider. Alienation, as a translation of the German *Entfremdung*, was given philosophical currency early in the nineteenth century by Hegel, who used it to denote what he thought to be characteristic of the individual in the modern world, his sense of inward estrangements, of more or less conscious awareness that the inner being, the real 'I', was alienated from the 'me', the person as an object in society. Later, Marx transferred the idea to the economic plane; for Marx, man only loses his isolation and realizes himself as a person through his activities, through his work; but under capitalism, since the commodity and its cash value are primary, the individual, no longer in personal control of his labour, feels alienated from his work, and therefore from society and from himself.<sup>10</sup>

Conrad, I need hardly say, was neither a Hegelian nor a Marxist; but all his writings, and especially his letters, make it clear not only that his mind completely rejected the social and intellectual order of the day, but that his whole inner being seemed to have been deprived of meaning. There can surely be few expressions of such total estrangement from the natural world, from other people, from the writing process, and from the self, to equal this Conrad letter to Garnett:

I am like a man who has lost his gods. My efforts seem unrelated to anything in heaven and everything under heaven is impalpable to the touch like shapes of mist. Do you see how easy writing must be under such conditions? Do you see?

Even writing to a friend – to a person one has heard, touched, drank with, quarrelled with – does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion – the words written, the mind at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt – and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of incertitudes.<sup>11</sup>

But alienation, of course, is not the whole story: Conrad also gives us a sense of a much wider commitment to the main ethical, social and literary attitudes, both of the world at large and of the general reader, than do any others of his great contemporaries.



'Commitment' I take to be the secular equivalent of what prize-giving speakers call 'dedication' – a binding engagement of oneself to a course of action which transcends any purely personal advantage. And the question inevitably arises as to how a man with the general intellectual perspective sketched above can possibly commit himself to anything larger than his own personal interests.

The beginnings of an answer are probably to be found in Conrad's life, which made alienation not an endless discovery demanding expression, but merely the initial premise. The initial premise because Conrad was, to begin with, an orphan; his mother died when he was seven, and his father when he was eleven. Then there was his nationality: as a Pole he belonged to a country which no longer existed, and whose people, Conrad wrote, had for a hundred years 'been used to go to battle without illusions'.<sup>12</sup> Adolescence brought further estrangements: in France from 1874 to 1878, Conrad tried to realize his dream of a career at sea, but he achieved only failure, debts, an unhappy love affair, and, it now seems virtually certain, an attempt at suicide. But when, at the age of twenty, Conrad joined the crew of the English freighter *Mavis*, the premise of total alienation began to be undermined. Conrad's successful struggle, under conditions, for the most part, of unbearable physical and psychological hardship, to rise from able-bodied seaman to captain, must have given him a sense of the unexpected possibilities and rewards of individual participation in the ordinary life of humanity. Conrad's years at sea were everything for his career as a writer. Not because they gave him a subject – Conrad would surely be a major novelist quite apart from the sea stories; but because to the earlier perspective of every kind of alienation there was added a foreground of immediate experience which featured a series of the most direct personal and social commitments – to his career, to his fellow-seamen, to his adopted country. These commitments had the most far-reaching effects on Conrad's attitude to his audience, on his role as a writer, and on his understanding of human life; and their importance was not diminished by the fact that they arose from attitudes which were in perpetual opposition to the larger view of the world which Conrad the seer had absorbed from his nineteenth-century heritage.

There is no very specific statement about the conflict in Conrad's letters or essays, but its results appear very clearly in his views of his audience, and of his art, as well as in the novels. In the earliest extant letters alienation is the pervading theme, and there is very little about commitment; where the conflict of the two does occur, it is very much