

# CONRAD'S POPULAR FICTIONS

Secret Histories and Sensational Novels

Andrew Glazzard



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#### List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used for Conrad's published works, letters and contemporary reviews of his works. Except for where indicated below, quotations are from the Dent Collected Edition of Conrad's works, London, 1946–55.

- C Chance
- CL The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, 1898–1902, ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies, Owen Knowles, Gene M. Moore and J.H. Stape. 9 vols, Cambridge University Press, 1983–2007
- CR Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews, general editors Allan Simmon, John G. Peters and J.H. Stape. 4 vols, Cambridge University Press, 2012
- I The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story (with Ford Madox Ford), Stroud: Liverpool University Press, 1999
- LE Last Essays, ed. Harold Ray Stevens and J.H. Stape, Cambridge University Press, 2010
- N Nostromo
- NC The Nature of a Crime (with Ford Madox Ford), London: Duckworth, 1924
- NLL Notes on Life and Letters, Cambridge University Press, 2004
- NN The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'
- PR A Personal Record
- SA The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale, ed. Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid, Cambridge University Press, 1990
- SS A Set of Six
- UWE Under Western Eyes, ed. Roger Osborne and Paul Eggert, Cambridge University Press, 2013
- WTT Within the Tides. London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1915

#### Introduction

# The All-Powerful Masses and the Limited Coterie: Problems of Popularity

John Conrad, Joseph Conrad's younger son, recorded in an affectionate memoir many memorable anecdotes of his father's eccentricities. One of these was Conrad's propensity to appropriate surreptitiously his family's reading material. If he saw his wife or one of his children reading a book, Conrad would 'cruise around' the family home 'and pounce on it if we put it down while we went out of the room. When we returned the book had vanished and could not be found; most mysterious until we realised what was happening. A day or so later the book reappeared in exactly the same place from which it had vanished, and open at exactly the same page.'1 At Christmas, genre fiction would also stimulate some secret nocturnal reading. John recalled, 'I was always given a bound volume of the previous twelve issues' of the Boy's Own Paper, the appeal of which was its 'adventure stories, well written and exciting, with instalments spread over several months' issues.' The volume also attracted the interested attention of another member of the Conrad household: 'I am pretty sure that J.C. read it after I had gone to bed because I found little spills of cigarette ash between the pages.'2 It is a delightful vignette. The successful author, in his well-appointed house near Canterbury. secretly enjoys the twin pleasures of a cigarette and an adventure story, perhaps as a break from the highly wrought prose and penetrative psychological characterization of one of his own fictions. Who would have thought that the author of such uncompromising, complex, early modernist works as Lord Jim (1900), Nostromo (1904) or Under Western Eyes (1911) also nursed a taste for the Boy's Own Paper?

In fact, Conrad's critics have long been aware that his fiction has important affinities with more popular work. Indeed, he recognized this himself, as when he told his publisher William Blackwood in 1902 that he had made 'Youth' (1898) 'out of the material of a boy's story' (CL2 417). Contemporaries who reviewed his works in newspapers and magazines often commented on their resemblance to (and, just as importantly, their difference from) the genres that were popular in the day. Sidney Dark, for instance, reviewing The Secret Agent (1907) in the Daily Express, wrote: 'For the subject of this latest story he has gone to Soho, and uses Anarchists, police spies, and all the other familiar ingredients of sensational fiction. But with what a difference' (CR2 349). Later critics were also intrigued by the similarities and differences between Conrad's work and popular forms. George Orwell was a great admirer of Conrad but could not overcome his irritation at what he saw as the 'absurdity' of Lord Jim, 'a very distinguished version of the type of book in which the hero is expelled from his club for cheating at cards and goes off to Central Africa to shoot big game'.3 More recently, the academic study of Conrad's fiction has included important books on Conrad's responses to adventure fiction by Andrea White and Linda Dryden and to romance by Katherine Baxter, as well as numerous shorter studies examining relationships between particular texts and works by such mainstays of popular fiction as John Buchan, Bram Stoker and Cutcliffe Hyne.<sup>4</sup> There is clearly a lot to say about Conrad and popular fiction.

This book is a contribution to the tradition of examining Conrad's work as a response to popular genres. It focuses not on the genre of adventure fiction, which has been so productively examined by others, but on genres which situated themselves in domestic and urban settings rather than in exotic ones, such as detective and espionage fiction; it examines Conrad's response to these especially in *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes, Chance* (1914) and a handful of short stories from the same period. That is not to say that adventure fiction is entirely irrelevant, not least as some of the genres I am interested in developed from it. As Tzvetan Todorov has suggested, a 'new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination'. The detective story, the terrorist novel, and invasion-scare and espionage fiction took tropes from adventure stories (the quest, masculine combat, mapping and exploration) and relocated them: their settings are not,

usually, beyond the frontiers of the Empire, but in London and the Home Counties. The other genre I examine closely - the Edwardian novel of finance - is equally urban but a little more idiosyncratic, although in some instances it also exploited themes and tropes from adventure fiction.

I have selected these genres because their influence on Conrad's work seems to me to be self-evident, as well as sufficiently complex and suggestive to warrant detailed examination, and because they were of considerable cultural significance in the period during which Conrad was writing. Detective fiction was in most respects the period's dominant genre, commanding huge sales and attracting many practitioners; the terrorist novel (sometimes called the 'dynamite novel'), concerned with conspiracies to cause physical and/ or ideological damage to the body politic, was well supplied with writers and readers and can be seen as one source of the modern thriller; invasion-scare and espionage fiction, like the terrorist novel, were new phenomena, responding to the geopolitical anxieties of their era, albeit drawing on older forms and themes; the novel of finance, which generated serious (and highly 'literary') works as well as comedies for the popular monthly magazines, also reflected contemporary concerns about social change and new ways of making (and losing) money. All of these genres are, in my view, worthy of more attention in their own right than they have hitherto received even early detective fiction, with the exception of Conan Doyle's contribution, is curiously under-researched - and, as I hope to show, their influence on Conrad's more canonical offerings is considerable. But there is another, perhaps more important reason to continue to examine the relationship between Conrad and popular fiction - as a case study for a more wide-ranging examination of how the 'literary' and the 'popular' relate and (perhaps) diverge.

#### Some literary reputation

For Conrad, there was clear separation, at least in theory and for most of the time, between the literary and the popular. In an 1898 letter to his cousin's wife, Aniela Zagórska, he surveyed the late-Victorian literary field in Britain and pronounced judgement on three of the most popular writers of the day. Grant Allen, a prolific professional writer who turned his hand to detective stories, a terrorist novel and adventure fiction, as well as 'marriage problem' and 'New Woman' novels, was - despite being also the author of such weighty works as Physiological Aesthetics (1877) - 'a man of inferior intelligence'. Marie Corelli, author of romantic fantasies such as the hugely bestselling The Sorrows of Satan (1895), was 'not noticed critically by the serious reviews'. Henry Hall Caine, whose romantic 'New Woman' novel The Christian (1897) had just become the first British novel to sell a million copies, was 'a kind of male Marie Corelli [...] a megalomaniac, who thinks himself the greatest man of the century' (CL2 137-8). Indeed, Conrad seems to have had a particular animus against Caine, 'the great master of self-advertising': he and Ford Madox Ford (né Hueffer) turned him into Callan, the ponderous, self-promoting literary lion of The Inheritors (1901). In Conrad's view, these three wrote for readers who were 'philistines'; all showed that their 'thought is commonplace and the style (?) without any distinction'; all three achieved their success through being 'puffed in the press' and having a knack of expressing 'the common thought' so that 'the common man is delighted to find himself in accord with people he supposes distinguished' (CL2 137). Writers of a higher class - with whom Conrad presumably wished to associate himself - included Rudyard Kipling, J.M. Barrie, George Meredith, George Moore and H.G. Wells. Although Kipling participated in popular genres, and Wells (whom Conrad subsequently befriended) was known as a pioneer of a new and popular genre - the 'scientific romance', or what we now call science fiction<sup>6</sup> – they were also seen as serious and innovative writers, while others in the approved list were distinctively 'literary'. (Meredith and Moore were both selected by Orwell as exemplary practitioners of writing as 'cerebration', as opposed to entertainment, in his 1945 essay 'Good Bad Books'.7)

Until recently, it was a widely held orthodoxy that literary fiction and genre fiction are two separate categories, and that the former is in some way superior to and removed from the latter. One of the many remarkable features of this orthodoxy has been its near ubiquity: across the political spectrum, from Richard Hoggart to Evelyn Waugh, from Theodor Adorno to Q.D. Leavis, cultural arbiters otherwise separated by the widest possible ideological gulfs have united in the view that popular literary culture is a contradiction in terms. There is an obvious objection to this orthodoxy: a transcendent category of the 'literary' rests on assumptions about value and status that

are difficult to justify without either a supporting edifice of ideology or a recourse to sheer prejudice. As Terry Eagleton puts it in a witty discussion of the ideological foundations on which literary canons have been constructed: 'Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust open them.'9 Conrad presumably thought Meredith was better than Corelli not only as a matter of opinion but also as a matter of fact. Today, however, such confidence in a literary hierarchy seems more difficult to sustain, and we might consider 'literary fiction' to be itself a genre, albeit one that often pretends to be outside or above such categorization. In Jacques Derrida's words, 'a text cannot belong to no genre'. Either 'literature' is a genre, or it partakes of genres: 'Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text.'10 Whether it is Joyce reinventing the comic novel in Ulysses (1922), Henry James trying his hand at a terrorist novel with The Princess Casamassima (1885) or Conrad in Lord Jim rewriting the story of a young man's fall from grace and his subsequent adventures in the jungle, genre is inescapable.

Hierarchical assumptions can nonetheless persist alongside acknowledgements of complexity, interpenetration and fuzzy edges. Marxist critics, for instance, epitomized by the 'Frankfurt School' of social and cultural theorists, inevitably see popular fiction as a form of commercialized and capitalist (literary) production, and hence inferior to more dialectical literary forms. Fredric Jameson's hugely influential The Political Unconscious (1981), for instance, dismisses the generic antecedents of Lord Jim as 'degraded' cultural forms that Jameson invokes simply so that he can juxtapose them with the novel's superior 'contemporary modernism'. 11 Similarly, Jeremy Hawthorn argues, apropos of Conrad's 1902 letter to Blackwood quoted above, that Conrad's fiction 'involves the requisitioning of popular modes and subject matter (boys' stories) for more serious purposes'. 12 But you do not have to be a Marxist to believe in a hierarchy that puts the popular below and the 'literary' above: in The Deceptive Text (1984), Cedric Watts set out to prove The Secret Agent's superiority to a Sherlock Holmes story, while in his study of Under Western Eyes Keith Carabine dismisses late-Victorian/Edwardian novels of terrorism and espionage as mostly 'pretty feeble'. 13 In some universities, popular fiction is increasingly seen as a worthwhile subject in its own right for academic study, but for critics working on more canonical material it has, if noticed at all, usually been relegated to the status of inferior source material. A critical approach which sees popular culture as a kind of base metal waiting to be turned into the gold of literature seems to me to have numerous drawbacks, not least in presupposing remarkably little curiosity about why an author such as Conrad might choose to appropriate popular forms in the first place. What purposes do popular genres serve? And, if we are wary of seeking to reconstruct what may have lain in the mind of the author, what of the mind of the reader? In other words, what effects might be created by including in a 'literary' work themes and characters that are familiar from popular genres? These are all questions which need to be addressed if we are to investigate seriously the relationship between the 'literary' and the 'popular'. I shall return to some of the theoretical implications of these questions shortly. The point I want to make here is that the fact that the boundaries – if they can be said to exist at all – are so unclear, the fact that the literary-critical debate is so inconclusive and contentious, the fact that questions of genre are so central to understanding what kind of fiction an author like Conrad thought he was writing and how we might read it, all argue that further work needs to be done on problems of genre and on the relationship of the popular and the literary.

Conrad's is a particularly good case to examine precisely because his fiction's relationship with popular forms is ambiguous and dynamic, and because during his writing career fiction, including its popular variants, changed out of all recognition. The terrorist thriller and espionage fiction were just two of several genres that emerged in the period; the list of genres which came into their own, became recognizably 'generic', at the turn of the century would also include the 'scientific romance', the sex novel, Ruritanian romance, the ghost story and horror fiction. 14 This generic growth and diversification was an aspect of a more general phenomenon, the period's unprecedented growth in the production and consumption of fiction, itself a symptom of an extraordinary convergence of social, economic and technological developments. Thanks to scholarship by literary and social historians such as Peter Keating and Richard Ohmann, the transformational changes in reading, writing and publishing that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century are now well understood. The education reforms of the 1870s and 1880s produced a largely literate population. Working men and the rapidly increasing numbers of working women had more time for reading,

thanks to factors such as urbanization, the rise of white-collar working and hence commuting and suburban living, and legislative reforms of working hours. Public libraries (which spread slowly after their introduction in 1850), and new commercial libraries such as the Boots Booklovers' Library (established 1900), eventually overturned the virtual duopoly exercised by the circulating libraries, Mudie's and W.H. Smith's, and made borrowing or renting books more accessible. New technologies made paper and printing cheaper and therefore books more affordable. This, and the repeal in the 1850s of Stamp Duty, Advertisement Duty and Paper Duty on magazines and newspapers, led to exponential growth in periodical publications: from a mere 643 in 1875, the number of magazine titles more than doubled in ten years to 1298 in 1885, almost doubling again to 2081 in 1895, and levelling off in the Edwardian decade so that by 1914 there were 2504.15 Similar changes occurred in the US, where the Chace Act (1891) extended copyright protection to British authors and publishers, dramatically expanding the potential market for British authors. 16 As a result, in the 20 years from 1894 to the First World War - the two decades in which Conrad produced much of his work - fiction 'was the most important section of the leisure industry'. 17 Bert Smallways, the narrator of H.G. Wells's future-war novel The War in the Air (1908), put it even more starkly when reviewing the rush of social, scientific and political changes which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'Never before had there been such reading masses.'18

The most visible sign of the times was a sudden change in the novel's physical form. For most of the nineteenth century, the novel conformed to a standard of three octavo volumes, without illustrations, retailing at 10s.6d. per volume (31s.6d. in total) and generally purchased and distributed by Mudie's and Smith's. The form of the so-called 'three-decker' 'encouraged narrative padding, especially a profusion of short-sentenced dialogue by which expanses of white paper could be used up with relatively few words', and yet it reigned supreme for 70 years. 19 Its death, following the realization by the circulating libraries that the form was economically unsustainable, was sudden: 184 three-deckers were published in 1894, the year in which Mudie's and Smith's decided to stop supporting the form; within three years, annual production had dropped to a mere four.<sup>20</sup> The replacement was the one-volume novel, retailing at 6s. One reason

for its adoption in the 1890s was evidence of its commercial success from the previous decade: Stevenson's ground-breaking one-volume Treasure Island (1883) and its successors, such as H. Rider Haggard's King Solomon's Mines (1885), had proved not only the viability of single-volume fiction, but also its potential for commercial dominance.21 Although still predominantly bought by libraries rather than individuals, the post-1894 single-volume novel signalled a new stage in what Andrew Nash has called the 'startling' growth in the production of fiction at the end of the nineteenth century: in 1895, the first year of the new dispensation, 1315 novels were published, the vast majority of them in single volumes.<sup>22</sup>

One of these 1315 novels was Conrad's debut, Almayer's Folly. Although not especially successful commercially, at 63,000 words it was well suited to the new shorter form, and its exotic setting - earning Conrad the famous tag of 'the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago' in The Spectator (CR1 47) - helped ensure it was noticed critically. Conrad thus launched himself into a literary field that was dynamic, expanding and diversifying: he arrived at an auspicious time, able to take advantage of the relative freedom of the new form, expanding print media and the increased demand for fiction. Given the options before him, one of the first questions he had to answer was what kind of writer he wanted to be. His letter to Aniela Zagórska suggests he aimed to be among the admired talents of the day rather than to be commercially successful, and this view is strengthened by an earlier letter, written in 1897 to his childhood friend, Baroness Janina de Brunnow: 'I have some - literary - reputation but the future is anything but certain, for I am not a popular author and probably I never shall be. That does not sadden me at all, for I have never had the ambition to write for the all-powerful masses. I haven't the taste for democracy - and democracy hasn't the taste for me' (CL1 390). His use of a political term is striking, and suggests a disdain not only for mass culture but also for the political reforms that accompanied it. Conrad here strikes a note of elitist defiance, rising proudly above the tide of mass consumption and popular representation. In his public pronouncements, Conrad's construction of (and self-fashioning as) the novelist as artist, in implicit or explicit opposition to popular writers, was even more high-minded. His Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (NN vii-xii) famously sets out to consider 'work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art'. The artist 'descends

within himself', he renews words 'worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage', his 'success is very far off', but his aim is 'inspiring, difficult'. In his 1905 essay 'Books', the novelist becomes God-like, creating a 'world' that is 'in his own image' (NLL 11): fiction is a feat of imagination. These are expressions of a powerful and enduring myth - of the writer as an autonomous genius, who expresses not 'the common thought' like Allen, Corelli and Caine, but that which is difficult and new, and who, careless of recognition today, submits himself to the judgement of posterity.

This myth, sustained in great measure by Conrad's own self-image, endures in Conrad criticism and in modernism studies more generally, despite the evidence of book historians, new historicists and others who have shown that even the most canonical modernist writers were sensitive to and influenced by commercial, contextual and practical considerations. By refusing to take Conrad's literary manifestos at face value is not simply to acknowledge the 'death of the author', or to heed D.H. Lawrence's advice to '[n]ever trust the artist. Trust the tale.'23 Rather, it is to accept that Conrad's non-fictional writings are rhetorical performances, and his self-fashioning as the autonomous artist, heedless of what sells, is only part of the story. Conrad's self-image has been examined in influential studies by Joyce Wexler and by Peter D. McDonald. For Wexler, Conrad (along with Joyce and Lawrence) subscribed in theory to Flaubert's belief that art and money were antithetical; the serious artist therefore had to 'renounce a popular audience'. 24 However, in practice Conrad's need to earn a living drove him to simplify his work to appeal to a wider audience: he 'vilified the kind of writing that was merely popular but never disdained popularity itself'.25 Deploying Pierre Bourdieu's influential schema of the 'field of cultural production', which uses sociological methods to examine how agents in a cultural field such as literature operate with, against or separately from each other, McDonald's more satisfying account positions Conrad in the late 1890s as a newcomer and 'committed purist' seeking to break into the more exclusive regions of the literary field. To do so, he formed or developed relationships with what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic brokers' of 'cultural capital' - writers, magazine editors, publishers and their readers and reviewers.<sup>26</sup> Conrad's first supporters included W.H. Chesson and Edward Garnett, readers for the publisher T. Fisher Unwin who were instrumental in Unwin's decision to publish Almayer's Folly, and

David Meldrum, reader for William Blackwood, publisher (in serial and volume forms) of Lord Jim and Youth (1902), as well as magazine editors such as the indomitable W.E. Henley, editor of the New Review and sponsor of an array of literary talent from Stevenson to Kipling.<sup>27</sup> Henley's sponsorship (or, to use Bourdieu's word, 'co-optation') of Conrad by serializing The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' is rightly identified by McDonald as a pivotal moment in Conrad's career. Abandoning the British Merchant Navy to become a professional writer, Conrad soon found that writing a novel a year would not provide sufficient income for himself and (after his marriage in 1896) his family. He found that writing short stories for magazines 'brought a significant relative increase in his earnings' - a tenfold improvement in his rate by the word compared with Almayer's Folly - but even this 'did not go very far towards improving his gross income'. However, at this point he could not simply write for more popular markets as 'his need to produce more marketable work was in direct conflict with his more urgent need to establish his position in the field'. He therefore chose to restrict himself to those periodicals, such as Cosmopolis, The Savoy, Cornhill Magazine, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine and the New Review, which were situated close to the purist end of the field, and to reject a popular publication such as Pearson's Magazine: Conrad's Jamesian short story 'The Return' was, he told Unwin, 'much too good to be thrown away where the right people won't see it' (CL1 405).<sup>28</sup> Conrad was ecstatic on joining what Max Beerbohm dubbed 'the Henley regatta' but not because this would make him rich, or a household name: he was expecting to accrue cultural rather than financial capital from this breakthrough.

McDonald concedes that Conrad later became more accommodating to the demands of the market with works such as The Mirror of the Sea (1906), parts of which were serialized in the mass-circulation Daily Mail. But McDonald sees this and other populist ventures as departures from his earlier 'committed' purism: 'In the early years he would not willingly have produced such "bosh", as he called it, and he would have resisted being seen in these publications' - that is the Daily Mail and also the Strand Magazine, which Conrad considered as a potential outlet for 'Gaspar Ruiz' (1906).<sup>29</sup> In the 1890s, Conrad was, according to McDonald, a high-minded, aesthetically pure idealist, who distanced himself from those in Bourdieu's category of 'profiteers' (such as Allen, Corelli and Caine) in order to establish what he himself called his 'literary reputation'.