

# CONRAD AND IMPERIALISM

## Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers

Benita Parry

  
MACMILLAN  
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Blind, fooled and staggering from her throne, I saw her fall,  
Clutching at the gaud of Empire;  
And wondering round her, sons and daughter-nations stood –  
What madness had possessed her;  
But when they lifted her, her heart was dead,  
Withered within the body, and all the veins  
Were choked with yellow dirt.

Edward Carpenter, *'Empire' in Toward Democracy*, 1902

Here I lay it down that Imperialism . . . is to be taken as the typical symbol of the end. Imperialism is pure civilization. In this outward form the destiny of the West is now irrevocably set. The energy of culture-man is directed inwards, that of civilization-man outwards. For this reason I see in Cecil Rhodes the first man of the new epoch. He represents the political style of a Western, Teutonic, particularly German future. His phrase 'expansion is everything' contains in its Napoleonic form the most real tendency of every mature civilization . . . It is not a matter of choice. It is not the conscious will of individuals or of whole classes or peoples that decides. The expansive tendency is a fate, something daemonic and huge which grips, forces into service and consumes the late mankind of the world-city stage, whether it wills it or not, whether it knows it or not.

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1918

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# 1 Introduction

Conrad in his 'colonial fictions' did not presume to speak for the colonial peoples nor did he address them, and if this aloofness is registered in portraits of iconic figures posed against archetypal landscapes, it also spared his writing the excess of that sentimentality joined with paternalistic reproof which was a characteristic feature of the nineteenth-century colonial novel. His original constituents were the subscribers to *Blackwood's* and *New Review*, an audience still secure in the conviction that they were members of an invincible imperial power and a superior race, and his contemporary readers remained those to whom colonial possessions appeared a natural extension of their own national boundaries. The extent to which Conrad in his own day, when he was hailed as the Kipling of the Seas, succeeded in his ambition to make his readers *see*, cannot be gauged; what is verifiable is that he was popularly regarded as a writer of romances in faraway places and stirring tales of adventure at sea, and that the subversive implications of fictions which disturbed even as they consoled were not apparent to contemporary reviewers,<sup>1</sup> just as the projection of an idealistic impulse to imperialism seems to have escaped the anti-imperialist R. B. Cunningham Graham who read the works as unequivocal assaults on colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect and because of radical shifts in historical perspective, altered standards of political morality and new methods of reading, it is now possible to see that the fictions' ironic strategies and alienation techniques do act to redraw the conventional picture of the world, since through demystifying enshrined notions about the unassailable nature of existing social institutions and standards of conduct, the texts confront readers with unacknowledged and discomfiting aspects of reality. By transforming the characteristic genres of colonial fiction into vehicles for reflecting on the precepts, values and habits of thought native to these categories, with the narrative material meeting audience expectations and the narrative mediations defamiliarising con-

ventional perceptions, disjunctions between the established morality and moral principle are displayed, while ethical absolutes are revealed to be pragmatic utilities for ensuring social stability and inhibiting dissent. These innovations from within the forms of the given mode produce a contrapuntal discourse where the authentic rendering of imperialism's dominant ideological categories is undercut by illuminations of the misrecognitions and limitations in a form of cognition which saw the world in black and white and admitted only a restricted area of reality to its purview. Yet, competing with exposures of imperialism's manicheanism and tunnel-vision, there are fantasy representations of the colonial universe seen across a metaphysical divide which act to endorse racial solidarity, invite the closing of ethnic ranks, and confirm western codes as human norms and the ultimate measure of moral standards.<sup>3</sup>

Critics and commentators who, out of deference for 'genius' and 'greatness', mute the strident resonances of an author's reprehensible social stances and intellectually irresponsible attitudes on the grounds that to discuss these critically is to take unfair advantage of a contemporary sensibility, make the assumption that all writers are shackled prisoners of dominant modes of thought. Not only does such an approach obscure the texts' dimension as 'free intellectual or spiritual production',<sup>4</sup> but it suppresses articulations that are integral to the fictions' decentred and internally inconsistent ideological structure. Although Conrad was cool about Kipling, disliked Buchan and thought Haggard's tales horrible, his own fictions with their racial stereotypes, ingratiating generalities on alien customs and the native mind, and their tendency to attach moral valuations to cultural particularities, do have affinities with writings he despised. In his works too the East is the consummate figure of the other: 'perfumed like a flower, silent like death, dark like a grave . . . so old, so mysterious, resplendent and sombre, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise . . . where a stealthy Nemesis lies in wait, pursues, overtakes so many of the conquering race' (*Youth*, (1898) pp. 38, 41, 41-2). Immutable properties are attributed to the colonial worlds, where the unreconstructed landscapes transfigure the planet's pre-history and symbolise moral vacancy, the archaic social arrangements are the extant form of the primal condition and the peoples personify a state of stupefied unconsciousness. Confronted by these mythic uni-



verses, their identities realised through negatives – they are inscrutable, immovable, unchanging and old but without a past – the white world gains in stature to stand as the undisputed embodiment of the rational and analytical energies, of human capacity in its evolved form. Within these ethnocentric configurations, the obverse to the disparaging images is the conception of the colonial peoples as possessed of privileged insights into transcendental realms and endowed with magical powers – both the contempt and the awe being in keeping with the conventions of colonial fiction. Where Conrad's writings break with the received perceptions of the other hemisphere as either a metaphysical landscape and/or the incarnation of those desires excluded and repressed by civilisation, is in the dramatisations of the antagonism between western modes and foreign precepts as conflicts of authentic alternatives, and although these invariably issue as victories for the West in the process fundamental questions are asked of European premises and opposing codes are given space to register their claims.

Scholars may differ on defining the source and content of Conrad's double vision, but the consensus is that he is the artist of ambivalence and the divided mind, a writer who discerned and gave novelistic life to those binary oppositions constituting the phylogenetic inheritance of the species and defining its existential condition. That Conrad perceived the world dualistically and was preoccupied by the interaction of antagonistic forces, are propositions abundantly evident in the fictions and confirmed by his commentaries on how he conceived the nature of the fictional undertaking. His essay on Henry James explains his own recourse to warlike images, 'since from the duality of man's nature and the competition of individuals, the life-history of the earth must in the last instance be a history of a really very relentless warfare',<sup>5</sup> and in a letter to the *New York Times* disputing an unfavourable review it had carried of *The Inheritors*, he provocatively affirms a belief in the ubiquity of oppositions:

The only indisputable truth of life is our ignorance. Besides this there is nothing evident, nothing absolute, nothing uncontradicted; there is no principle, no instinct, no impulse that can stand alone at the beginning of things and look confidently to the end . . . The only legitimate basis of creative works lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagon-

isms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous – so full of hope.<sup>6</sup>

It is certain that Conrad's fictions are battle-grounds; however it will be argued that the wars fought can be read as struggles not of metaphysical forces or transhistorical values, but of political doctrines and cultural systems, epistemological suppositions and ontological goals as these are manifest in their historical articulations and forms.

To the extent that the fictions give voice to heterodox values within western traditions and bring the totality of these customs into confrontation with foreign alternatives,<sup>7</sup> they can be interpreted as radically subversive of the official ethos. Within the first category, empiricism is counterposed to scepticism, 'the power to act' to 'the faculty of meditation', 'the fascination of material advantage' to 'the restraint of abstract ideas',<sup>8</sup> triumphalism to inertia, positivism to utopianism. Reason is challenged by unconscious desire and rational cognition by disruptions of 'normal' consciousness, in ways that question and undermine orthodoxies and where the established verities are not necessarily the winners. But when western mores are in conflict with alien structures of experience, the contest is differently articulated and the outcome ideologically determined. Although ethnic solipsism is interrogated and domestic moral axioms deprived of their supremacy, because the other hemisphere *does* represent 'the other', the fictions effectively intercede to decide the contest between two cultures as if these represented two unequal moral universes. Thus even as the fictions rescue from denigration or neglect those notions and goals that are opposed to western norms, the antinomies between the West and Asia/Africa/Latin America, or between North and South, are ultimately transmuted as the antagonism between Ego and Id, Reason and the Irrational, Consciousness and the Unconscious, the Performance Principle and the Pleasure Principle, and in this context the contrary aspirations of instinctual renunciation and gratification, initiative and passivity, innovation and quietism, action and world-negation which were enacted as genuine options within a tradition, become a combat where the values of the white world must assert themselves against the negation of civilisation itself and resist the annihilation of authentic human purpose.

Both disenchanted scrutiny of the flaws to imperialist ways of

seeing and complicity in its perceptions are manifest in the contradictory constellations of meaning produced by the fictions' chiaroscuro of light and dark. An obsessive motif in all Conrad's writings where it signifies a multitude of polarities, the iconography of black and white in the colonial novels is integral to the texts' dramatisations of the cultural differences, moral antagonisms and metaphysical antinomies apprehended by the western imagination as structural to the colonial situation. It is a commonplace that in western thought the contrast between black and white has for centuries stood for the good, true, pure and beautiful as opposed to the evil, ignorant, corrupt and atrocious. When the actions of modern imperialism brought the white world into organised confrontations with the other continents, the existing accretions of dark and black were thickened and extended to establish an equivalence between 'primitive', 'barbaric' or 'savage' societies and moral perversity, and by inference between black people living amidst jungle, forest and wilderness and a condition of aboriginal depravity.<sup>9</sup> In Conrad's fictions the dark tropics emanate poisonous influences, decay and death; the sombre, primeval forests whisper of inexplicable desires, the gloomy impenetrable jungles of uncivilised life. However, while such metaphors conform to the authorised image and the fictions go on to develop conventional western connotations, the texts also invert customary usage, a reversal which calls into question the received values of a social order inordinately boastful of its own excellence. If Conrad does use white and light as the signs of truth, integrity, knowledge, decency and reason, he also annuls these associations when the conspicuous objects of imperialist desire, the gold of *Almayer's Folly*, the ivory of *Heart of Darkness* and the silver of *Nostromo*, serve as emblems of avarice and agents of corruption. Conversely, while black does signify evil, death, hell, chaos and moral nullity, it is also the figure of transcendent reality and ultimate meanings, overarching the facile and transparent truths visible in the light. Nor is Conrad's dark a monolith: like a blanket it can blind and suffocate, but it can also reach the eye as luminous and meet the touch as velvet.<sup>10</sup>

The history of Conrad criticism is the history of changing methods and concerns in contemporary literary studies, and abstracts of the vast literature about his fiction display the presence of every stance in the critical canon. A closer look at this body of expository

writing will show that while work on Conrad's intellectual heritage, political ideas and historical imagination continues to be produced,<sup>11</sup> the predominant trend has been away from discussing what has been termed the 'public dimensions' and towards analysing the novels as either ontological meditations and psychological explorations, or as symbolic representations of 'transhistorical' realities.<sup>12</sup> The hazards both in empiricist readings of self-evidently historical texts and in formalist procedures that suppress their immanent political meanings are apparent. Just as commentaries preoccupied with identifying sources, origins and factual equivalences do not engage with the fictiveness of the writings, so do the paradigms of metaphysical, ethical or allegorical worlds conferred by critics seeking to establish the existence of universal and invariable categories remain dissociated from the historically produced ideology which the fictions signify, criticise and augment. To bring political criticism to Conrad's writings is not to isolate the 'sociologically significant' aspects of the novels, nor to initiate a survey of their historical authenticity, realistic features or tendentious design, and indeed the primary concern of such analysis is to understand the relationships between literature and history at the level of a work's formal, literary structures.

Fictions that both in their own day and subsequently contributed to the making of western opinion about late nineteenth-century imperialism and the worlds it conquered, and which because of past interpretative intercessions were handed down as valid testimony about those times and places, have inevitably invoked dissertations on the relationship between this specific historical context and the history intrinsic to Conrad's 'colonial novels', and impinging on the general enquiry are variously conceived researches situated in the more specialised area concerned with the literary subculture of imperialism.<sup>13</sup> By the very nature of its terms, this undertaking is in danger of reading the fictions as 'reflections' of an objective reality or as 'mediations' of prevalent political attitudes and cultural values, a tendency which points up the endemic problems in the debate on fiction and society or history. Although the high incidence of methodological lapses in the study of literature and imperialism should not be taken as evidence of an intrinsically disabling factor invalidating the discussion itself, it should serve to caution critics against using fiction as a form of writing aspiring to replicate,

explain and normalise the lineaments of the real world, a procedure which would yield reductive interpretations of the texts and singularly unreliable empirical evidence about history.

If, however, literature is approached as an autonomous practice producing specifically fictional representations of what has through other means been construed as history, then criticism can elucidate the texts' eccentric perceptions of the epistemological premises, ethical axioms and social goals proposed by the dominant ideology, and this study will attempt to discuss how the interlocation of narrative discourses in a set of Conrad's fictions transforms, subverts and rescues the established norms, values and myths of imperialist civilisation. For within Conrad's writings the animations of received ideas, beliefs and apprehensions that act to ratify the *status quo* engender a protest against the authorised sources as these are dislocated and distorted to make the normal appear strange, to reveal the fixed as mutable and expose the absolute as relative. It is the presence of incommensurable meanings, which are articulated in the dialogue of voices soliciting support for antithetical ideas and principles, and generated by the discontinuities between what the action shows and what the narrative says, between the fiction's indwelling significations and the formal constructions imposed by narrative exegesis and rhetoric, that displays the text's struggle to escape ideology and the pressures drawing it back into the orbit of the imperialist world-view.

Imperialism is necessarily a controversial word since it has been used and sometimes abused by competing bodies of ideas to describe a diversity of unrelated historical developments. Although repudiated by some academics as a term unfit for scholars, it has always been central to the Marxist vocabulary and is now widely accepted as necessary to understanding those processes which have defined the structure of the modern world and continue to characterise its interrelationships. Those historians and economists concerned with formulating a coherent theory of imperialism have acknowledged that the undertaking is beset by conceptual ambiguity and terminological confusion:

Marxists since Lenin have in fact fluctuated in their use of the term imperialism. Very often it has been used to describe the whole capitalist system; just as often it refers to the relations between advanced and backward countries within the system.

Sometimes it is used in both senses simultaneously, either with or more often without, an acknowledgement of the ambiguity involved.<sup>14</sup>

Because the essence of modern imperialism is the formation of a world economic system generated by the impulses of western capitalism and dominated by its needs, its usage cannot be confined to colonialism, a particular mode within its many and mutable states, and one which preceded the growth of international finance capital and whose formal ending imperialism survived. But when it is applied exclusively to the changing forms of capitalism and the concomitant transformations in social relationships and traditional values within the metropolitan society, then the effect is to relegate the West's conquest of the 'third world' to a contingent status and occlude the system of global domination exercised by the white nations as a necessary outgrowth of capitalism and its most spectacular export.

A Eurocentric orientation to the discussion has been disputed by participants who point out that the contributions made by imperialism's 'consumers or victims'<sup>15</sup> are concentrated on defining the material conditions, social relationships, patterns of conflict and ideological premises specific to those colonial situations produced by the invasions of modern imperialism, incursions which disrupted existing societies and delimited the future possibilities of whole continents. The arguments of this controversy have influenced the political interpretations of literary texts, and to claim as one critic has done that Conrad's 'colonial' fictions' before *Nostromo* signally fail to confront the nature and dynamics of imperialism as a system,<sup>16</sup> is to circumscribe the inherent significations of the concept and truncate the compass of Conrad's historical imagination. For if Conrad did not see imperialism steadily, he did, in fictions that dramatise the war of the hemispheres within a structurally joined and spiritually divided universe, see it whole, thereby inviting readers to scrutinise the ethical foundations to the civilisation of expansionist capitalism and engaging them in a critical view of imperialism's urge to conquer the earth.

The same ambiguity that attaches to the use of imperialism applies also to the properties of imperialism's dominant ideology. In its general sense this ideology<sup>17</sup> can be understood as the system of representations produced by established institutions

through which individuals living their roles within the class structure of late capitalism learn to assimilate their existing positions and relationships as natural, permanent and conforming to a transcendent ethical plan. When used more specifically, imperialist ideology can be taken to mean that constellation of values, beliefs and myths giving intellectual coherence and moral sanction to colonialism (the burden of a racial and national mission, service to a noble corporate cause, implementation of the laws of order and progress in the dark places of the earth), which foster in men and women a form of cognition whereby they come to identify themselves as members of a ruling race, identify with the conception of a great national destiny and accede to the relationship of power and dominance between the West and other continents. Although this study is principally concerned with the latter meaning, this is conceived as integral to the larger ideology, which in the epoch of colonial expansion acted to undermine the class consciousness generated by socialism with appeals to the supreme authority of a patriotism that an historian has described as being 'above class, loyal to the institutions of the country, and resolute in defence of its honour and interests'.<sup>18</sup>

To explain and justify the West's galactic ambitions and establish its title to global paramountcy, imperialism's propagandists devised the heady conceit of Europe's messianic destiny as the saviour of benighted peoples, asserted as proven the existence of a master race and represented the species' interactive relationship with its material conditions as one demanding total control of the physical environment. Raymond Williams has described the 'triumphalist version of "man's conquest of nature"' as a theory that is 'in an exceptionally close correspondence, the specific ideology of imperialism and capitalism, whose basic concepts – limitless and conquering expansion; reduction of the labour process to the appropriation and transformation of raw materials – it exactly repeats';<sup>19</sup> and the apprehension of this corporate will to domination and supremacy is central to Conrad's perception of imperialism's inspiration and aspiration. Within the many ideological forms coexisting in the age of imperialist expansion, it was an assemblage fusing pragmatism and irrationalism, utilitarianism and metaphysics in a noxious conflation, and that was definitively configured in Cecil John Rhodes's dream of annexing the planets, which Conrad's fictions illuminate and interrogate – the temperament of a puritan



joined with an 'insatiable imagination of conquest', 'the misty idealism of the Northerners, who at the smallest encouragement dream of nothing less than the conquest of the earth' (*Nostromo*, pp. 76, 333).

The retrospect on modern imperialism presents special problems to western critics living within or on the periphery of an intellectual environment where the old colonial lore has retained the power to elicit nostalgia for the horizons empire once spanned and lost, the passing of the privileged life of service and romance is still regretted and new legends legitimising both past exploits and contemporary neo-imperialist interventions are being newly devised.<sup>20</sup> Because of this continuous process of rehabilitation, even those critics who deplore the many unlovely entries in imperialism's annals can in their readings of the literary texts display an attenuated apprehension of imperialism's apocalyptic urges (which if exercised by a western nation on peer nations would have inspired a holy war against the anti-christ daring to pursue such an ambition) and express a remote disavowal of the insult and injury inflicted on foreign populations in the fulfilment of these impulses. Thus a convulsive process which radically altered the organisation of metropolitan societies and disintegrated the existing social orders of the conquered land, is represented as a stage in an inevitable and necessary progress devised by a benign but determined meta-intelligence, in the course of which some unkindness and injustice has inadvertently been committed. In critical discussion of Conrad's work, this bland approach which sterilises the theory and obfuscates the practice of imperialism acts to mute and even suppress the fictions' negative representations of the imperialist vocation. For by revealing the disjunctions between high-sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions and indicting the purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to global expansionism and hegemony, Conrad's writings engender a critique more destructive of imperialism's ideological premises than do the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire.

But while the fictions can be seen to sabotage the mystique of empire through refusing the received account as mendacious, to read these works as univocal denunciations of imperialist mores, motives and dreams is to overlook those textual processes which not only leave imperialist assumptions intact but originate perceptions of a latent idealism indwelling in what was manifestly



a soulless project. The interaction of these discontinuous meanings within the text makes it inappropriate to discuss the fictions' transformations of imperialist ideology within a conceptual framework contained by a critic/apologist dichotomy, since neither the repudiations nor the vindications conform to the terms of reference used in arguments against and for imperialism. On the one hand the censure, which moves between the poles of social concern and moral testament, exceeds the boundaries of political debate and on the other, the affirmation of saving ideas postulates heterodox motives and ends at variance with imperialism's declared and covert ambitions. That the proffering of a visionary dimension to imperialism was doomed to fail was an irony that did not escape Conrad in his many meditations on the wasting of utopian desire when attached to pragmatic purposes and immoral goals. All the same, the effect of seeking to recover the spiritual forces at work or incipient in imperialism is to arrest the reappraisal of beliefs demanded by the fiction's arguments and revelations, even as it stands as a sign of the principle of hope.

If imperialism's terms of seeing are confuted by the texts, they are also restored through being rewritten in forms more acceptable to advocates of moral conscience, where they serve to prolong the life of disreputable justifications and vindicate the sophistries of an extravagantly mystified rationale. But since the ethos of the existing system has been discredited and cannot be exonerated, alternative bases for allegiance are insinuated by appeals to ethnic solidarity and protestations of the spiritual value inhering in patriotism that ask no questions of the principles to which the race is dedicated or the goals to which the nation aspires. With the intercession of this discourse, the texts themselves become accomplices in the life-lie necessary to the existence of a world that can neither be defended nor disavowed, and as moral authority is restored to a civilisation which has been exposed to be in a state of moral disarray, the fictions' stark representation of imperialism as the very figure of a ruthless triumphalism is clothed in veils of sentiment and idealism. Ironically it was a minor collaborative work, *The Inheritors* (1901), a political fantasy written with Ford Maddox Hueffner/Ford (and which he felt called upon to defend from hostile reviewers although his own part in the writing had been small) that Conrad, in a passage to which he certainly contributed even if the cadences are not characteristically his, registered an unequivocal protest against the absolute depen-