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CONRAD AND SARTRE

One of the main reasons for the failure of so many past critics in their attempts to pigeonhole Conrad into a precise literary category was his defiance of dogmatic classification — his individualism both as a person and as a novelist. Conrad is a romantic, yet his romanticism is not quite English nor wholly Polish. He is a realist but his realism is different from that of other literary men of his age. He is an impressionist, yet his impressionism is but one of the many aspects of his art of fiction. He certainly is not a mere spinner of romantic sea yarns nor, as some critics suggest, a political novelist, for his main intention was not to grapple with tangible, contemporary problems. It is obvious that Conrad belongs to no school. His achievements, he would have us believe, are simply due to the fact that he followed his instinct: "the voice from inside."

This intense individualism of Conrad justifies an examination of his work in the light of existentialist thinking, since existentialism is not a clear-cut philosophical doctrine and the single essential feature shared by its chief literary exponents is "their perfervid individualism."[1] Jean-Paul Sartre has been largely responsible for the dramatization of existentialism in literature, and his work reveals some remarkable similarities with Conrad's fiction as well as significant differences.

Sartre views man as a creature conceived for no specific purpose and subject to an indifferent fate; he considers his freedom to be unlimited and therefore expressed in purely arbitrary preferences. Perhaps if all Sartre wanted to express were the pointlessness of man's existence, he would not be much different from a writer like Hardy, whose heroes face the unjust and senseless verdicts of destiny, and rebel against them. But Sartre (and Conrad) goes farther than a mere expression of a protest against blind destiny. The core of his work is the preoccupation with man's commitment and decision, man's loneliness in the universe, man's contradictory nature. Man chooses himself by his commitment and thus becomes

the sole arbiter of his freedom. Existence means freedom, but this freedom is that Nothingness in man's heart which compels the human reality to *make* itself, instead of *being* itself. This extreme vision of human freedom serves to emphasize the dominant themes of existentialism: the "either-or" quality of man's lot, the unpredictability of his life, his guilt and feelings of anxiety, and his final limit of death. The full realization of man's mortality forces man to make the choice of his life, which is an authentic choice *because* it is made face to face with death.

In *Nausea* (first published in 1938) Sartre tells the story of Antoine Roquentin, a French writer who keeps a brutally frank diary. This hero is possessed by an overwhelming sensation of nausea which he experiences both in himself and in the outer world of his reality:

> So this is Nausea: this blinding evidence? I have scratched my head over it! I've written about it. Now I know: I exist—the world exists—and I know that the world exists. That's all. It makes no difference to me. It's strange that everything makes so little difference to me: it frightens me.[2]

It is clear that this "nausea" has a symbolic value and that it is intended not only to express Roquentin's and Sartre's disgust with reality but also Sartre's vision of the world's absurdity. This conception of the alienness of the world is perhaps the main tenet of existentialism.

Conrad too was aware of the absurdity and the inscrutability of nature and the human condition. As early as 1898 he professed his belief to Cunninghame Graham that

> there is no morality, no knowledge, and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world . . . that is always but a vain and floating appearance.[3]

He did not think it was worth troubling about the fate of humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold. He favoured the attitude of "cold unconcern" as the only reasonable approach to life, suspecting that perhaps our appointed task on this earth is indeed only "the unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness."[4] Conrad is resigned, for he has no faith with which to counteract his sceptical view of mankind's progress. Life, he tells us in his novels and stories, is a fascinating spectacle despite its horrors and tragedies, and sometimes because of them. It most assuredly merits the artist's effort to record his impressions.

Conrad's treatment of his heroes shows the fundamental difference between his idea of man's destiny and that of Sartre. Though life may be purely a spectacle,

Conrad asserts, it should not be an object of despair. Hence, the failure and the futility of man's efforts are not necessarily synonymous with defeat. On the contrary, defeat may be an affirmation of the ideal value of things. The idealism that is capable of triumphing in defeat is expressed by the concept of fidelity, one of the basic ideas that stand out clearly in Conrad's men and women. He carried this notion of fidelity, with which he was imbued in his childhood and at sea, into the field of letters. It made him truly a slave of the writers' galley, where, chained voluntarily, he laboured with scrupulous, unflagging perseverance. Having isolated himself as an artist, he unfolded his particular vision of humanity, looking at it and at himself with the perfect detachment of distance. It is to this Olympian isolation of Conrad that we owe the inimitable portrait of man struggling against terrific powers — the forces of nature and destiny, or a morbid obsession with an idea.

This picture of the solitary individual is often a dramatization of Conrad's own misery and disillusionment, as indeed Sartre's disgust with life may reflect his reaction to the world which produced dictatorships, concentration-camps, and the horrors of genocide. Both Conrad and Sartre are preoccupied with a *motif* which is recurrent in modern literature: it is the now familiar theme of man's insufficiency, alienation, and guilt. Both writers knew great unhappiness in their youth. Conrad grew up in the atmosphere of national defeat and frustration that followed the ill-omened Polish insurrection of 1863. A son of exiles, soon an orphan and emigré, he knew the meaning of death and defeat. Sartre matured in the pre-war France, torn by inner dissension and strife; he too learned the meaning of defeat under German occupation and came to the paradoxical conclusion that his fellow countrymen had first to be crushed before they could understand the meaning of liberty.

In such works as *Nausea* or the play *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*) Sartre ridicules mankind and humanism; Conrad's works, while also revealing the lack of ethical aim in the world and the anguish of living, are often a limpid exposition of good and evil. The distinction between the two is made clear by the personal code of decency and faithfulness of their heroes. Sartre's characters do not have any code of behaviour except in the sense of an unpredictable commitment they make in a moment of desperation.

Conrad the philosopher or, more accurately, Conrad the letter-writer, may censure mankind severely and condemn its morals and its religions; Conrad the novelist creates unhappy, persecuted, and lonely figures, driven to self-destruction and struck down by forces beyond their control. But these characters are not neces-

sarily depressing or disgusting as are Sartre's. In many instances, their destiny is tragic because they have the making of great men, and because their own shortcomings as well as chance bring about their downfall; moreover, often the self-sacrifice of Conrad's suffering man has a purifying effect upon him, and it reveals to him the ideal conception of his own personality—the essence of his existence as a human being. For example, Lord Jim and Razumov (in *Under Western Eyes*) have no true knowledge of themselves. When they discover their own cowardice (in a truly Sartrian preoccupation with the subject), they seek death as a solution to their problems, as a means of moral redemption and perhaps also as a means of self-assertion — their final act of free will.

When Sartre deals with a similar problem he does not recognize the morality of liberation and salvation, for his "free" individuals are forever in a state of conflict with other men. In his *Existentialism and Humanism*[5] Sartre considers *his* view of human existence as optimistic because it gives man a chance to shape his own destiny. "There is no other universe," Sartre avers, "except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity."[6] And it is the eternal presence of man, not within himself but in a human universe, that Sartre calls existential humanism. It is the relation of man's transcendence with subjectivity. Man is his sole legislator, and he alone must make his decisions.

The treatment of love and sex by these two writers again presents similarities and differences. Both Conrad and Sartre show the fundamental loneliness and apartness of man from woman even in situations commonly considered to be intimate. But Conrad's lovers are romantic and rather chivalrous souls, often torn by a conflict between their passion and their sense of honour. Love to Conrad is either a brusque or chivalrous tenderness of man toward woman and the passive submission of the latter; or else it is a consuming passion which is as paralyzing to the hero as the self-probing restlessness of a Jim. Men and women fall under the spell of its illusion only to find the dream turn into a nightmare. The romantic dream and the realistic nightmare are both characterized by separateness, and they are symbolic of man's inability to come really close to another human being.

Even when the end of the love affairs is not tragic, as in the case of George and Rita in the autobiographical book *The Arrow of Gold,* and the lovers are reunited for a while, they must share "a perfect detachment from all mundane affairs." Rita leaves George because she realizes that an integral life to George cannot be an existence of love alone.

Love and sex mean something totally different to Sartre. He is openly

cynical in his attitude toward the former. There can be no true love where the relationship of one individual toward another is based only on conflict and dominance. In Sartre's works sex is blatant, aggressive and usually associated with physical filth and images suggesting revulsion. Where Conrad speaks of the tragedy of noble souls that cannot come to terms with the harsh realities of life, Sartre paints scenes of amorality and vacuousness, shocking to the squeamish mind.

In the story "Intimacy" the relationship between Lulu and Henri is anything but a romantic picture of marital bliss; the title is ironic, for theirs is a brutal and quite heartless sort of intimacy. Henri and Lulu sleep naked in the same bed and are shown in some of the more sordid physical aspects of their domesticity (soiled underwear and *urinoirs* seem to be especially fascinating to Sartre). What links them together is not love but an abject, slavish and masochistic submission on Henri's part and a somewhat sadistic and cynical affection of Lulu for her husband. Conventional morality simply does not exist for these people. Yet it is to Sartre's credit that he makes his characters come alive and their vices not quite wicked.

In "Erostratus" Sartre gives an almost clinical, yet fictionally successful, analysis of a sexual deviate and criminal. Erostratus (Paul Hilbert) is but a poor shadow of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and his dream of power. The dominant emotion is again a kind of nausea — a profound disgust Paul Hilbert has for *other* men. It is little wonder that, after shooting his victim, he winds up in a public lavatory with one bullet left in his revolver, which he has kept for himself. At the last moment, however, he does not have the courage to shoot himself, and he throws away his revolver, opening the door through which captors will reach him. He has made his decision.

If one agrees with Mr. Moser's recent interpretation of Conrad's attitude toward love and sex,[7] one can easily draw an analogy with Sartre's treatment of the same subjects. Mr. Moser points out the shift in Conrad's themes, from explorations into moral failure in the masculine world (that had enabled him to achieve artistic success) to the frustrating subject of love. Conrad's negative attitude toward love should not be shocking or surprising, Mr. Moser asserts, since Conrad sees man as lonely and morally isolated, troubled by egoistic longing for power and peace, stumbling along a perilous past, his only hope benumbing labour or, in rare cases, a little self-knowledge. Conrad could not possibly reconcile so gloomy a view with a belief in the panacea of love, wife, home, and family. Thus, the effect of sexual subject matter on Conrad's creative processes was inhibiting and crippling.

It is difficult, however, to accept the psychoanalytical theory that love is the

key to the understanding of Conrad's works. The spectacle of "menacing female sexuality" (not unlike that of Sartre's heroines) which Mr. Moser finds almost everywhere and the persistent implication that Conrad and his heroes are sexually impotent, cannot give a full explanation of Conrad's protagonists. Sex alone does not account for the passivity of his women, nor for the diffidence of his men. Polish and European Romantic writers, Conrad's experiences as a sailor, and, above all, the tradition of patriarchal Polish landed gentry from which Conrad came — these are some of the *other* factors that undoubtedly influenced his treatment of love.

As an uncompromising atheist Sartre denies the existence of God; faith in God is a myth which gives men a false feeling of security and prevents them from assuming the full, anguished responsibility of making their own choice. Man's freedom, therefore, means freedom from any illusory myth, freedom to make his own world. By the negation of all myths (and this could mean men's past civilization) and by the realization of nothingness a person can achieve the state of absolute freedom.

Conrad resembles both Sartre and Dostoevsky in their pictures of lives that are full of melodramatic fury and shocking violences. But where Sartre quarrels with the established human institutions, Dostoevsky and Conrad are more concerned with the duality of the human soul and the struggle within it. Yet Conrad differs from Sartre and Dostoevsky, for he does not expound either the theories of atheism or the gospel of Christianity. None of his several versions of a Don Quixote is as Christ-like as Myshkin, but each is as detached from the circumstances of ordinary life as Dostoevsky's saintly but often ridiculous figure. Heyst, Jim, and Lingard have no religion. What make them resemble Don Quixote and Myshkin is the conclusion that may be drawn from their lives — that man's agony and loneliness are futile, yet worth telling.

Dostoevsky always seeks for God and man's salvation through God. In Conrad's work there is no such search. Conrad finds Christianity distasteful and irritating although he acknowledges it is "great, improving, softening, compassionate." He resents its "impossible standards and the anguish it has brought to innumerable souls — on this earth."[8]

One need not suppose that such irascible comment is close to Sartre's militant atheism; indeed, nothing could be more misleading. If anything, Conrad's protagonists evince all the good qualities of an "improving, softening, compassionate" faith even when there is no adherence to formal religion among them. What Conrad preaches, if he can be said to preach at all, is the gospel of individuality:

> Everybody must walk in the light of his own gospel . . . No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That's my view of life—a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas and principles of other people's making. These are a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me.[9]

However, while man must retain his own self, from which he cannot escape, he should not forget the ties that bind him to the human community. This is the moral law that can be deduced from all of his writings. The Fichtean dictum, "Act according to thy own conviction of duty," expresses Conrad's beliefs. An erroneous conviction of man's duty, which opposes the principle of Human Solidarity, is always punished. Those of Conradian individualists who smack of the Nietzschean superman suffer the fate Melville assigned to Ahab — that is, total defeat.

Conrad also distinguishes the two central themes of freedom and negation. But the metaphysical and moral conclusions that can be deduced from the behaviour of his heroes are quite different from those of Sartre. It is true that men like Decoud (in *Nostromo*) commit suicide when faced with the crushing state of loneliness and nothingness. After three days of total isolation on a deserted island, Decoud begins to doubt his own existence. From a mere outward condition of living, solitude has become for him a state of soul in which neither irony nor skepticism has a meaning. His individuality disintegrates so swiftly because there is no faith to hold it together, nor any sustaining illusion of an independent existence.

In Sartre the universe is metaphysically void and therefore confrontation with emptiness does not have a destructive influence upon the hero; in Conrad, on the other hand, the sudden awareness of such metaphysical emptiness is fatal. Moreover, it is by dint of a positive identification with some ethical code of behaviour that the Conradian hero achieves his personal freedom of choice and thereby his moral redemption.

Perhaps the main distinction between the Sartrean hero (*e.g.*, Orestes in *The Flies*, who sets himself free from his final myth) and the Conradian protagonist, lies in the fact that the former becomes himself only when he recognizes the nothingness, the pointlessness of the world — when he can make the authentic choice in terms "Rather death than . . . . " Thus, Orestes can achieve no help from supernatural sources and he himself must assume the guilt when he appears before Jupiter, who serves as a kind of a cosmic Gestapo chief.

In Conrad's fiction, the unreflecting hero has no trouble at all in making the right decision; it is those who think too much and have no attachment to society

or some ideal that succumb to the forces of nature or to evil without a struggle or escape from life by self-destruction. Others find their true selves *precisely* at the moment of the *right* decision, the moral decision of their lives, which sets them free in the sense that they as individuals are permitted to respond to their personal concept of fidelity. Even in the extreme example of a man like Heyst (of *Victory*), whose egoism and philosophic alienation from the world are his and Lena's undoing, we have the moment of redemption, implied perhaps by the title. Of course, one may view such redemption as essentially ironic, since their mutual self-sacrifice appears to be a confirmation of the tragic senselessness of man's destiny. Yet though Heyst speaks with an accent of unconcealed despair at the end of the novel, his suicide is, paradoxically enough, the ultimate manifestation of his redemption: it symbolizes his return to humanity. Heyst has been punished for the betrayal of human solidarity.

Conrad's characters are not happy people, but the state of happiness is not excluded from their lives as an impossibility. Indeed, sometimes they achieve a state of exalted happiness at the moment of the supreme self-sacrifice (*e.g.*, Lord Jim). Sartre's view of man's birth as a wrong that cannot be righted eliminates happiness. What brings Sartre and Conrad together is their interest in man's morality.

Sartre's attitude is one of absolutism. His heroes are cast into desperate situations and are left to themselves, to make use of their freedom to act as individuals, to make the all-or-nothing decision of their lives. Man's situation, as Sartre studies it, is meaningless, but occasionally his protagonists act as idealistically as those of Conrad although their affirmation seems perhaps sullied by his "nauseated" view of humanity. Thus, in his story "The Wall" the anonymous hero goes through the tortures of waiting for his own execution; when he finally makes his choice for the positive freedom of self sacrifice, he does not seem to understand the reasons for his courage. He does not like Ramon Gris, but he would rather die than betray him. The act of courage is performed almost nonchalantly. The hero is amused by the insignificance of it all.

> Undoubtedly I thought highly of him: he was tough. But this was not the reason that I consented to die in his place; his life had no more value than mine; no life had value . . . .
> I thought to hell with Spain and anarchy; nothing was important. Yet I was there, I could save my skin and give up Gris and I refused to do it. I found that somehow comic; it was obstinacy. I thought, "I must be stubborn!" and a droll sort of gaiety spread over me.[10]

When the *falangistas* come for an answer he tells them that Gris is hiding in the

vault of a cemetery — a piece of information he believes to be a lie but which, by uncanny (or shall we say cynical) coincidence proves to be true.

It is interesting to note that at this moment of his courage the man feels stunned and malicious rather than proud; and he regards this heroic part of himself as belonging to someone else.

> . . . this prisoner obstinately playing the hero, these grim falangistas with their moustaches and their men in uniform running among the graves; it was irresistibly funny.[11]

His reaction upon learning the truth about the capture of Gris is a state approaching hysteria: he laughs so hard that he cries. Sartre has made his point: life is absurd, incongruous. Still, we are left with the impression of a courageous man; also with the impression that Sartre tends to be cynical where Conrad is merely ironic or detached.

Yet neither this story nor the play *No Exit* (which also deals with the problem of collaboration with the enemy) shows an intrinsic interest in the problem itself. Sartre does not delve into the deeper moral issues of betrayal and redemption that preoccupy Conrad in so many of his works. The sole moral issue here seems to be that of the hero's personal character, or, more precisely, the issue whether or not he is a coward. Sartre will not admit any heroic dimensions in man, which is consistent with his theory of existentialism. Not for Sartre's heroes the "eternal constancy" or the "shadowy ideal of conduct" of a Jim; nor the inner moral conflict which plagues numerous Conradian characters. Only a few of Conrad's heroes are of the anti-hero type, while most of the Sartrean protagonists belong in this category. The Conradian hero also fails in his self-sacrifice, but at least he has undergone a moral purgation or he has made a case for an affirmative attitude toward life by drawing a clear distinction between good and evil. When his world is absurd it is, like Kafka's, ironically absurd.

That is why Conrad cannot be regarded as a political or social novelist even though some of his books contain an indictment against the social conditions of his time. Sartre's novels, plays and stories are consciously intellectual; Conrad discusses politics less for the sake of making a point and more in order to lay bare the souls of his protagonists. Thus, the chief problem in *Under Western Eyes* is not anarchism and Conrad's treatment of the Russians, but Razumov—his moral struggle, his tortured conscience. Yet both writers are fundamentally concerned with the individual.

The world of Sartre is ugly, sickening and nightmarish. One cannot upbraid him for it; the reality of France as he knew it before and during the war was not

pretty. But it is one thing to observe evil, filth and chaos; it is another to see nothing but those. Sartre's view of life as a vast nastiness and absurd existence is perhaps too one-sided to be universally true.

Conrad's vision of the world is more rewarding aesthetically as well as morally. He too has lost his illusions, but not a sense of human values. Sartre reveals the incongruous and the pathological in man, Conrad his moral complexity. Conrad's world is as sad as that of Sartre, but only the latter is depressing in the final count. Sartre seems to be rationalizing on the theme of resistance to evil, and occasionally his analysis of the relationship of the evil-doer and his victim is brilliant. Rarely does he present Conrad's timeless issues of man's success and failure, of his terrible loneliness when he plunges into a moral conflict with himself.

Perhaps we might sum up the difference between the two writers thus: Sartre's characters cannot attain to tragedy for, by definition, they exist in a metaphysical emptiness; Conrad's heroes may suffer as much as Sartre's do — they almost invariably meet with a violent death or languish in solitude — but even in their extreme state of isolation or defeat they are an affirmation of human fidelity and compassion. Their destiny can arouse in the reader the feelings of catharsis, without which there can be no perception of tragedy; Sartre's cannot, for his view of the universe of man and nature as absurd excludes the possibility of tragedy, which presupposes the existence of some ethical pattern of behaviour.

In Conrad we find the self-conscious and often moralizing Marlow, to serve as a foil to Kurtz; the romantic dreamers like Lord Jim, Lingard and Stein, and the stern men of the sea, dedicated to their ideals of service. Conrad's vision is not one of stark tragedy alone, but Sartre's is almost always a view of implacable darkness from which no one is permitted to withdraw, where men have nearly lost their humanity.

NOTES

1. Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 11.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1959), p. 165.
3. G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1927), I, p. 226.
4. Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1924), p. 92.
5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1948). This book is a lecture delivered in Paris in 1945 and published in French in 1946 while Sartre was in the U.S. Subsequently it was disavowed by him as too one-sided in its apologetics.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

7. Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).
8. *Letters from Conrad,* ed. Edward Garnett (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1928), p. 265.
9. Letter to E. L. Noble, quoted by Jean-Aubry, *op. cit.,* I, p. 184.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Intimacy and Other Stories,* trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: Avon Publications, 1948), pp. 134-135.
11. *Ibid.,* p. 136.