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“SOMETHING ESSENTIALLY DIFFICULT TO APPROACH”:
CONRAD, WOOLF, AND ROMANTIC ABSTRACTION

When Joseph Conrad died, Virginia Woolf wrote: “One opens his pages and feels as Helen must have felt when she looked in her glass and realized that, do what she would, she could never in any circumstances pass for a plain woman” (*Essays* IV 227). Woolf gave Conrad’s style high praise, but the terms she offers associate it with remoteness from human character and relations. Helen, after all, was the ideal for which men abandoned their families in order to be heroes. Woolf’s use of Conrad in *The Voyage Out* has been well-documented;¹ but the persistent echoes through her later fiction, and the ambivalent attitudes of her essays, remain relatively unexamined and unconnected. In fact, the association with Helen suggests themes that would recur in Woolf’s essays again and again: Conrad stands for the inhumanity of the solitary solipsist, for the dangerous allure of abstract thought.

Conrad, she proclaimed, in 1920, “is a romantic writer. Romantic writers die young” (*Essays* III 229). This is a review of *The Rescue*, and what is odd about her claim is that most critics associate Conrad’s “romantic” phase not with the earlier novels she considers successful romance but with the later novels she disparages as disillusioned. Though the relative valuation of these phases of his career is fairly constant—in the century since, few champion *The Rescue* over *Lord Jim*—the reasons for the valuation are opposite. Yet, for Woolf, the Romantic side of Conrad is of a piece with the abstracting Conrad she criticizes—she likes Conrad not for his modern qualities, but as a quasi-Victorian author, romantic because beguilingly prone to simplification.

She is generally skeptical of Conrad’s treatment of human interactions. She writes of Conrad’s work from *Nostramo* onwards that, for him,

this world of civilized and self-conscious people is based upon “a few very simple ideas”; but where, in the world of thoughts and personal relations, are

¹ E.g., DeKoven, Wollaeger.

we to find them? There are no masts in drawing-rooms . . . Seeking and not finding such supports, the world of Conrad's later period has about it an involuntary obscurity, an inconclusiveness, almost a disillusionment which baffles and fatigues. We lay hold in the dusk only of the old nobilities and sonorities: fidelity, compassion, honour, service—beautiful always, but now a little wearily reiterated, as if times had changed. (*Essays* IV 232)

“Times had changed” is a variation on a familiar Woolf theme, but here there is a little less of that suggestive wit of multiple possibilities that accompanies her line regarding December 1910 (*Essays* III 421); instead, for her, Conrad's changed times close off options for imaginative visions of humanity and human experience. Her criticisms of style, as well-counterbalanced by defense as they are, relate to this same problem: Conrad's style, she thinks, is static, unable to deal with the flux of human relations rather than the abstract “old nobilities.” The terms of her critique have to do with stillness: “The demon which attends Mr Conrad's genius is the demon of languor, of monotony, of an inertness such as we see in the quiescence of the caged tiger. In *Nostramo* the tiger broods superb, supine, but almost completely immobile” (*Essays* II 227). This sounds harmless, as though the mistake is the failure of style to spring into violent action; but she goes on to write,

in a novel we demand something more than still life, and where the still life is thus superbly designed we want humanity as largely modeled and inspired by vitality deep and passionate in proportion to the magnificence of the conception. As is apt to be the case with any work by Mr Conrad, his characters have the rare quality of erring on the side of largeness. The gestures with which they move upon his wide stage are uniformly noble; and the phrases lavished upon them are beautiful enough to be carved for ever upon the pedestals of statues. But when critics speak of the “failure” of *Nostramo* it is probable that they refer to something inanimate and stationary in the human figures which chills our warmer sympathies. (II 227-228)

There is overlap here between the warmth of “languor” and the “chill” with which she concludes that belies their apparent distance. A still tiger should not be the same as a sculpture, but they both have to do with *not moving*, and so she implies continuity between the potential weakness of the style at its best and the failings she associates with the late turn. The sculptural, heroic stasis is deeply bound up in what Woolf views as Conrad's strengths as well as his weaknesses—“Mr Conrad, no doubt, would be a greater writer if, besides honouring the quiet deeps of the heart, he felt also its storms and transiencies, if he were dramatic as well as static, instant and direct as well as composed and compassionate” (*Essays* II 292). In

other words, Conrad's strengths are in his coolness, in his ability to look at matters with judicious care rather than sudden emotion: "His conspicuous merit is that he is compassionate, courageous and just" (*Essays* III 291). Though Woolf is not ironizing these virtues, they are not for her the *only* virtues—they could as well, perhaps better, be applied to a statesman as a novelist—and the absence of directness, of kinship to emotional transiencies, relates Conrad to a particular type of character in her novels: the cool figure in solitude who disdains emotional connections to others in order to pursue some form of intransiency: high ideals and achievement.

There is a particular cluster of images Woolf takes from Conrad, associated with the potential sacrifices made in a single-minded pursuit of truth. In *Victory*, Conrad describes Axel Heyst's relationship with his father:

It is not the clear-sighted who lead the world. Great achievements are accomplished in a blessed, warm mental fog, which the pitiless cold blasts of the father's analysis had blown away from the son. (88-89)

The dynamic traced here—clear vision as destruction, harsh disillusionment as erosive of human happiness and achievement—appears in several forms in Woolf's fiction. In *The Waves*, Woolf has Bernard say of Louis:

... we waited his approval, seldom given. His ascendancy was resented, as Percival's was adored. Prim, suspicious, lifting his feel like a crane, there was yet a legend that he had smashed a door with his naked fist. But his peak was too bare, too stony for that kind of mist to cling to it. He was without those simple attachments by which one is connected with another. He remained aloof; enigmatic; a scholar capable of that inspired accuracy which has something formidable about it. (209)

Analysis and accuracy, respectively, stand for the forces that dispel the potentially useful fog. But whereas Conrad's fog has to do with how the man it clings to perceives reality, Woolf's has to do with how others perceive him. The image avoids suggesting that the "mist" which Percival apparently has is in tension with reality, whereas in Conrad the opposition is defined by the sardonic ironies attaching equally to "clear-sighted" and to the "blessed, warm mental fog": the one undercut because of its destructiveness, the other because of its obliviousness.

The ironies in Woolf are different: the question of "truth" does not enter into it. Instead, it is displaced by the more relative "Accuracy," which is a suspect quality in Woolf; James Ramsay thinks his father speaks with "some secret conceit at his own accuracy of judgement. What he said was true. It was always true. He was

incapable of untruth” (4). In Conrad, clear vision of abstract truth can be invidious to others—as occurs with Heyst’s father transferring his views to his son—but it most primarily is a danger to oneself. In Woolf, by contrast, clear vision of abstraction is primarily selfish. Mr. Ramsay, too, is associated with the dispersal of clouds: “Naturally, if one’s days were passed in this seeing of angular essences, this reducing of lovely evenings, with all their flamingo clouds and blue and silver to a white four-legged table . . . , naturally one could not be judged like an ordinary person” (23). Whereas a disillusioning “clear vision” can ambush characters in Conrad, it is something Woolf’s characters have to deliberately search it out. What is threatening about Conrad for Woolf, the reason she adapts the line from *Victory* so drastically, is that it suggests that refraining from searching after truth means not just living in the immediacy of life, but living in an active lie. Mr. Ramsay’s way *reduces* reality; it leaves things out, like the (here literal) clouds which have no place due to their lack of angular essentialness.

Louis, the businessman, thus has a startling congruency with Mr. Ramsay: the search for approval he inspires in those around him; the solitude; Louis being like a crane as Mr. Ramsay is said “to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone” (44). In a draft of the novel the passage about Louis above included the line, “His autocratic mind exerted its sway” (666). Louis himself says, “I roll the dark before me, spreading commerce where there was chaos in the far parts of the world” (143). This is the language of *Heart of Darkness*, but it also compares to Mr. Ramsay, who faces the “dark of human ignorance” (44). By stressing the mentally-constructing side of the mistless outlook, Woolf sidesteps the Conradian sense of threatening truths lurking beneath things, and emphasizes this outlook as an active work of the mind, estranged in some ways from reality—cold, remote, like the characters in *Nostramo*. Louis, a “peak” without mist “cling[ing]” to him, in fact resembles the forbidding qualities Woolf ascribes to Conrad himself: “Still,” she wrote upon his death, “there clings to the genius of Conrad something essentially, and not accidentally, difficult to approach” (*Essays* IV 227). She then goes on to talk about his lack of wide popularity, to imagine a hypothetical reader bored by the style: “He was self-conscious and stiff and ornate, they complain, and the sound of his own voice was dearer to him than the voice of humanity in its anguish. The criticism is familiar, and as difficult to refute as the remarks of deaf people when *Figaro* is played” (*Essays* IV 228). The defense here is full-throated, but there is the lurking presence of the incongruity that her own lines about the “still life” of *Nostramo*, to which “nothing would be more out of keeping than an offering of tears” (*Essays* II 228) represent an essentially similar complaint about the absence of the “humanity in its anguish.”

The question has become inextricable from style, too; this passage also includes the line about Helen. In Woolf’s novels, the sacrifice of aspiration is usually on

behalf of beauty in some form—as in *To the Lighthouse*—but she perceived in Conrad a risk that beauty itself seemed to become the distant ideal, a sign of aspiration and of rejection of human immediacy, a Helen-object. Thus she loves Conrad’s style under very particular circumstances:

he must be lost indeed to the meaning of words who does not hear in that rather stiff and somber music, with its reserve, its pride, its vast and implacable integrity, how it is better to be good than bad, how loyalty is good and honesty and courage, though ostensibly Conrad is concerned merely to show us the beauty of a night at sea. (*Essays* IV 228)

Simple virtues found in a routine between man and nature: this, to Woolf, is the safe form of stylistic magnificence. Her love of early Conrad is based on the claim that “his characters ... were fundamentally simple and heroic ... in conflict with Nature, but at peace with man” (*Essays* IV 228). In other words, to Woolf, Conrad is at his best when his implacable authority is at the service of a return to the details of experience (the sea at night) and the simplest moral sentiments (it being better to be good than bad). This places Conrad into the category of Septimus Smith’s deathbed revelations: “Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want?” (149) In the critique of *Nostromo* for its failure at character she praises its sensual details in identical terms: “The sun is hot, the shadows profound, the earth weighted and veined with silver” (*Essays* III 227). Only its human beings, as seen above, want passion and vitality.

The problems seem to arise for Woolf when this voice of pride and reserve approaches people and their experiences, which by her view, must be approached without reserve, with directness, and with all due attention paid to the misty imprecision and inaccuracy of experience. An image extremely close to the “too bare, too stony” example and the original from *Victory* occurs in a different context in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily Briscoe prepares to paint:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. (158)

Woolf’s attitude towards this has little if any tint of critique, and this vision of the artist as one who inevitably is exposed to the risks of solitary truth, bereft at least momentarily of those cherished “simple attachments,” is closely related to Louis and Mr. Ramsay. The difference is Lily’s wariness of it: “Here she was again, she

thought, stepping back to look at it, drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people into the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers—this other thing, this truth, this reality” (158). Truth as an enemy “roused one to perpetual combat, challenged one to a fight in which one was bound to be worsted” (158). Truth, in this configuration, is antithetical to life and human connection; it is only when she finds “some rhythm which was dictated to her ... by what she saw” (159) that she is able to paint, losing consciousness both of “outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance” (159). She cannot let herself be an active, combative consciousness engaged in an inevitable combat with truth: this is the situation of a Conrad novel, and it is the danger Lily must escape.

Woolf’s criticisms of Conrad show that in some respects he fits into the larger edifice of her attitude towards her various predecessors. There is a parallel between her comments on Conrad and those on Milton, the “first of the masculinists,” for instance:

He deals in horror & immensity & squalor & sublimity, but never in the passions of the human heart. ... The inexpressible fineness of the style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing in to, long after the surface business in progress has been despatched. ... Moreover, though there is nothing like Lady Mabeth’s terror or Hamlet’s cry, no pity or sympathy or intuition, the figures are majestic ... (*Diary I* 193)

Yet it is worth noting that despite the similarities, there are certain elements of difference. Milton never has the association with the static through which she criticizes Conrad, perhaps because his characters never seem to live enough for her for their stillness to be a problem, though her description of being arrested “gazing in to” the style seems analogous. Conversely, Conrad does not earn Milton’s explicit association with “masculinism,” though many critics have justly made this connection themselves. In particular, Shirley Neuman’s analysis of *Heart of Darkness* in *Mrs. Dalloway* puts Woolf’s attitude in terms of illusion, relevant to the problems of philosophical skepticism at issue here: “Marlow does characterize women as the guardians of civilization, but theirs is also a benighted world which demands a lie to maintain is ‘saving illusion’. A saving illusion remains nonetheless an illusion” (66). Conrad seems to have a suspicion that no matter how necessary illusions were—which he associates at times with women, at times with masculine heroic codes, and which stretch through nearly every form of human aspiration—they remain illusions. This idea, to Woolf, is an assault on what the real stuff of life is. Her view of late Conrad as somehow more “disillusioned” [cite]

than early Conrad may be a misreading of Conrad, but it does reflect the pervasive sense of the *danger* of disillusionment and cynicism continually and explicitly evoked by late Conrad in particular, the need of characters to be on guard and reject it. At the end of *Victory*, Heyst announces: “Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life!” (383) That “mistrust of life” is associated with seeing it too clearly; Conrad here agrees with Woolf. But whereas Conrad gives a harshly rational tinge to this enterprise, feeling the dangers of clear vision as a kind of inevitable paradox, Woolf seems to view such vision as a volitional act, a choice some people happen to make with attendant costs they must struggle with. It is this that Lily is able to escape in her painting, by reducing both human personality and volition.

If late Conrad seems to Woolf a harsh rationalist, hyperaware of all potential self-deceptions even as he asserts the damage disillusionment can do, she views early Conrad as, in some sense, a purveyor of dreams—and a partisan of the same old truths discredited since the Victorian era. The passage about how “a single phrase, ‘He steered with care,’ coming at the end of a storm, carried in it a whole morality” (*Essays* IV 231), sounds a little like an unpoisoned version of the dart Woolf aimed at the Victorians, when she explained their deficiencies in characterization: “the undeniable vividness of so many of them is the result of their crudity. The character is rubbed into us indelibly because its features are so few and so prominent. We are given the keyword . . . , and then, since the choice of the keyword is astonishingly apt, our imaginations swiftly supply the rest” (*Essays* III 386). This is a vision of a world in order, where there is perfect continuity between a keyword and all features of character, where a phrase can be generalized to an entire morality. This connection also hints at the continuity between her various doubts about Conrad. She describes the “semi-transparent envelope” of life, and asks: “Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?” (*Essays* IV 160-161) Her twin visions of Conrad fit together as visions of a Conrad who is a partisan of order—ordering illusions expanding out of a Victorian-style key phrase; ordering disillusionment expanding out of a too-harsh emphasis on rationality. Out of the two versions of Conrad, only one repeatedly receives blame, despite these lurking similarities; the reason the quasi-Victorian Romantic escapes censure for the most part is that such an outlook merely fails to see the complexities of reality, rather than seeing them and deliberately ignoring them, as the outlook she attributes to disillusioned abstraction does. Conrad, she says, is baffled by changing times, rather than coming up with a new way of dealing with them.

Thus, Woolf rewrites Conrad in order to defend the value of things which, if he does not quite dismiss them as deceptive, he cannot stop looking at their deceptive

qualities. Eloquence is one of these. Bernard says, “When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness—I am nothing” (113). There is an echo here of *Heart of Darkness*:

A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. Oh, he struggled! he struggled! The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now—images of wealth and fame revolving obsequiously round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. (147)

The passages share a depiction of eloquence which conceals a dark emptiness at the center of the human soul—yet if the disconnect between the loftiness and the barren darkness drives Kurtz insane, it keeps Bernard the most balanced of the personalities of *The Waves*, the one who is given the task of summation at the end. Bernard’s smoke rings, with which he criticizes himself (compared to Louis, who “will write some words that may outlast us all”—113), are another iteration of Woolf’s suggestion that life itself is in the curling smoke, like the mist, like all the transitory bits of experience she praises so highly. Conrad’s language has “astonishing solidity” (*Essays* II 227), but lacks the flexible delicacy of the fog he seems both to want to see through and to advocate. Many of Woolf’s novelistic habits would develop out of this desire to defend mist and the rings of smoke, to make them a little more solid in connotation: Lily Briscoe thinks about her painting: “Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron” (171). The problem, for Woolf, is to get at the solid *through* the misty, to avoid seeing them in eternal opposition.

Yet there is also a critique of Conrad the Romantic, the illusionist instead of the disillusioner, and it returns to that question of simple characters opposed to complex ones suggested in the kinship between her views on Conrad and on the Victorians. She takes issue with Conrad’s essay on Alphonse Daudet, saying,

as he puts it it appears that the emotions of the sophisticates are of little moment compares with what goes on within the hearts of “simple and unknown men” traveling “a path of toilsome silence . . . with closed lips, or, maybe, whispering their pain softly—only to themselves”. But it is because we are looking through Mr Conrad’s eyes that we see the prospect drawn to this scale. Look through Donne’s eyes, through Racine’s, Molière’s, Jane Austen’s, and the insignificant pool is a deep ocean and the struggles of the victims of enthralling importance. (Ellipses are Woolf’s; *Essays* III 292)

This passage is a good example of Woolf's quarrel with Conrad the Romantic—here focusing on those “simple and unknown men”; it is also an extremely odd inverse of a very familiar argument; there is something unexpected about her apparent feeling that the emotions of sophisticates need defense.² Woolf is adopting an egalitarian form of argument—for the expansion of types of people valuable as subject matter in novels, for the grand scale of people currently being deemed petty—while rooting her argument in a long history of the traditional subject matter of literature. Next to Donne and Racine, Conrad's romanticism, she claims, is of recent vintage, so Woolf's opposition to Conrad tries to paint him as both a strange outgrowth on the tree of literature with only a limited area of expertise, and as someone who cannot change with the coming of modern times.

There is a question here about whether complexity and the transient are supposed to be an ancient heritage or part of the new sense of human nature she is so fond of announcing, and the reason Conrad provokes such conflicting responses in her is that he seems simultaneously to be behind the times, with a simplistic understanding of humanity no longer adequate to reality, and terrifyingly ahead of them, suggesting that illusions about the complex meanings of human experience can—though perhaps not should—be exposed to reveal an essentially non-human and indifferent reality.

Thus, her responses to Conrad take forms similar to Lily's renunciation, to thoughts in opposition to speech like Mr. Ramsay's that forecloses illusion. Clarissa Dalloway thinks, “she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that” (8-9). This is a denial not just of Victorian keyword characters, but to any disillusioning fixity which reduces the capacity of people to be in one moment something other than what they are now, of reality itself to be multiple and divided rather than singular, angular, and essential. The evils of accuracy, of precision, are ultimately about speaking as being harsh to the particularity of the world. The language about Mr. Ramsay being incapable of lying—more precisely, being incapable of refraining from saying the accurate

² Contrast, for instance, George Eliot's comments on the subject in *The Mill on the Floss*: “Mr Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers, and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too ...” (172) Woolf's point, apparently, is that the pride and obstinacy of the cultural elite are no less tragic than those of millers.

thing—echoes language on Conrad being incapable of stylistic flaws. To Woolf, Conrad's inability to refrain from beauty in style is also an inability to refrain from "saying," from destroying the intangible contingencies of the world by harsh accuracy, fixing everything into sculptural stasis.

When Woolf demands that the novelist "trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (*Essays* IV 161), she demands of her characters an arrest of the process of retrospective analytical reordering which is so central to Conrad's attempt to make sense of the senseless; in the essay on Henry James, which Woolf praises (*Essays* III 290-291), Conrad calls the artist one who is able to "interpret the experience of mankind" (17), but interpretation is exactly what Woolf's faithful recording novelist is not supposed to do, not supposed to bridge the disconnected and the incoherent, not supposed to roll order where there was chaos, and instead to allow, in some cases, the freedom of humanity to be ignorant, of Mrs. Dalloway to care for her roses instead of the Albanians (or Armenians). In Woolf's view Conrad's aesthetic limitations define a way of living of which her characters must be wary, and which they ultimately must reject.

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