INTRODUCTION

Nina Pelikan Straus identifies in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* a rhetorical and symbolic structure that proffers to male readers and critics an heroic and secret knowledge from which women are excluded. She observes that an investigation is necessary into 'the repressed irritation that *Heart of Darkness* produces as a type of highly artistic intimidation' of women. Such an investigation needs to be aimed not only at Conrad as artist, but at critics 'whose own autobiographical resonances are hidden within supposedly objective commentary.'[1] Straus's argument is compelling; therefore, as a male critic writing an introduction to a collection of essays on Conrad and gender, I shall not attempt to offer an 'objective' overview of the broad field of enquiry covered by this volume. Rather I would like to reflect on the topic in a way that registers, by including elements of the personal, some of the dilemmas and challenges that it offers.

Indeed, the problem of how to 'introduce' such a topic is not the least of these dilemmas. The essays in this volume are diverse but rich in their connections. They range over such matters as: sources and influences (Susan Jones's consideration of the importance of Marguerite Poradowska); Conrad's publishing strategies and sense of his potential readership (Laurence Davies on *Chance* and women readers); the literary consequences of Conrad's cultural displacement (Monika Elbert on *'Twixt Land and Sea*); the literary and sociological context of his portrayal of secret male worlds (Robert Hampson on Conrad, Thackeray, and Robert Louis Stevenson); the interlocking discourses of criminology, anthropology, imperialism and gender (Rebecca Stott on *The Secret Agent*); the gender-inflected contest between adventure story and Gothic in *Lord Jim* (Padmini Mongia); Conrad's representation of masculinity in relation to subjectivity and the emergence of modernism (Scott McCracken); and the implication

[1] Nina Pelikan Straus, 'The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' *Novel* 20 (1987), 123-37, 124.

of male readers in a chain of competing, self-revoking claims to masculine knowledge of women (Andrew Michael Roberts). Common themes and concerns emerge: gender and genre in the essays by Mongia and Jones; masculinity in those by Roberts, McCracken, and Hampson; and gender, colonialism, and ghostly representations of the feminine in those by Mongia and Stott. Four of the essays consider from very different perspectives the novel in which Conrad seems most explicitly engaged with feminist issues and gender relations: *Chance*. The conventions of an introduction, written only after one has read the work of the other contributors, yet placed first in the book, seem to pull me towards one of two unwanted alternatives: either by virtue of coming first to set the terms and context of the discussion, or by writing last to synthesize and draw conclusions. I feel in no position to do either of these, and would ask that this introduction be read as part of a dialogue which for me represents a process of learning from others and gradually developing a sense of my own position in relation to the forms of political and personal understanding which this dialogue continues to unsettle.

I recently read a plot summary of Conrad's *Lord Jim* (written for a reference work) which contained no mention of Jewel, the partly Malay and partly European woman who becomes Jim's partner in Patusan. Jewel is almost the only woman to appear in the book; and this omission of a woman whose life is carefully placed by Conrad within an obscure history of colonial displacement presumably reflected the summarizer's sense that she is marginal to the action of the story. She is indeed treated as marginal to the central issue of the moral development of the white, male protagonist Jim: by Jim himself (who deserts her to retrieve his sense of personal honour), by Marlow, by Stein. She is a focus of pathos and a symbol of Jim's sacrifice, but she is rhetorically established as a woman with no past and no future: she is first mentioned by Stein with the comment, '... I think there is a daughter left'; and she ends by 'leading a sort of soundless, inert life' in the house of the man who was so vague about her existence.[2] Even her name is a term of endearment bestowed by Jim; no other name is mentioned, in the absence of the father from whom it might come. This plot summary may seem a trivial example of critical exclusion, but it illustrates a process that the present volume seeks to resist: a process in

[2] *Lord Jim* (London: Dent, 1946), 220, 416. Further page references are given in the text.

which our reading of Conrad's texts *repeats* the ideological structures of inclusion and exclusion, domination and subordination, that they contain. Jim remarks gruffly to Marlow at one point 'There's Jewel ... I need not tell you what she is to me' (335). My contention is that we do need to tell, not only what (we think) Jewel is to Jim, but also what she is to us, what Jim is to us, what Conrad is to us.

This of course raises the question of who 'we' are. I would suggest that attention to ideas of gender and gendered structures and images within Conrad's work brings the position of the reader and the manner of reading into question. We are led to reflect on the critical discourse surrounding Conrad's texts (not only academic discourse, but the discourse which is created whenever any reader thinks and speaks about the experience of reading). The political force of a discussion of gender in literature is as much directed towards readers as towards the writer. This volume is not, at least in my understanding, about the question: 'Was Conrad sexist?' That question is as valid as any other piece of psycho-biographical speculation, and is a line of enquiry which has been pursued by Bernard C. Meyer, who considers what he regards as Conrad's 'underlying general distrust of all women.'[3] But as a way of thinking about what Conrad's work has to offer and what status we accord it, the question seems limiting in demanding a judgment of simple rejection or acceptance. I do not belive that it is very illuminating to isolate an author's apparent attitudes and beliefs from their socio-historical context and to judge him or her by the extent to which they conform to our own ('our own' being of course various). Nor do I believe that one can dismiss questions of racism and sexism by saying that an author reflected the attitudes of his or her time or social group or upbringing. Instead of either of these alternatives, we need to understand the interpretative process in terms of a complex model which acknowledges the culturally and historically relative nature of political judgments without diminishing the force of critique.[4]

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[3] *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), 289.

[4] Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), in which Conrad is given a significant place, represents a notable attempt to formulate such a model. For a critical view of the adequacy of Jameson's model, see J. A. Berthoud, 'Narrative and Ideology: a Critique of Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*,' in *Narrative: From Malory to Motion Pictures*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 101-15.

My own view is that much of Conrad's fiction is strongly marked by the presence of patriarchal and sexist ideology but that it also provides the basis for a strong feminist critique. To put it thus evades, of course, the question of whether Conrad himself (or the implied author of his works) is making such a critique, or whether it is one which readers make in opposition to the ideology which his work would seem to promote. I think that both of these propositions are true and that they overlap; that the nature of reading is such that we cannot always separate these seeming alternatives; and that this overlap is particularly notable in Conrad's case because of the notorious dualities within his life and work. As regards his life, it seems likely that the complexity of his cross-cultural experience helped to produce an ambivalent view of the roles of the sexes. In the fiction the spirit of scepticism, the epistemological uncertainty, and the destabilizing effect of the narrative technique involve the texts in processes of self-questioning as well as making them highly responsive to the interpretation and critique of their readers.

Having made a plea for questions of gender in Conrad to be read in terms of a reasonably complex interpretative model, and indeed having done so in language which may seem implicitly to claim that detachment which I began by forswearing, I would like to return upon my own argument and acknowledge the importance of anger, rejection, condemnation, loyalty, and the whole range of 'personal' reactions to these 'political' issues. The best way to make this acknowledgment may be to shift temporarily from questions of gender to the analogous (though not homologous) questions of 'race.' This shift may be illuminating because the statement 'Conrad was a racist' (indeed, a 'bloody' or 'thoroughgoing' racist) has famously been made by Chinua Achebe, prompting a contuing debate.[5] I am not going to rehearse the arguments, but to comment on certain features of the way in which these arguments have been conducted and on my own changing response to them. At one time my opinion about Achebe's statement, based on the sort of points I have made above in relation to sexism, was that he was quite right to point to the presence of racist attitudes in Conrad's text, but that it was misleading to make this point both personal and absolute by calling the author a 'racist.' Not only, I felt, were there the

[5] 'An Image of Africa,' lecture delivered at the University of Massachusetts, 18 February 1975. Revised as 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*,' *Research in African Literature* 9 (Spring 1978), 1-15, collected in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1967-87* (London: Heinemann, 1988).

ambiguous relations between author and narrative to which defenders of Conrad have pointed, but Conrad lived in a society pervaded by ideas and hierarchies of racial difference, and seemed to accept some and not others. Achebe's evidence that *Heart of Darkness* included some of the ignorant or wilful prejudice that served to justify colonial exploitation seemed unanswerable. However, given that Conrad attacked the obvious evils of colonialism, how fair was it to criticize him so strongly for failing to see through some of its ideological underpinnings?

I still feel that such points are worth considering, but I have come to value and respect the very directness of Achebe's attack, and this for several reasons. One was the worrying confidence with which a group of eighteen-year-old (white) students felt able to dismiss it as irrelevant to the higher purposes of literature. Another was the anger felt by an African colleague, who also spoke of the widespread hatred of *Othello* in his home country. My mind was also changed by my own bungled attempt to criticize Achebe. In the course of a review (not otherwise concerned with these issues) I had occasion to refer to his judgment of Conrad, which I described in passing as 'sincere but misguided.' Reading this afterwards, I was somewhat appalled, not only because I had not said what I thought I meant, but because I heard a patronizing tone and an echo of racial prejudice in my own phrase. If there is a rhetorical strain in *Heart of Darkness* that sees African people as 'natural' but 'primitive,' less corrupt than Europeans but also less 'developed,' then without consciously intending it, I had echoed that rhetoric. Like the plot summary of *Lord Jim*, my critical discourse had repeated an ideological structure. This led me to question my motives for defending Conrad and the nature of my emotional and intellectual investment in his status as an author. Straus comments that a host of male critics, including those who address such political issues, 'are able to identify the imaginative autobiography of their masculinity with Marlow's, this set-apartness, this full psychic cup engineered by transcending "good and evil"' (130). I do not believe that our utterances need be absolutely bound by our gender, or that we must speak from only one subject position. Yet for a white male critic, however sincere and well-guided, to weigh up issues of racism and sexism in Conrad's work by discussing his representations of women and non-European peoples may involve that pleasurable transcendence that Straus detects, that identification with the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, who confronts the Other and returns with a story, one all the more appealing for its gestures of self-doubt and its tribute to the enigmatic. As Luce Irigaray has stated:

> What I am able to say without any hesitation is that when male theoreticians today employ women's discourse instead of using male discourse, that seems to me a very phallocratic gesture. It means: 'We will become and we will speak a feminine discourse in order to remain the master of discourse.' What I would want from men is that, finally, they would speak a masculine discourse and affirm that they are doing so.[6]

Speaking as a man—I hope in the spirit of this request—I would argue that Conrad's fiction presents to male readers the opportunity to consider the political nature of homosocial bonds between men. [7]

Another sort of anger also contributed to my change of mind about Achebe's judgment: the anger generated among critics and lovers of Conrad's work by political criticisms. This has been apparent when such issues have been raised at conferences. On one such occasion I was struck by the very personal and yet very depersonalized nature of the debate. It was personal in that one sensed, behind many of the comments, various loyalties and feelings: political loyalties; intellectual allegiances created by years of reading and study; emotional attachments created by the pleasures of reading and of identification; patterns of acceptance and denial created by those processes, partly mysterious to ourselves, by which we shape our self-understanding. The debate was depersonalized in that we did not speak much about such feelings, but discussed the qualities of an object 'out there,' which we called 'Conrad' or 'Conrad's work.' Reflecting on this, my sense of Achebe's criticism developed further: precisely by attacking Conrad as a person (a person who now exists as a cultural sign, an object of discourse, a focus of value), Achebe had called into question the emotional and intellectual investment of readers and critics and its political consequences.

A consideration of gender in the work of Conrad is, then, both personal and a challenge to our sense of the personal: calling up some of the ways in which we define and express our sense of our selves, it challenges that sense by showing it to be part of a discursive structure with its own history. This can generate new ways of engaging with fictional texts.

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[6] 'Luce Irigaray', interview with Lucienne Serrano and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, in *Women Writers Talking*, ed. Janet Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 230-45, 243.

[7] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

The concept of gender, distinguishing as it does patterns of social differentiation from biological difference, evokes both the setting up of distinctions and their unsettling. This combination can be especially productive in relation to literary readings, since the processes of fiction seem to be based on structures of opposition and differentiation and the transformation or dissolution of those structures. If gender in Conrad is a theme which challenges and provokes, it is also one which illuminates.

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Andrew Michael Roberts
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