



THE NATURE AND CONDITIONS OF PERSONAL "LIFE":  
SOME ASPECTS OF THE ART OF JOSEPH CONRAD & VIRGINIA WOOLF

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### Summary

This thesis is about a central feature of Modernist literature - its perception and presentation of human character; in particular, the ways that Conrad and Virginia Woolf explored the nature of human-beings and the difficulties of giving any adequate account of human lives. Each novelist focused on different aspects of experience: Conrad on human actions, and on the complex moral questions they raise; Woolf on more elusive states of "sensibility" and the emergence of a sense of identity from within a person's thoughts and responses to the outward world. But despite this, they show some important similarities and affinities, both in the ways they conceive their material and in the ways their conceptions develop.

Both recognized that revealing the deepest truth about human lives required an art calling upon the writer's fullest integrity. Both found that the integrity required was too complex to be realized in a single novel; they found they had to follow certain questions through a number of novels. I have tried to examine the logic and integrity with which they do this in some of their works.

In the first section, I have taken "Youth", "Heart of Darkness" and To the Lighthouse, all of which focus on the power of a particular "self" to compel attention and invite exploration, and on the kind of attention and exploration it prompts. All three works discover the inadequacy of clear-cut distinctions - e.g. between past and present, between one individual and another, and between moral ideals and inner, personal necessities. The key images of "light" and "darkness" in each work become ambivalent; the journey that is a central motif in each work emerges as a voyage of moral understanding that has no end (in both senses of the word).

The second section discusses Lord Jim and The Waves. These works seem less bothered by the fact that the essential nature of human lives is inaccessible, and less concerned with trying to resolve lives into a single, though complex formula. This, I argue, is (paradoxically) because each writer is now able to release his own self more fully into his work, and take greater risks with his moral assumptions and outlook. Thus the relationship between "witnessing" and "bearing witness" is central to both the themes and method of the novelists' art.

A major difficulty about "bearing witness" with the necessary openness and integrity is that it means acknowledging not only the limits

of one's own self and therefore of one's own art, but also the possibility of the life beyond the self disrupting, altering, or even destroying the self. In the last section of the thesis, I discuss Chance and Between the Acts as examples of how the novelist can respond to these problems. Conrad's novel, I argue, shows a retreat from the difficulties to the simpler imaginative activity of merely "witnessing": the central weakness of Chance is that the writer remains no more than a spectator of the life he depicts. The strength of Between the Acts, on the other hand, is that the writer does "bear witness" fully to the life she presents; and one mark of this strength is the novel's capacity to include real gaps and real disruptions as part both of its material and of its own imaginative life.

Such a summary account mis-represents the subtle and open explorativeness of these works - which are concerned, in fact, with the impossibility of such summings-up. This is why I have tried to avoid any explicitly theoretical approach to the works discussed, and to follow a developing line of insight I see in the novels themselves.

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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