

CONRAD'S "AUTHOR'S NOTES": BETWEEN TEXT AND READER

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Between 1917 and 1920, Joseph Conrad composed about 20 prefaces, entitled "Author's Notes," to his fictional works. Along with *Notes on Life and Letters*, a collection of non-fiction writings published in 1921, the "Author's Notes" have been seen as a testamentary act – an attempt by an aging author to influence how he will be perceived in the future. In my paper, I ask what the "Author's Notes" might testify to, focusing on the ways in which these prefaces construct Conrad's persona as author and on the ways in which they may guide our reading of his work. Where and how do the Author's Notes locate interpretive authority? How do they help us read Conrad's work, and how might they make it more difficult? In the latter part of my paper, I reflect on the implications for us, critics, of the kind of reading Conrad encourages his readers to pursue.

Gerard Genette has focused attention on what is normally considered marginal to a literary work. The illustrations, title page, designation of the genre of the work, prefaces, dedications, and other elements on the periphery of the text constitute what he calls the paratext, and play a crucial role in the reception of the text proper. As Genette has put it, the paratext is a threshold "between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits, either towards the interior (the text) or towards the exterior." It is "a zone not just of transition, but of transaction: the privileged site of... a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading" (261–262). As elements on the threshold, however, Conrad's "Author's Notes" do not simply stand in a perfect balance between fiction and reality, looking, Janus-faced, equally in both directions or mediating between them, as if to usher the reader into the fictional world. Neither do they lean outward to the real world – the "author" in the "Author's Notes" resolutely avoids self-evident facts. Anyone hoping to glean direct explanations of Conrad's work from *Notes on My Books*, a collection of the Notes published by Doubleday in 1921, would be sorely disappointed: the Notes, arranged there side by side and severed from the bodies of work to which they belong, have a rather estrang-

ing effect – reading them is like entering into a conversation already going on, without a real introduction.

The Notes do make for a more pertinent reading – but not by offering authoritative commentary. They occasionally respond to the public’s misconceptions or critics’ misreadings – but they do this in order to prevent the closure of meaning, not merely to correct understanding. To refute an Italian lady’s judgment that *Lord Jim* was “all so morbid,” for example, Conrad does not defend the novel directly but, instead, questions the basis of the lady’s dismissal: if she was capable of such a statement – he concludes – she “could not have been an Italian. I wonder whether she was European at all?” (6). The question of how to assess the novel is displaced onto the question of how to assess a particular reader’s response. In another instance, the “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad responds to reproaches for what critics saw as “the sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale.” Interestingly, he does not distance himself from the anarchist world, and doesn’t condemn it definitively by dispelling any suspicion of sympathizing with it. Instead, he writes:

I have no doubt... that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them... I was simply attending to my business... with complete self-surrender. I could not have done otherwise. It would have bored me too much to make-believe. (12–13)

The question of where Conrad the author stands with respect to his subject matter cannot be answered definitively – the very practice of writing permits him to occupy various persona with a concentrated, if temporary, commitment.

More significant than such enigmatic correctives is Conrad’s persistent elision of authorial mastery over his work. Instead of standing outside the texts to offer a glimpse of the real author, or serving as a stable reference point, the “Author’s Notes” are most consistent in speaking to the works’ often unverifiable origins. In the Note to *Lord Jim*, Conrad writes of the main character:

he is not the product of coldly perverted thinking... . One sunny morning, in the commonplace surroundings of an Eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by – appealing – significant – under a cloud – perfectly silent. (6)

In a similar manner, the genesis of Winnie Verloc’s character in *The Secret Agent* is attributed to an off-hand statement by a friend: ““Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards.’ These were absolutely the only words that passed between us,” Conrad writes. “It never occurred to me later to ask how he arrived at this knowledge” (4). Thus, the sources of Conrad’s stories are traceable only to fleeting affects, figures, or casual remarks – but these cannot be taken for determinate origins, since they themselves are, rather, *effects* generated by other causes, by sources that are either impossible to recover or simply irrelevant.

The "Author's Notes" offer neither the authoritative last word nor a solid account of origins. Instead, they employ the same strategies of displacement of authority as those that operate in the fictional works, where perspectives are often not only multiple but also of uncertain validity. In other words, the Notes do not provide the ground of truth missing from the stories and novels, but re-enact its absence. By doing so, they affirm the purposefulness of the strategies of the fictional texts. The Notes are, thus, continuous with the stories and novels, but not in the way an explanation follows from its object – they belong, rather, to the same world, pushing the boundary between what's intrinsic and what's extrinsic to a literary text entirely to the outside. The Notes are not of the "real" world but belong, rather, to the fictions.

Just as Conrad labors to focus attention away from real sources, and to discourage us from looking for direct correspondences between his narratives and the world outside them, he also takes pains to avoid accounting for "who *really* speaks in the text." In "A Familiar Preface" to *A Personal Record*, his autobiography published in 1912, he gives us a glimpse of his own theory of authorship:

A novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself. But the disclosure is not complete. He remains, to a certain extent, a figure behind the veil. (3)

He is, thus, writing about himself at all times, yet he cannot be discovered; he is the only reality, but cannot be located. This may sound like Conrad is inviting us to keep looking for the real author hidden underneath his fictions, for that "only reality in an invented world." It may also sound like Conrad is making us a promise that finally, here, in an ostensibly autobiographical book, he is going to give us the long-deferred disclosure. Yet *A Personal Record* does not offer it, either. It is, avowedly, not a fiction, and yet it is prefaced, just like Conrad's fictions proper. This alone creates – perhaps unwittingly – a layered effect, of story within a story, or of nested degrees of referentiality, as if the Preface and the later "Author's Note" – standing on the "threshold between the inside and the outside" – were meant to be read as more direct and less veiled than the text they frame.

Critics – as we are wont to do – have tried to unveil the real Conrad from beneath even these statements, and claimed that his reticence is due to his insecure position as an outsider to England, a foreigner who would rather beguile than alienate. When Conrad writes in the Preface to *A Personal Record*: "Could I begin with the sacramental words, 'I was born on such a date in such a place'? The remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest" (9), we might comment that he is conscious of the cultural divide between himself and his audience, that he is deliberately carving out a public persona to appeal to his English readers. The more Conrad points our attention away from himself and toward the very problem of the limits of knowledge and of language, the more we seem compelled to show that we know what he is really hiding. I want to suggest, however, that the question of his underlying motivations is quite distinct from the question of the effect of his writing

– the two questions point us in divergent directions, toward conclusions that belong to different registers. Why he writes will not explain what he is telling us.

The tension between textual indeterminacy and historical referentiality manifests itself repeatedly in the critical reception of Conrad's work and remains unresolved. In Conrad's fictional works as well as in *A Personal Record*, textual undecidability emerges from thematic, rhetorical, and narrative strategies such as irony, nested narratives, concern with the relationship between reading and knowledge, mediation of first-hand accounts through intervening witnesses or through writing, and explicit allusions to generic conventions. A significant portion of Conrad's critical reception, however, has focused attention on his biography – that is, his cultural identity and political convictions – and on his historical context as indispensable elements for a proper, or complete, understanding of his work.

The treatment of *Under Western Eyes* – a novel classified among Conrad's "political" works and written at the same time as the autobiographical *Some Reminiscences*, which later became *A Personal Record* – is particularly instructive in showing this tension. Because of its thematic proximity to Conrad's biographical and cultural origins, and because of the cost to its author's emotional health, the reception of *Under Western Eyes* has been dominated by the question of Conrad's precise stance toward Russia. Such an approach is especially tempting because of the existence of non-fiction pieces that serve as evidence of Conrad's presumed Russophobia: the essay "Autocracy and War," a direct condemnation of Russia, and personal letters to Marguerite Poradowska and Edward Garnett, in which the statement "‘La Russie, c'est le néant' ... Anybody can see it" is unambiguously anti-Russian. In such a constellation, the novel is merely one piece in the puzzle of Conrad's political opinions, and must be made coherent with the non-fictional, direct statements – it must be stripped, that is, of its narrative and rhetorical strategies as if they were merely veils to be removed in order to get to the truth. Conrad's own admission in the "Author's Note" to *Under Western Eyes* that "the obligation of absolute fairness was imposed on [him] historically and hereditarily" seems, paradoxically, only to provoke the reader-critic, to invite such work of unveiling. While Conrad writes "I had never been called before to a greater effort of detachment from all passions, prejudices and even from personal memories" (xx), many critics have focused precisely on those prejudices, on his failure to conceal them, seeking ways to reinstate the personal memories and opinions into the text.¹

A reading of a passage from *Under Western Eyes* shows not only that the novel is more than an expression of an unequivocal political stance, but also that it displaces the question of the author – and, thus, of a single, coherent determination of meaning. Conrad's politics cannot be equated with the novel's, and his political essays cannot be read simply as more direct explications of what the novel makes opaque. The two

¹ Najder defends Conrad from the label of "Russophobe" by pointing out that many of the Russian characters in *Under Western Eyes*, in "Heart of Darkness," and in "The Warrior's Soul" are portrayed sympathetically ("Conrad, Russia, and Dostoevsky," *CIP*, 119–138).

politics may be traceable to a single source – Conrad's experience – but the formal differences between an essay and a novel constitute a barrier that should not be transgressed.

The end of chapter II and the beginning of chapter III together – Razumov's return home after he has betrayed Haldin and the narrator's troubled reflection on his "task" of rendering the story meaningful to his readers – point to a reading of *Under Western Eyes* that makes the novel's seemingly impenetrable opacity its precise focus. Having wandered much of the night, Razumov writes five lines on a piece of paper that will be pinned to the wall above his bed:

History not Theory.
Patriotism not Internationalism.
Evolution not Revolution.
Direction not Destruction.
Unity not Disruption. (50)

The writing itself seems to come automatically, or in evident effort made with the last of his energy before he falls asleep. Razumov is making a choice, consolidating his political identity on the side of reason and stability, rejecting everything Haldin stands for. On the next page of the novel, which begins a new chapter, the narrator searches for his own "keyword" to sum up "the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface" – "a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages." The word that persistently comes to the narrator is *cynicism*:

...the spirit of Russia is the spirit of cynicism. It informs the declarations of her statesmen, the theories of her revolutionists... to the point of making freedom look like a form of debauch, and the Christian values themselves appear actually indecent." (51)

Just like Razumov's convictions, for the narrator, "had become crystallized by the shock of his contact with Haldin" in the set of oppositions pinned to the wall, so the narrator's own image of Russia becomes crystallized – though for him, one word suffices. The narrator, a mere observer, imagines himself to stand outside the choices Razumov is forced to make; he is free from the mirage of oppositions. In the teacher's rendering, however, it becomes clear that Razumov cannot make the right choice. His fatal flaw is not in his character, but in the "moral conditions" governing the very language he mistakenly trusts to be a guide: the oppositions themselves are already corrupted, porous, undermined by falsity. Razumov cannot be in charge of his own destiny because the language supposed to make it intelligible fails him.

What are we to make of the demands made upon the reader by Conrad's own textual strategies, which seem to remove any stable grounds of interpretation even in the "Author's Notes," and by the competing imperative to produce coherent and historically informed accounts of his work? This contradiction is not resolved, but rather dramatized and heightened, by the "Author's Notes" – they seem to re-insert the author's presence back into the texts, and to intervene in the reader's understanding

of the works, but they refuse to dictate their meaning. The “Author’s Notes” work in line with, not against, the radical instability of meaning with which the stories, the novels, and even the autobiographical writings confront the reader. I would like to frame this problem with reference to Michel Foucault’s well-known essay “What Is an Author?” – but not in order to make the familiar point that an author is merely an effect of discourse. Foucault’s more provocative insight is that the figure of the author performs an ideological function: to reduce the danger of an infinite proliferation of meanings. In a world *without* the author function, writes Foucault:

We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? [...] With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used [...] and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? (390–391)

The shift in emphasis from the question “who really speaks in a text?” to the question of “what subject positions might the text enable?” reflects, in a general sense, the underlying ambition of theories of reception: to focus interpretation away from the author’s intent and toward the reader’s response. But, while reception theories sometimes ask “who really reads the text?,” I think Foucault’s questions are more open, and reflect what I take to be Conrad’s own sensibility.

The perhaps-impossible challenge to stop looking for the real author, to at least suspend the temptation, has remained unanswered not only among scholars of Conrad, but among scholars of literature in general. As Roland Barthes has written in “The Death of the Author,” “*explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if... it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his ‘confidences’” (50). Conrad’s own intervention into customary modes of reception is very much in line with the insights offered by philosophers like Barthes and Foucault. Conrad’s affinity with them is striking and merits at least a momentary consideration. According to Barthes, “to assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. This conception is quite suited to criticism, which then undertakes the important task of discovering the Author... beneath the work: once the Author is found, the text is ‘explained,’ the critic has won” (53). What would it mean for us to take Conrad at his word? What kinds of questions and conclusions might attention to Conrad’s textual strategies enable?

Before I reflect on this, I would like to make a cautionary digression, and to signal a difficulty. In “Defining Frames,” one of the few existing analyses of Conrad’s “Author’s Notes” as a body of work in its own right, Vivienne Rundle has pointed out their open, inconclusive quality. As she puts it, they “encourage the reader’s hermeneutic freedom” and “interpretive pluralism”; they are concerned “not with the precise interpretation that a reader will generate, but with the manner of reading itself”

(14–22). I cite her essay not in order to find support for my own reading of Conrad's Notes (since she and I agree on their open quality), but rather to point out that there is a certain danger in celebrating readerly freedom for its own sake.

Significant as it may be, it is not enough to find that Conrad's work encourages the reader to participate, or that his "Author's Notes" refuse authorial didacticism. We must ask why, or to what end, they might do so. As Mary Louise Pratt has observed, reader-response criticism could be seen to exhibit a shared ideological affinity with the very formalism it attempted to overcome. That is, just as formalism asserted the autonomy of the work of art, and subscribed to the valuation of art for art's sake, so reader-response criticism found ways of diverting attention from power relations inherent in any act of reading, or in any constitution of readerly communities. Pratt writes:

The new awareness of the relativity of interpretation and the social constitution of reality has translated not into a repoliticization [of reading] but into the complementary effort to depoliticize. Long-standing social and aesthetic categories are redeployed in the effort. For instance, the fact that interpretations are relative and variable translates into a celebration of the freedom of the interpreting subject when read through the rosy ideology of individual liberty. (34)

Thus, it is not enough to observe that Conrad's work calls attention to the manner of reading, or to reading as process – we must ask what that manner might be, precisely, and how far it can take us. Once we put our faith primarily in the text, and only secondarily in our knowledge of the historical context or biographical motivation, what ground might there be for finding a politics in the text? Having observed that Conrad demands that we *read* his work instead of looking underneath it, how do we turn this observation into a starting point of inquiry and not its endpoint? My own emphasis on the ways in which Conrad elides referentiality is not meant to privilege an ungrounded proliferation of meanings for their own sake – even if it remains to be seen how far such an emphasis may be pursued and what limits it may face.

What might it mean for us, then, to take Conrad at his word and attend to the importance of his rhetorical strategies? In the 1897 preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus*, he reflects not only on the role of the writer, but also on the link between writing, history, and solidarity:

The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity [...] which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living, and the living to the unborn. (17)

The artist does not deal with verifiable, apparently stable facts – these turn out to be subject to revision and replacement. What Conrad calls solidarity must be forged on the tenuous ground of language, which can only approximate a certain truth of

experience. As Edward Said has noted, Conrad's narratives depend on "the alternation in language of presence and absence," concretized in the alternation between seeing and hearing. For Said, Conrad is conspicuously concerned with the impossible approach to a center; phrases like "the horror" or "material interests" "work as a sort of still point, a verbal center glossed by the narrative and on which our attention turns and returns. See the thing they announce, and you might have no further use for words" (95–96). The two persistent themes of Conrad's work – the elusiveness of words and the possibility of solidarity – are not divergent. The ethical import of Conrad's invitation to the reader – of granting the reader interpretive freedom – lies, I believe, in an injunction to seek and constantly redefine one's place among others and in history, to give up the attachment to verifiable certainties and the belief in the transparency of either language or facts. Conrad's work, thus, invites a certain reading practice, training us in a specific way of inhabiting the world.

This is why Michel Foucault's questions – "Where has [this discourse] been used [...], and who can appropriate it...? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects?" – are urgently relevant to Conrad's work. They remind us that his fictions invite us to find a place for ourselves. In *All the Difference in the World*, an especially attentive treatment of Conrad's twin preoccupations with language and with the possibility of solidarity, Natalie Melas has argued that Conrad gives voice to the difficulty inherent in

...writing an account of imperialism in a language debased by imperialism; that is, one in which there is not only the familiar discrepancy between word and thing, word and deed, but where the relation between them is one of outright negation. (59)

For this reason, Conrad's works foreground the very problem of transmission, which is directly related to the problematic nature of the kind of communities that can be forged in a world and in a language fractured by imperialism. Marlow's listeners and Conrad's readers are called on to find community without a reassuring sense of communion – without a stable identity that would bind together all members of the audience *a priori*. For Melas, Conrad leaves for us to keep open the following question:

...If imperialism finally [...] disturbs the purity of cultural difference and therefore of a reading predicated on cultural identification, what basis for cross-cultural interpretive community remains? (96)

Melas's book is exemplary in attending to the ethical implications of Conrad's rhetorical strategies. Indirectly, however, it also calls attention to the role of critical discourses in the constitution of readers – an endeavor in which, I believe, all scholars of literature are implicated, whether or not we address this problem directly. Melas's own delineation of the historical contexts relevant for reading Conrad is instructive. In her only mention of his Polish background, she writes:

Without denying the degree to which Conrad's exceptional life experience undoubtedly inflects his narratives, I want to argue that [...] the complex disarticulation of community emerges *from within* the specificity of the colonial situation. (81, emphasis mine)

Having argued that Conrad's narrative strategies stage the very incommensurability of perspectives, Melas implicitly draws a boundary after all: even as Conrad's texts foreground heterogeneity, one particular kind of difference remains outside. This elision of Conrad's Polishness is not particular to Melas, but reflects a gesture often repeated in Conradian criticism concerned with the historical and political dimensions of his work. Deciding which historical contexts are relevant for interpreting Conrad's work entails at least an implicit carving out of cultural spaces – between his Polish past and his writing life in England, between Poland and empire. The two cultural spheres are often treated as given, taken for granted as separate. One result is that postcolonial criticism on Conrad's work and research on his Polish background rarely speak to each other. This compartmentalization of Conrad reflects the historical and cultural fissures of Europe itself.

This problem is directly related to the notion of the reader we employ. If readers are conceived as already pre-constituted, as approaching a literary text according to their types, social positions, or historical situations, then assumptions about the essential fixity of cultures are reinforced. Conrad's own work, however, constantly questions such divides and the very notion of culture as bounded, through his emphasis on solidarity. Unlike the notion of a readerly or cultural community – which conjures images of stable formations – solidarity is tenuous, and entails an effort. The notion of solidarity invites a constant revisioning of one's relationship to the world and, for Conrad, such a revisioning must take place by attending to the literariness of language. This, I think, is the ethical import of placing the focus on reading as a process, and the reason why Conrad diverts attention away from himself – even in the "Author's Notes."

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