


YOUR CONRAD: MAKING THE VOICE OF KORZENIOWSKI/ CONRAD HEARD IN HIS WRITINGS

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Abstract: In my essay I argue that in order to understand to what extent his art is the result of his intellectual makeup we must combine both the formalist and the biographical critical approaches. I make visible in his life and works the problematics involved in preserving his particular worldview through an idealistic faith in the value of art. To this end, I examine the evidence of how the existential and artistic choices that guided the evolution of Conrad's art were silently intertwined with an artistic project founded on two key statements: the affirmation in 1899 that he felt the need to "*garder ma pensée intacte*" and the reference to his "inner voice" (1908).

I order these choices in two sequences: the first one connects the key passages in the evolving narrative techniques that led from his famous 1897 programmatic declaration "My task... is to make you see" to *Under Western Eyes*. The second one traces a succession of texts and paratexts covering the period 1907-1920, when two fault lines – Slavic v. British and Russian v. Polish – that he was able to transform into materials for two masterpieces: *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes*, emerged. Among these writings a key role is played by the articles on Poland he wrote during and after World War One, when he cast aside the cautions of a life preserved in silence, and finally spoke as a Pole to English and American audiences.

Keywords: Poland, artistic idealism, art, biography, narrative forms

In my work on Conrad, I have relied on the tools of textual analysis to make the writer's voice heard in his texts. Along the way, however, I realized that my formalist approach was turning into a problem because, by (rightly) rejecting a biographical reading of his works, I was in fact also missing to what extent his art is part of his intellectual makeup. I should have listened to his silences, which are as revealing as his statements. In the present essay I will suggest ways to look at the evolution of Conrad's art as evidence of how the choices that guided that evolution were silently intertwined with his artistic project. And I will try to explain why I believe that, in particular, his identity as a Borderland Pole is as a prism through which we should try to understand his Europeaness.

The inevitable starting point is a passage in *A Personal Record* – the book in which he came closer to speaking in his own voice – in which Conrad reminds those who would "murmur scornfully the word desertion" that

No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. The appearances of this perishable life are deceptive like everything that falls under the judgment of our imperfect senses. The *inner voice* may remain true enough in its secret counsel. The fidelity to a special tradition may last through the events of an unrelated existence, following faithfully, too, the traced way of an inexplicable impulse.

It would take too long to explain the intimate alliance of contradictions in human nature which makes love itself wear at times the desperate shape of betrayal.¹

In a February 1899 letter to Cunninghame Graham we find an earlier formulation of what in 1908 he was to define “inner voice.” He wrote:

Moi je regarde l’avenir du fond d’un passé très noir et je trouve que rien ne m’est permis hormis la fidélité à une cause absolument perdue, à une idée sans avenir. [...] Vous qui dévouez Votre enthousiasme et Vos talents à la cause de l’humanité, vous comprendrez sans doute pourquoi je dois – j’ai besoin – de *garder ma pensée intacte* comme dernier hommage de fidélité à une cause qui est perdue. C’est tout ce que je peux faire. J’ai jeté ma vie à tous les vents du ciel mais j’ai gardé ma pensée.²

It is only a hypothesis, but the need to “*garder ma pensée intacte*” of 1899 and the “inner voice” of 1908 are both descriptions of what guided the existential and artistic choices that shaped a great part of Conrad’s corpus. I will follow here two sequences of these choices to make visible in his life and works the problematics involved in preserving his particular worldview through an idealistic faith in the value of art.

The first sequence will trace the evolving of narrative techniques that led from his famous 1897 programmatic declaration “My task... is to make you *see*” to *Under Western Eyes*. The second sequence begins with the misreading, on the part of some reviewers, of what Conrad was making his readers *see* in *The Secret Agent*; a misreading which led to the charge of “Slavonism.” From there, I will focus briefly on a succession of texts and paratexts covering fourteen years 1907-1920 in which two fault lines – Slavic v. British and Russian v. Polish – emerged as potentially destructive forces; in fact, he was able to transform those fault lines into materials for two masterpieces: *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes*. Among these writings a key role is played by the articles on Poland he wrote during and after World War One, when he cast aside the cautions of a life preserved in silence, and finally spoke as a Pole to an English audience.

¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea: Memories and Impression and A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences* (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 35-36, emphasis added.

² *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Laurence Davies et al., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 160, emphasis added. “I look at the future from the depths of a very dark past, and I find I am allowed nothing but fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future. [...] You who devote your talents and your enthusiasm to the cause of humanity, you will understand no doubt why I must – I need to – *keep my thinking inviolate* as a final act of fidelity to a lost cause. It’s all I can do. I’ve thrown my life to all the winds of heaven, but I have kept my way of thinking” (emphasis added, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 2, p. 161).

1. CHOICES, 1897-1907

In a 1988 book, the famous Modernist scholar, Hugh Kenner, quotes the famous phrase from the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*: "only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences [...] the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage." And then he asks: "what story-teller in England before Conrad would have thought of his obligation in that way? [...] the words in which a story was written had not previously been pointed to as a focus of concern."³ He then fast-forwards twenty five years, to the 1920s and the recognition, on the part of T. S. Eliot, of the contribution Conrad made to the language of poetry and narrative fiction. Not only Eliot declared, in "Swinburne as Poet" (1920), that "the language which is more important" to the poets of his generation "is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects, as, for instance, the prose of Mr. James Joyce or the earlier Conrad"; and concludes: "Thanks largely to Conrad, the narrative inheritance entered the twentieth century's poetry."⁴ What more important context could there be for an assessment of Conrad's idealistic contribution to English letters?

Conrad had known all along the price he had to pay for being "England's Polish genius," as the phrase goes. In a 1924 letter he explained to a French Anglicist and art historian, Charles Chassé, who had mentioned in an article Conrad's presumed "Slavonism":

As to the references to my Slavonism, I am certain you wrote in all sincerity, like many English critics who had been raising the same point some years ago, but not so much lately.

[...] I have asked myself more than once whether if I had preserved the secret of my origins under the neutral pseudonym of "Joseph Conrad" that temperamental similitude would have been put forward at all. As to myself, I have my doubt. I believe that, here at any rate, what is personal has been put to the account of racial affinities. The critics detected in me a new note and as, just when I began to write, they had discovered the existence of Russian authors, they stuck that label on me under the name of Slavonism. What I venture to say is that it would have been more just to charge me at most with "Polonism."⁵

"Here" in Britain what made him unique ("personal") as a writer was explained as a generic ethnic trait ("Slavonism"); the unfortunate temporal coincidence between his debut and the discovery of certain Russian novelists absolved all critics from the need to understand what was specifically Polish about what was "personal" about his writing; most importantly, the price to be paid for defending the originality of his art

³ Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writer* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1987), p. 52.

⁴ Kenner, *A Sinking Island*, p. 54.

⁵ 31 January 1924; *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Laurence Davies et al., vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 290-291.

– that “new note” – was the silence he had to maintain about his origins. But the time would come when it was no longer possible.

Conrad was lucky in his choice to write in English. If he had spent fifteen years, say, in the Italian merchant navy, he would have not been accepted as openly. Hats off, first of all, to his early reviewers. They may have reduced at time his complex works to a norm they could understand, by using inadequate terms such as ‘romance’ and ‘realism.’ But their attempts were also as many tributes to the originality of those works. They were far more intellectually honest than the “eagle-eyed English critic,” Dr Leavis, with his moralistic diktats and his lack of knowledge about the novel form.⁶

And what about the proverbial common readers? One still finds critics lamenting how the relative success of *Chance* signaled the decline of Conrad’s moral fiber and intellectual faculties. Henry James knew better, and asked to review the final Marlow novel to protest the way the narrative method Conrad had invented – that “special, eccentric and desperate a course” which, resulted in a “combined eccentricities of recital” – constituted a breach of “the general law of fiction” and an “example of objectivity, most precious of aims, not only menaced but definitely compromised.”⁷ And yet, the Master cannot but recognize that “we are in presence of something really of the strangest”: Conrad’s greatest success with *Chance* was exactly what later critics would have found deplorable: “an inordinate number of common readers have not only condoned but have emphatically commended” the lack of authenticity in Marlow’s narrative, and if they did so, he avers, it was because they privileged instead “some authenticity other in kind, [...] Mr. Conrad himself.” And he concludes: “Than which nothing could be of a greater reward to critical curiosity were it not still for the wonder of wonders, a new page in the record altogether – the fact that these things are apparently what the common reader has seen and understood. Great then would seem to be after all the common reader!”⁸

If there is one critic who deserves a special position in the history of Conrad’s critical reception it is W.H. Chesson, the Fisher Unwin reader who opened the package containing the typescript of *Almayer’s Folly* captain Korzeniowski had sent in

⁶ Sufficient to remind the passage in which he claims that “the laws conditioning the form of Jane Austen’s novels are the same laws that condition those of George Eliot and Henry James and Conrad.” For other instances, see Richard Ambrosini, “The Geopolitics of Modernism: Revisiting the Idea of an Eliot-(James)-Conrad ‘Great Tradition,’” *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani* 52 (2020), passim.

⁷ Susan Jones reads the role Conrad assigned to Marlow as in itself a “critique of Jamesian narrative theory.” This critique should not be read as a confirmation of Conrad’s selling out, but rather, she argues, as a sign of James’s awareness that the Polish author’s narrative method was a way of “engaging in a technical debate with ‘The Master’ [...] over the issue of what can be ‘known’ to the author.” This is why she views the text of *Chance* as a dividing line between two arts of fiction; James’s was to prevail, and the “empiricist strain in criticism” he initiated would come to dominate English Studies, when the “Jamesian method of ‘showing’ over the tendency of writers like Conrad to ‘tell’ [would be] “taken up by subsequent critics, notably F.R. Leavis,” and would be “codified much later by Wayne Booth.” Susan Jones, *Conrad and Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 123, 126, 129.

⁸ Henry James, “The Younger Generation,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March and 2 April 1914. Rpt. as “The New Novel,” in Henry James, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 148-151.

1894, and was the first to recognize the artistic and intellectual excellence of Conrad's writing. Chesson denied he or anyone else had "discovered" Conrad, since "the purely stylistic and academic merits of Mr. Conrad's work were even in 1894 too obvious to make the 'discovery' of him by a literary critic much more than an evidence of reasonable attention to his business."⁹ Unfortunately, the second reader, Edward Garnett, was unable to recognize those merit.

In his Introduction to his 1928 collection *Letters from Joseph Conrad*, Garnett contradicts Chesson's account by stating "My wife recollects that I showed her the manuscript." What did his wife have to do with it, other than because she was one of the several translators of the Russian masters, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and later Dostoevsky? In the Introduction, Garnett recalls his first reaction: "The strangeness of the tropical atmosphere, and the poetic 'realism' of this romantic narrative excited my curiosity about the author, who I fancied might have Eastern blood in his veins." This racial fantasy was off the mark: as it turned out, he was a Pole, but this detail "increased my interest since my Nihilist friends, Stepniak [i.e. Sergej Michajlovič Kravčinskij] and [Feliks] Volkhovsky, had always subtly decried the Poles when one sympathized with their position as 'under dogs'" (the two Nihilists were Ukrainian, not Russian).¹⁰ What an ugly thing to say. Conrad had been dead for four years, and with this phrase his one-time friend marked the beginning of their relationship by casting the Polish author in the role of a lesser "Slavonic" romantic writer, not quite up there with the Russian writers his wife was translating.

That same year, 1928, Ford Madox Ford, who in the late 1890s had supplanted Garnett as Conrad's unofficial literary agent, wrote a Preface to the 1928 American edition of *The Sisters*, Conrad's first love story, between two marginal Europeans – a Ruthenian aspiring artist and a Basque beauty – that Garnett had blocked Conrad from writing. Ford took the opportunity to bemoan the way that "the literary dictator of London" at the time "forced [Conrad] to become [...] the relatively exotic novelist of the sea and the lagoons," even though – but this is Ford's opinion – his desire was "to be a Dostoevsky who should also be a conscious artist writing in English or preferably in French." Imagine, he adds, Conrad could have become "an immensely great International writer, another but more impassioned Turgeniev, another Flaubert but more of a poet." His greatest accomplishment remains *Under Western Eyes*, he concludes, in which "you have Conrad appearing in the rôle of a Dostoevsky [sic] who is also an artist, and if I were asked to name the book by which I was sure – and hoped – that Conrad would go down to posterity this is the book that I should name."¹¹ Chesson, Ford, T. S. Eliot, and in 1947 George Orwell¹²: it is time to reevaluate an English line of Conrad readers alternative to the qualified praises of the Polish guest

⁹ Ugo Mursia, "Il vero «scopritore» del talento letterario di Joseph Conrad e altre note di biografia conradiana. Con tre lettere inedite," in *Scritti conradiani*, ed. Mario Curreli (Milano: Mursia, 1983), p. 32.

¹⁰ *Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895-1924*, ed. Edward Garnett (New York: Charter Books, 1962), p. 2.

¹¹ Ford Madox Ford, "Conrad and the Sea," in Ford Madox Ford, *Portraits from Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), pp. 28-39.

¹² George Orwell's rediscovery of Conrad while he was writing *1984* should be seen as the road not taken of British Conrad studies: Douglas Kerr, "George Orwell's Conrad," *George Orwell Studies* 1 (2016)

left behind by the younger generation of English modernist authors – Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster – in essays and reviews that (thanks also to Leavis) live on still today in embarrassing critical tropes such as achievement-and-decline, the “simple soul” mariner, the sexually timid writer, etc.

2. CHOICES, 1897-1911

Conrad’s choice to become an author writing in English has enriched British culture and created a precedent for migrant writers from around the world in the new millennium. His case is emblematic of the condition Mikhail Bakhtin described in his 1970 essay “Response to a Question from the ‘Novy Mir’ Editorial Staff,” in which he wrote that in order to understand a foreign culture “it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture [...] In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding.”¹³ I hope British readers appreciate his contribution as a life-long student of the *Homo Britannicus* – one reason the more for valuing his outsideness rather than appropriating him through cultural contextualization.

A key to understanding how the outside-inside dynamic shaped Conrad’s art is to be found in his most famous pronouncement on the task he tried to achieve: “by the power of the written word,” he wrote in the April 1897 Preface to the *Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, he wanted “to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*.”¹⁴ The only part of this program is the “how”: through the power of the written word; otherwise, the content of the vision (“what”) and the identity of the addressee (“you”) remain elusive. But I doubt he had us, Conradians, in mind. No, of course, he meant: “to make you [oh, British reader] *see*.” And we know so because of the first of the choices that shaped his art after his debut: the invention, one year after the 1897 Preface, of a new narrative device, an English captain-narrator, Charlie Marlow. Over the next three years, in an 1898 short story (*Youth*), a 1899 novella (*Heart of Darkness*), and a 1900 novel (*Lord Jim*), Marlow would make an audience of English worthies “*see*” through a variety of point-of-view shots, renderings of places visualized for his listeners, the recording of human dramas that affected their eyewitness. This technique offered the first European transnational novelist the opportunity to make his English readers *see* the difficulties he encountered in creating

; Richard Ambrosini, “Lessons in Making Conrad ‘Our Contemporary’: Wilson Harris, George Orwell, and the ‘Beauty’ of Conrad’s Art,” *Fictions. Studi sulla narrativa* 23 (2024), p. 145.

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Response to a Question from the ‘Novy Mir’ Editorial Staff,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, transl. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 9.

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’: A Tale of the Sea* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925), p. x.

a type of novel so foreign from those written by other contemporary English novelists.

There would have been a fourth Marlow tale, *Chance*, that appeared in 1913. While he was making the final revisions for the book version that summer, he responded to a written interview by declaring how he was proud of the way he had succeeded in making his readers *see*: “There is a convention,” he wrote,

that only six or seven novel forms exist, & all writers are expected to adapt themselves to those forms.

If everybody has agreed to look at a landscape in one way, I don’t see why we should not look at it in another. It does not hurt for us to stand on our head to see it, if it has grown stale to us when we look at it standing on our feet.

I am the only one in our generation who seems to be seeking a new form. Not that I deliberately sought it – stories came to me so. I had to have a number of different people seeing others from different angles.¹⁵

Marlow is a device, not a projection of the author’s secret desire of being an English gentleman. In all the Marlow tales, the captain-narrator’s seeing turns out to be in fact a projection. In *Heart of Darkness*, he hears about Mr. Kurtz, who on his way down the river, toward the Central Station, suddenly turned around and went back to his station. “I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time,” Marlow recalls, “It was a distinct glimpse [...]. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake.”¹⁶

In *Lord Jim*, it is Jim whom Marlow sees for the first time in the Bombay police court. Jim is annoyed that the magistrates don’t take seriously his imaginative and evasive answers, and in that very moment “He met the eyes of the white man. The glance directed at him was not the fascinated stare of the others. It was an act of intelligent volition. Jim between two questions forgot himself so far as to find leisure for a thought. This fellow – ran the thought – looks at me as though he could see somebody or something past my shoulder.”¹⁷ Of course, the “somebody or something past [Jim’s] shoulder” Marlow is seeing is a creation of a mind at work projecting onto the young gentleman the status of “one of us.”

Marlow was wrong in both cases, but what great stories are set in motion thanks to those projections, that end with a lie and the collapse of the hermeneutical architecture which had led to making Stein and Marlow that it was a good idea entrusting the “romantic” Englishman with the wellbeing of a community of dark skinned men and women. As the captain writes in the painful letter he sends to the racist privileged reader, “there shall be no message unless such as each of us can interpret for himself from the language of facts, that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrange-

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad and Warrington Dawson: *The Record of a Friendship*, ed. Dale B.J. Randall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 63.

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness / Cuore di tenebra*, introd. Giuseppe Sertoli, trans. Alberto Rossi and Giuseppe Sertoli (Torino: Einaudi, 2021), p. 98.

¹⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A Tale* (London: Dent, 1961), pp. 32-33.

ment of words.”¹⁸ The storyteller can no longer arrange words into a fiction, or throw at his Philistine audience the implications of a word or an event.¹⁹

Following Marlow’s failure and Jim’s death, Conrad abandoned the Marlow-device and started experimenting with completely different narrative strategies to make his readers *see*: an increasingly ironic omniscient narrator orchestrating a plurality of perspectives and competing points of view – and a dizzying chronological disorder designed, it would seem, to make them *think*.

In *The Secret Agent*, he gave a further twist to his “task” by setting a story – a spy story! – in the imperial metropolis and making his readers “see” an unfamiliar London. He also, provokingly, included among the competing perspectives, a set of Eastern Eyes observing British society, the eyes of Mr. Vladimir, First Secretary at the Russian embassy and master spy. He had, the narrator notes, “a drawing-room reputation,” and was “something of a favourite in society,” thanks to his wit, that “consisted in discovering droll connections between incongruous ideas.” One of the ideas is his contempt for the British bourgeoisie’s disregard for the arts:

Artists – art critics and such like – people of no account. Nobody minds what they say. But there is learning – science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow. It is the sacro-sanct fetish. [...] They believe that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity.²⁰

Some critics expressed their gratitude to the author for making them *see* a London they knew nothing about. In a 20 September 1907 in the *Times Literary Supplement* a reviewer wrote: “And then comes Mr. Conrad with his *steady, discerning gaze*, his passion for humanity [...] it was left for Mr. Conrad once again to *hold the lantern that was to light every cranny*,” a couple of weeks later, in *Truth*, another one remarked that “Mr. Conrad has chosen to *illuminate* some very sordid and ugly things *with the light of his wit*.”²¹ Not only Conrad had succeeded, but these two readers attest that he was not appreciated for his literary impressionism, but for the intellectual weight he brought to the task, his wit, his discerning gaze, his “passion for humanity.”

Why then did Conrad feel that the critical response to the novel marked a low point in his relationship with his public?²² Well, because other reviewers felt that what he had made them *see* was the obscurity of a Slavic soul. Garnett of course distinguished himself in this operation, by claiming in the *Nation* on 28 September 1907:

¹⁸ Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 340.

¹⁹ Richard Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; 2008 paperback edition), p. 185.

²⁰ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale*, eds. Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid, assistant ed. Nancy Brik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 30.

²¹ Norman Sherry, *Conrad: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 185, 191, emphasis added.

²² Sherry, *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, p. 25.

It is good for us English to have Mr. Conrad in our midst *visualising for us* aspects of life we are *constitutionally unable to perceive*, for by his astonishing mastery of our tongue he makes clear to his English audience those secrets of Slav thought and feeling which seem so strange and inaccessible in their native language. They are not inaccessible, those secrets, not in the least; through the gates of literary translations we can all enter the alien spirit of those distant peoples.²³

The two quotes above provide the best illustration of what Bakhtin means when he praises the contribution an outsider may bring to a culture²⁴ – as well as of the success of the self-appointed task as a master of “the power of the written word.” Garnett’s insight took the opportunity to suggest that his wife’s translations are just as good. And there are someone who still today take him seriously!

The Secret Agent, not *Chance*, was the novel Conrad hoped would bring him a popular success. Instead, it was a fiasco. “I’ve been so cried up of late as a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English,” he wrote to Garnett, “anything I say will be discounted on that ground by the public.”²⁵

For someone trying to make Conrad’s voice heard that “anything I say” is extremely important.

How did he react? By writing a sequel to *The Secret Agent*, of course. On December 4, 1907, three months after the spy story’s publication, we find him mentioning to his agent, J.B. Pinker, a new story: “It’s the one about the revolutionist who is blown up with his own bomb.”²⁶ One month goes by, and in a January 6 letter to John Galsworthy the “revolutionist” has become a Russian, the title character of what will be “Razumov.” I think, he explains to his friend, “that I am trying to capture the very soul of things Russian – *Cosas de Russia*.²⁷ The next day, to Pinker “Here is given the very essence of things Russian [...] Nothing of the sort had been done in English.”²⁸ Capture the very soul of things Russian? Reaching down to the very essence of things Russian? Nothing of the sort had been done in English – not even in Olivia Garnett’s translations? We are moving beyond “making [the British reader] *see*.”

The sequence of choices following the 1897 artistic manifesto resulted in the creation of an *ad hoc* form in which the Polish novelist thematized how a British expert in teaching foreigners the English language *sees* Russia. *Under Western Eyes*, then, marks the culmination of fifteen years of experimentations, and the result is a novel not only about Russia, but also about the English – just like *Lord Jim*.

Initially, the English narrator casts himself as a rabid Russophobe, but then, thanks to his infatuation for Natalia Haldin, he changes. And after all, as Conrad explained in the 1920 *Author’s Note*, his function was to “give a glimpse of [Natalia’s] idealistic faith, of her great heart, and of her simple emotions.” This he does, and when she

²³ Sherry, *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, p. 191, emphasis added.

²⁴ Bakhtin, “Response to a Question,” p. 9.

²⁵ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Laurence Davies et al., vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 488.

²⁶ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 3, p. 513.

²⁷ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, eds. Laurence Davies et al., vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 8.

²⁸ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, p. 14.

thanks him for his friendship he replies, “I have done little else but look on.” “There is a way of looking on,” she replies, “which is valuable. I have felt less lonely because of it.”²⁹ I like the way the Professor makes us all *see*, perhaps because I love Natalia.

Unfortunately, the writing of *Razumov* did not proceed smoothly. In August 1908 a journalist’s review of *A Set of Six* forced the author to set aside his work and respond instead to a violent *ad hominem barbarum* attack. Robert Lynd had called him a man “without either country or language” and calls him a cosmopolitan, a homeless person. Why such animus? It is a crescendo. Having claimed that his choice of writing in English is a “very regrettable thing, even from the point of view of English literature” he proceeds to pay a compliment to – who else? – Constance Garnett.

[T]he works of Joseph Conrad translated from the Polish would, I am certain, have been a more precious possession on English shelves than the works of Joseph Conrad in the original English... What greater contribution has been made to literature in English during the past twenty years than Mrs. Constance Garnett’s translations of the novels of Turgéniéff? But suppose Turgéniéff had tried to write them in English!³⁰

Conrad came up with a counter-suggestion: “That’s an idea. Shall I send her the clean type of *Razumov*? But why complicate life to that extent? She ought to write them.”³¹

The response to Lynd’s attack begins with his conjuring up the ghost of the patron saint of the artistic novel; the “shade of old Flaubert,”³² he recalls, was flitting around his cabin aboard the *Adowa* while he was writing the third to last chapter to *Almayer’s Folly*.

Ah, but then, perhaps, Ford Madox Ford was right after all, and in the years in which he was writing in parallel *Under Western Eyes* and in the reminiscences he had commissioned, and were to become *A Personal Record*, Conrad was indeed finding his bearings in between Flaubert and Dostoyevsky.³³

Lynd’s attack was the first of two traumas that marked the writing of the Russian novel. The second occurred on January 27, 1910, when Conrad arrived at Pinker’s office to deliver the manuscript of what had become *Under Western Eyes*. Finding himself with a mountain of papers without an ending in his hands, the agent exploded and berated brutally the writer, telling him that he “could not speak English.”³⁴ Once he got home, Conrad had a mental and physical breakdown. He started recovering only two months later, in mid-March, but by May he had already finished his revisions of *Under Western Eyes*. Two months: Pinker’s tantrum was uncalled for.

The most interesting episode in this sequence of choices, texts and paratexts is a letter to Pinker of September 1911. Conrad is informing his agent (who only han-

²⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (Oxford: Oxford Classic Edition, 1983), pp. xxxi, 134.

³⁰ Sherry, *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 210-211.

³¹ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, p. 110-111.

³² Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea: Memories and Impression and A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences* (London: Dent, 1975), p. 3.

³³ Ford, “Conrad and the Sea,” pp. 28-39.

³⁴ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, p. 334.

dled his fiction) that he has found a publisher for the Polish memoir, *A Personal Note* (later *A Personal Record*), in which he collected the reminiscences he had started in October 1908. By then, the serialization of the Russian novel was almost completed and the volume was to be published shortly. At a certain point in the letter he writes:

I think – in fact I am certain that it will *not* interfere with the sale of the novel. On the contrary. Those who will read the Personal Note will no doubt wish to see the novel. [...] [The are two considerations] The first purely personal [...] I wished to explain (in a sense) how I came to write such a novel as *Under Western Eyes* (I shall say that much in the preface) so utterly unlike in subject and treatment from anything I had done before. That *Personal Note* will make it intelligible to such people – my public – who care for and attach some importance to my work.³⁵

“My public.” There, he said it.

3. CHOICES, 1914-1920

For someone who reads *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo* as evidence that Conrad was endowed with a geopolitical intelligence which was at times prophetic, it is difficult to accept the fact in the summer of 1914 he failed to read the signs of an impending catastrophe and decided to take his family to Cracow in the aftermath of the Sarajevo *attentat* of June 28, 1914. Partly, this was the result of his ending up in the coils of a snake, a young Polish lawyer, Józef Hieronim Retinger (1888-1960), who posed as an emissary of an irredentist organization, but was in fact an Austrian secret agent. In his life, Retinger was to prove his “subtle manipulative skills”³⁶ as an undercover servant of many masters on both sides of the Atlantic, the Vatican included. Was Retinger aware that he was putting at risk the Conrads by taking them to the rear of the Eastern Front, where Marshal Piłsudski’s Polish Legions were fighting alongside Austro-Hungarian troops against the Russians, England’s allies?

But these historical and biographical facts are marginal compared to the inner reality of Conrad’s life-long existential trajectory. As “we sat together in the same railway carriage,” he was to recall later that year in his essay “Poland Revisited,” his travel companions

were looking forward to a voyage in space, whereas I felt more and more plainly, that what I had started on was a journey in time, into the past; a fearful enough prospect for the most consistent, but to him who had not known how to preserve against his impulses the order and continuity of his life – so that at times it presented itself to his conscience as a series of betrayals – still more dreadful.³⁷

³⁵ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, p. 477.

³⁶ Maria Grazia Bruzzone, “Il Bilderberg 2014 di nuovo segreto, l’Ue e la misteriosa figura di Jozef Retinger, ideatore del club,” *La Stampa*, 16 maggio 2014, <https://www.lastampa.it/blogs/2014/05/16/news/il-bilderberg-2014-di-nuovo-segredo-l-ue-e-la-misteriosa-figura-di-jozef-retinger-ideatore-del-club-br-1.37251597/> [accessed: 18.11.2024].

³⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent 1970), p. 149.

It is revealing to read in parallel with this passage the impression Conrad made in 1918 on an emissary of the Nationalist Party, Stanisław Kozicki, who had in vain solicited his support. Kozicki later recalled that listening to Conrad talk made him feel that he was moving back in time and space:

Conrad spoke Polish fluently, but his accent, his manner of expression were such as I observed among the inhabitants of the south-eastern Polish borderlands. One felt clearly that when he thought of Poland it was a Poland of a half-century ago. When I listened to him, I could not evade the impression that I am being carried back in time and talk to one of the people of long ago.³⁸

In August 1916 Retinger showed up again with a memorandum on the Polish question and asked Conrad to confect out of it a document that he was to deliver in person to the Foreign Office. He obliged, and – whether it was a coincidence or not – two weeks later the writer and British subject was offered an opportunity to prove himself loyal to the Crown in a series of propaganda operations on behalf of the Admiralty. Retinger disappeared and in April 1918 he was finally expelled from all territories of the Allied Powers.³⁹

Conrad waited until after the Armistice was signed, in November 1918, before addressing primarily his American readers in “The Crime of Partition.” He reconstructs here with great effectiveness – and a few polemical jabs at the Western powers – the tragic partition of Poland. But the article was meant as a political intervention, aimed at reassuring Western readers about the idealism that had guided Poland’s foreign policies in the past and would certainly guide the Polish Republic when it came to defining its eastern borders. “The spirit of aggressiveness,” he writes,

was absolutely foreign to the Polish temperament [...] Territorial expansion was never the master-thought of Polish statesmen. [...] the preamble of the first Union Treaty (1413) [...] begins with the words: “This Union, being the outcome not of hatred, but of love.”⁴⁰

All the more important it was to remind Westerners of this past, now that

Already there are innuendoes, threats, hints thrown out, and even awful instances fabricated out of inadequate materials, but it is historically unthinkable that the Poland of the future, with its sacred tradition of freedom and its hereditary sense of respect for the rights of individuals and States, should seek its prosperity in aggressive action or in moral violence against that part of its once fellow-citizens who are Ruthenians or Lithuanians. [...] There can be no doubt that the moral impulses and the material interests of the new nationalities [...] will unite them sooner or later by a spontaneous movement towards the State which had adopted and brought them up in the development of its own humane culture – the offspring of the West.⁴¹

Was Conrad outside of history? In those months Marshal Piłsudski – who was himself a *szlachcic* of the Polish *limes*, born in Lithuania – was attempting to create

³⁸ Cit. in Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, trans. Halina Najder (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), p. 507.

³⁹ Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, p. 505.

⁴⁰ Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 119-120.

⁴¹ Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 133.

a federation that was to unite Poles, Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, in a multi-ethnic Confederation, It was the so-called “Jagiellonian Idea,” which Conrad was trying to revive in “The Crime of Partition.”

The article came out in May 1919, and by that time Polish soldiers had already occupied Vilnius, and were fighting in eastern Galicia, where in July they had succeeded in repelling an attempt by Ukrainian forces to seize Lviv. The first to reject federation were the Ukrainian and Lithuanian nationalists.⁴²

News from *Kresy* began to filter out but Conrad was not to be silenced. Four months after “The Crime of Partition” was published he reworked in different words the same vision of Poland, this time in the “Author’s Note” to *A Personal Record*, which he finished writing on September 8, 1919. Free from the burden of remorse towards his home country, he found the right words by recovering his most individual voice: that of the novelist who had defended his art, against those who wanted to dismiss it as the expression of a Slavic soul. Toward the end of the “Note,” he addresses the English critics who had labeled him ethnically:

It is not for me to criticize my judges, the more so because I always felt that I was receiving more than justice at their hands. But it seems to me that their unfailingly interested sympathy has ascribed to racial and historical influences much, of what, I believe, appertains simply to the individual.⁴³

But who was this “individual,” who all along – he claims here – had remained loyal to the Polish temperament and tradition? At this point, his writing takes flight:

An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood: – matters of calm and deep conviction both lasting and consistent, and removed as far as possible from that humanitarianism that seems to be merely a matter of crazy nerves or a morbid conscience.⁴⁴

It is an extraordinary passage. If we go through it sentence after sentence, we can find many of the ideas he had worked into his fiction:

– the “*impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour and misery...*” was the key idea in the ethical-artistic project he first tried to share with the British readers in his 1895 Preface to *Almayer’s Folly*, where he writes: “There is a bond between us and that humanity so far away. [...] I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live.”⁴⁵ It is interesting to discover that Ford

⁴² Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 244.

⁴³ Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. vi.

⁴⁴ Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. vii.

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly and Tales of Unrest* (London: Dent 1968), p. viii.

Madox Ford recognized in this “impartial view of humanity” a sign of Conrad’s Polishness.⁴⁶

– “with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth.” In *Nostromo* a variety of English, Italian and Costaguanero characters appear, against the background of the geographical setting, populated by the “unprivileged of this earth” so admirably described in the opening pages. Several Englishmen are busy in the foreground – Charles Gould, Captain Mitchell, Sir John, the chief engineer, Dr. Monygham, and others – while the one Englishwoman, Emilia Gould, slowly moves back into the background until the last pages. In the beautiful seventh chapter of part one, the English couple travel in the interior, and the narrator notes in what way Emilia’s perspective diverges from that of her husband: “Mrs. Gould was indeed becoming a Costaguanero. Having acquired in Southern Europe a knowledge of true peasantry, she was able to appreciate the great worth of the people. *She saw the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden.*”⁴⁷ But she also comes to admire the land-owners of that beautiful land. Sir John detests “the benighted state of mind of the owners of its fertile territory – all these aristocratic old Spanish families, all those Don Ambrosios this and Don Fernandos that, who seemed actually to dislike and distrust the coming of the railway over their lands”⁴⁸ – which was designed to be the first step of the “systematic colonisation of the Occidental Province, involved in one vast scheme with the construction of the National Central Railway.”⁴⁹ How do all those *pan Bobrowski* this and *pan Korzeniowski* that dare to defend that land of blue skies and golden fields of grain?

– In *The Rover*, Michel, the destitute fisherman, accompanies Peyrol to the boat that will take them to certain death. All of a sudden Peyrol turns around and asks Michel to shake hands, saying: “If I had gone away by myself, I would have left you marooned on this earth like a man thrown out to die on a desert island.” Some dim perception of the solemnity of the occasion seems to enter Michel’s primitive brain. He connects Peyrol’s words with the sense of his own insignificant position at the tail of all mankind, and, timidly, he murmurs with his clear, innocent glance, the fundamental axiom of his philosophy: “Somebody must be last in this world.”⁵⁰ He also will die a hero’s death.

– “on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services”: is not this the discovery the young captain in *The Shadow Line* makes at the end of the

⁴⁶ “The curious, Oriental courtiership in Conrad’s disposition led him to greet the humblest of human beings,” he wrote in *Portraits from Life*. “I have seen him behave,” he continues, “with an identical Oriental display before an old labourer’s wife; his child’s nurse; myself; a peer of the realm; Messrs. Gosse, Garnett, and Galsworthy [...] so that, if he was a respecter of persons, he respected all persons alike. [...] The faculty that made him be able to prostrate himself in unbelievable politeness before Messrs. Gosse, Garnett, and Galsworthy, [...] let him, at other times, perceive and express the bitterest, the almost most sadistic contempt for those three gentlemen – and, of course, myself – though he was, as a true Polack *pan*, almost always a miracle of patience with his child’s faithful attendant.” Ford, “Conrad and the Sea,” pp. 57-58.

⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (London: Dent, 1960), p. 89, emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ Joseph Conrad, *The Rover* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, 1923), p. 253.

ordeal, having started out fantasizing about “a sort of composite soul, the soul of command [that] had whispered suddenly to mine”? He discovers instead that he can save himself and the ship only through a “*honourable reciprocity of services*” with his sailors; and asks himself “whether it was the temper of their souls or the sympathy of their imagination that made them so wonderful, so worthy of my undying regard.”⁵¹ – “*removed as far as possible from that humanitarianism that seems to be merely a matter of crazy nerves or a morbid conscience*” – In the “Preface to My Readers in America,” he wrote in 1914 for the Doubleday edition of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* Conrad explains that “James Wait, afraid of death and making her his accomplice was an impostor of some character – mastering our compassion, scornful of our sentimentalism, triumphing over our suspicions. But in the book he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action.”⁵² In the novel, that “nothing” is made visible, is given a voice, when following a question posed by the omniscient narrator (“Was he a reality – or was he a sham – this ever-expected visitor of Jimmy’s?”) turns out to be the cue for a “We,” who takes over the narrative when an anonymous sailor starts telling the readers what is the effect of Jimmy’s illness on the crew:

We hesitated between pity and mistrust, while, on the slightest provocation, he shook before our eyes the bones of his bothersome and infamous skeleton. [...] He had found the secret of keeping for ever on the run the fundamental imbecility of mankind; he had the mastery secret of life, that confounded dying man; and he made himself master of every moment of our existence. We grew desperate, and remained submissive.

And we are at the beginning of the voyage; in the end, the anonymous “We” will show a different degree of awareness: “He was demoralising. Through him *we were becoming highly humanised*, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathised with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions – as though we had been over-civilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life.”⁵³

The legacy of the Korzeniowski and Bobrowski families, “the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood,” had turned into an artistic ideal. The phrase “matters of calm and deep conviction both lasting and consistent” can be seen to provide a key to the life of an Eastern Pole living in exile. The journey back in time, begun in 1914, had reached its destination. Yes, the commitment to “*garder ma pensée intacte*” throughout his life had become the “inner voice” of his art.

⁵¹ Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line: A Confession* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917), pp. 76, 148.

⁵² Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* p. ix.

⁵³ Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* pp. 36-37, 139, emphasis added.

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Early View