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IN THEIR
TIME

Brian Spittles

Joseph Conrad



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WRITERS IN THEIR TIME

Joseph Conrad

Text and Context

Brian Spittles

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For Margaret

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Abbreviations

Page numbers in respect of Conrad's novels refer to the following Penguin editions:

Heart of Darkness (1989)
Lord Jim (1986)
Nigger of the 'Narcissus', The (1988)
Nostramo (1990)
Secret Agent, The (1990)
Tales of Unrest (1977)
'Twixt Land and Sea (1988)
Under Western Eyes (1989)
Victory (1989)
Youth (1975)

Compilations of other writing by Conrad are referenced by the following coding:

- CD Zdzisław Najder (ed.), *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces by Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday, 1978)
CL Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (eds), *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
 Volume I, 1861–1897, published 1983
 Volume II, 1898–1902, published 1986
 Volume III, 1903–1907, published 1988
 Volume IV, 1908–1911, published 1990
LE Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays* (London: Dent, 1926)
LL G. Jean-Aubrey (ed.) *Joseph Conrad: Life & Letters*, volumes 1 and 2 (London: Heinemann, 1927)
NL Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1970)

General Editor's Preface

In recent years many critics and teachers have become convinced of the importance of recognizing that works of literature are grounded in the conditions of their production in the widest possible sense of that phrase – in the history, society, ideas and ideologies of their time, the lives and careers of their authors, and the prevailing circumstances of the literary market-place and the reading public. To some extent this development reflects both a disenchantment with the 'practical criticism' approach that held sway for so long in school, college and university teaching of literature and a scepticism towards the ahistorical biases encouraged by some more recent schools of critical theory.

It is true that lip-service has long been paid to 'background': the English Tripos at Cambridge, for instance, embodied the 'life, literature and thought' formula from its early years. Such an approach, however, tended to treat 'background' as distinct and detachable from literary works and as constituting a relatively minor, marginal and even optional element in the study of a text. What is now perceived to be in question is something more vital and more central: not a loosely defined relationship between certain novels, plays and poems on the one hand and 'history' or 'ideas' on the other, but an intimate informing and shaping of the one by the other. Colonialism in Conrad or Kipling, Christian theology in Milton or Bunyan, scientific discovery in Tennyson or Hardy, politics in Yeats or Eliot: these are not background issues against which the texts can be foregrounded but crucial determinants of the very nature of the texts themselves without which they would be radically different and which profoundly affect the way we understand and value them.

At the same time, as most teachers are ready to attest, even a basic knowledge of the historical and cultural conditions of past, including recently past, generations cannot be taken for granted. To many students, periods as recent as the 1930s or the Great War are largely a closed book, while key concepts of earlier generations such as Darwinism or Puritanism, and major movements such as the spread of literacy and the growth and decline of imperialism, are known in the sketchiest outline if at all.

This series is intended to provide in an accessible form materials that will make possible a fuller and deeper understanding of the work of major authors by demonstrating in detail its relationship to the world, including the intellectual world, in which it was produced. Its starting-point is not a notion of 'background' but a conviction that many, perhaps most, great writers are in an integral sense *in* and *of* their time. Each volume will look afresh at the primary texts (or a selection of them) in relation to the ways in which they have been informed and shaped by both the external and the ideological conditions of their worlds. Historical, political, scientific, theological, philosophical and other dimensions will be explored as appropriate. By understanding more fully the contexts which have made particular works what they are and not otherwise, students and others will be able to bring new understanding to their reading of the texts.

NORMAN PAGE

1

The Unique Background

Joseph Conrad is unique as a writer. Not just as all writers differ from one another, but in the way his life and two careers mark him out as being different from any previous – and perhaps any more recent – novelist in the realms of English literature. Of no other major novelist could another author write the description John Galsworthy, in a letter to his sister, gave of Conrad:

he is a man of travel and experience in many parts of the world. . . . He has been right up the Congo and all around Malacca and Borneo and other out of the way parts, to say nothing of a little smuggling in the days of his youth.¹

Galsworthy wrote this in 1893 after his first meeting with Conrad, and they were to become lifelong friends.

At the time of his birth in 1857 the great tradition of the English novel, that Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski would ultimately both challenge and develop, was being carried by such writers as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray and Anthony Trollope, who had inherited it from Henry Fielding and Jane Austen, and who would pass it on to George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. These were not the only important, or interesting, novelists in English before Conrad began to write, but they are central figures who share one common, dominating, feature: their Englishness. Of course, Irish and Scots novelists also contributed significantly to what is known as English literature – Laurence Sterne and Walter Scott provide outstanding examples – and later Welsh writers too participated in that tradition; but despite their nationality those authors shared in, and largely subscribed to, a British education and culture that was dominated by England. In the year of Conrad's birth it seemed that Britain had overcome much of its strife and uncertainty, and was fundamentally a secure and self-confident political and economic entity – although instability and loss of confidence did occur later.

Few Poles during the period of Conrad's childhood enjoyed the English/British sense of security of national identity, for during most of the nineteenth century Poland was virtually an occupied country. It was pressured from the west by Prussia, the most military of the Germanic States; from the south by the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and from the east by Czarist Russia.

Joseph Conrad came from a family with a long history of patriotic struggle against the forces of occupation. The grandfather from whom Conrad gained his second name, Teodor, won military honours in 1809 fighting against Austria; and in 1830 was again in action, this time in the attempt to end Russian oppression in Poland. He finally died, when his grandson Joseph was five years old, trying to join the Polish insurrection against Russia that occurred in 1863. That spirit of political conflict and aspiration was also evident in Conrad's father, Apollo Nałęcz Korzeniowski, who was exiled by the Russian authorities in 1862 for actions defined as political crimes. In the following year in addition to the death of Joseph Conrad's grandfather one of the boy's uncles was killed in the insurrection, and another sentenced to exile because of his participation in the anti-Russian rising.

It is obvious that Conrad's formative years were a time of political turmoil and violence in which his family were deeply enmeshed. Conrad's family came from aristocratic stock that had fallen socially. A combination of financial carelessness and political idealism, that had embroiled various members in conflict with the Russian forces of occupation, caused that fall; although they remained a well-educated family who never quite accepted their new, and inferior, social status. In fact they did not lose all social prestige. When Apollo married Evelina in 1856 he was an estate manager, and with the help of her dowry leased a farm – in the Ukraine, the south-east area of Poland that was under Russian Czarist government – just before Joseph Conrad was born. That venture, however, lasted only three years, ending again in financial mismanagement. Joseph Conrad grew up as an only child in an atmosphere in which his father was frustrated financially and politically. The latter leading to him being banished in 1862 by the Russian authorities in order to remove him from the political arena in Poland.

Most of the British novelists mentioned earlier were critical, some extremely so, of their society, but they never felt displaced, were never physically exiled from it. Conrad suffered two exiles,

both of which served to affect his perception of western European life and culture profoundly.

His first exile, as a boy of four years old, was involuntary – accompanying his father and mother on Apollo's political banishment to a fairly remote area of Russia north-east of Kiev, about 300 miles from their home. They were harsh conditions in which to grow up, as his father's description of the place they were initially sent to illustrates:

a great three-verst marsh . . . everything rotting and shifting under one's feet. . . . The climate consists of two seasons of the year: a white winter and a green winter. The white winter lasts nine-and-a-half months and the green one two-and-a-half . . . [on their arrival] it had already been raining ceaselessly for twenty-one days.²

In the circumstances it is not surprising that in the same letter Conrad's father observed, the 'population is a nightmare: disease-ridden corpses'. Although the family later moved to a less hostile environment Joseph's mother, Evelina, was often ill and died in 1865 when her son was only seven years old. Joseph's father too suffered poor health, and so the boy was then being brought up in a foreign country by a single parent who was impoverished, unwell and a patriot longing to return to his homeland. That ended in 1869 when Apollo also died. Joseph Conrad was an orphan at the tender age of eleven, but that enabled him to return to the family where he was effectively raised by Uncle Thaddeus, his mother's brother.

Conrad's views of political action and idealism, patriotism, sacrifice must have been fundamentally influenced by the havoc and distress these concepts caused to his family, and the sheer physical hardship they inflicted during his formative years. All of these experiences are a long way from any sufferings undergone by British novelists – which is not to argue that they had easy, comfortable lives, but that the scale of their hardships was different, and occurred within a *comparatively* stable political and cultural framework. In moving from the British novelists to Conrad it is necessary for the reader to change perspectives.

Those potentially noble, potentially destructive concepts that drove his family on recur as themes throughout Conrad's work. Writing was also a family trait: his grandfather Teodor wrote a

play in verse; and Conrad's own father aspired to being a man of letters. Apollo studied at Petersburg University – that in itself is significant of the power of Russian educational imperialism in the Poland of the nineteenth century – and translated western European writers, including Shakespeare and Dickens. He also wrote poetry and plays. The family was imbued with the literary culture of its time, which was mainly patriotic anti-oppressor in sentiment. Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski was given his first two Christian names after his grandfathers, and probably awarded his third name in respect to a fictional character, Konrad Wallenrod – the eponymous hero of an epic, inevitably, patriotic poem. It is a feature of Conrad's fiction, though, that linguistic and structural ironies often make it difficult for the reader to know exactly what the author's attitudes are towards the themes. Although Conrad was brought up in an atmosphere of polemical writing he does not often take a simple propagandist approach to ideas and conflicts. A central facet of Conrad's vision as a writer is the way in which he sees complexity, ambiguity and paradox in situations that the mere polemicist would use simply to illustrate a predetermined theory. His own subsequent honest opinion of his grandfather's *Drama*, expressed in a letter to Edward Garnett, was that it is 'so extremely dull that no one was ever known to have read it through' (CL, vol. 2, p. 245). In his own work Conrad was determined to avoid both the simple-mindedness and the dullness of conventional epic narratives; which he achieved partly by developing relatively uncommon narrational techniques. The use of a narrator who is also a participating character, in particular Marlow who appears in several works, is one aspect Conrad developed beyond the mainstream of nineteenth century usage; and the use of time in a disorientating manner is a feature of a number of novels and stories.

In *Youth* and *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, the narrative structure is based on an older Marlow telling incidents of his earlier life to an audience of listeners; the main narrator being one of that group. The filtering of the story through memories means that nothing can be taken for granted, as it can be in many earlier novels, that the narrators themselves must be questioned. *Nostromo* is constructed around a very complicated time scheme. In Part the First, for example, the time scheme is circular, denying the traditional convention of a simple linear plot development. Many occurrences are described and analysed, but with the action

ending at exactly the temporal point at which it began in the novel. The effect of these devices is to involve the reader intellectually. Conrad's novels cannot be read passively, simply for the plot – the reader has to work quite hard at times simply to understand what is going on. That is part of the challenge of reading Conrad, and also the core of the joy and excitement when some comprehension is attained. Conrad uses the active process of interpretation to question traditional forms and ideas, to challenge conventional attitudes and beliefs.

Conrad's second exile was chosen by him when he was a youth. At the time it was not necessarily a long-term decision but in the event that is what it became, and it led directly to his first career: that of a seaman. As an orphan who had moved about a good deal Conrad was restless and somewhat rootless. He had been taken to the sea at Odessa, and that had fired his imagination; his father had begun to teach him French during their period in exile together, and those two factors fused in young Conrad's desire to escape and begin to form his own life and identity. He left Poland for Marseilles in 1874, at the age of sixteen, and the following year began his career as a sailor in the French Merchant Navy. Four years later Conrad, in the way international sailors often did, drifted into the British Merchant Navy and apparently began to feel some stability seeping into his nomadic existence. It was from this period that he started to gain marine career qualifications, and in 1886 he became a naturalised British subject. In 1895 he formally dropped his Polish name on the publication of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. In the following year he married an English woman, Jessie George, and took up permanent residence in England. They had two sons: Borys, who was born in 1898, and John in 1906. Nevertheless Conrad always felt close to Polish troubles, and did revisit the country. When he died in Kent in 1924 the name Korzeniowski was inscribed on his gravestone.

No other major novelist of English literature had quite such a varied life. The experience of Conrad's first career, as a sailor, also marks him out from the mainstream of novelists in the canon of English literature in at least three basic ways: the length of his first career, its nature, and the world perspective it enabled Conrad to bring to English literature.

The majority of the leading British-born novelists had not moved to writing from a totally non-literary career as Conrad had. Of those mentioned earlier, for example, Henry Fielding was engaged

with the theatre; Charles Dickens was a reporter for a few years; William Makepeace Thackeray also worked for newspapers; George Eliot was a translator, reviewer and essayist – all occupations related to reading and writing. In addition Laurence Sterne was a clergyman; Anthony Trollope had a public school education and eventually attained a prestigious position in the Post Office. Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell had no formal career as such, but both had physically and financially secure lives in which they were rarely far from a private library. Thomas Hardy did train as an architect, and he was perhaps most removed from contact with the world of letters, but even he published his first novel, *Desperate Remedies*, when he was only thirty years old, and had more or less given up the profession of architect by the time he was thirty-three. Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, was published when he was thirty-seven, and his sea-going career lasted for nineteen years. In a way Conrad was returning to an old family concern in becoming a writer. He was, however, a late starter in his own right, later than many other novelists, and came to writing with very different attitudes from those of his grandfather, father, and the majority of other novelists.

The second factor differentiating Conrad from the mainstream was the nature of his first career. This contained two major elements: physical action and acute danger. When Conrad writes about work it is not from a theoretical position, nor does he necessarily rigidly separate mental and physical work. If there was a Victorian Protestant work ethic – and that glib slogan retrospectively applied can cover much poverty of thought – Conrad could hardly be claimed, legitimately, as a subscriber. It is not so much work that is important, but the mental and physical activity involved in it – the energy – that is vital. It is necessary to make a crucial judgement about the two activities, of mind and body. They have to be fused, either one on its own can become sterile. The former can lead to a divorce from practical reality. Decoud's solitude when he is stranded on the Great Isabel engenders:

The vague consciousness of a misdirected life. . . . His sadness was the sadness of a sceptical mind. He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images. . . . And all exertion seemed useless.

(*Nostromo*, pp. 413–14)

Chronic inertia leads to stagnation, and in this case death by suicide. But physical activity alone may be ultimately sterile too. Conrad drew, in a *Fortnightly Review* article in 1905 – attacking, incidently, two of the old Polish enemies, Russia and a Prussian-dominated Germany – a parallel between individual people and political States:

States, like most individuals, having but a feeble and imperfect consciousness of the worth and force of the inner life, the need of making their existence manifest to themselves is determined in the direction of physical activity. The idea of ceasing to grow in territory, in strength, in wealth, in influence – in anything but wisdom and self-knowledge is odious to them as the omen of the end. Action, in which is to be found the illusion of a mastered destiny, can alone satisfy our uneasy vanity.

(NL, pp. 108–9)

Simple action without thought is an illusionary mastering of destiny – mere physical action for its own sake leading to aggression and violence – just as intellectualism divorced from practical action also leads to a condition, or state, of unreality. But the two in fusion are able to generate positive values, for it is energy that is created by the practical and natural yoking of both activities. Aggression is a destructive force; renunciation of the will to use it is a natural and creative force. Conrad argued this in an article in the *North American Review*:

a fine consciousness is naturally a virtuous one. What is natural about it is just its fineness, and abiding sense of the intangible, ever-present, right. It is most visible in their ultimate triumph, in their emergence from miracle, through an energetic act of renunciation. Energetic, not violent; the distinction is wide, enormous, like that between substance and shadow.

(NL, p. 18)

These are pre-eminently the thoughts of a writer who has had to work practically and intellectually, not simply to earn a wage, but literally as a matter of life and death at sea.

This element – the danger – is the other major aspect of the nature of Conrad's first career. A lot of Conrad's fiction – a great deal more than at first meets the eye – is not particularly concerned

with the sea, or only peripherally so, but in order to grasp the whole of his achievement it is necessary for the modern reader to appreciate the quality of sea-going life in the nineteenth century, in which most of the fiction is set although mainly written in the twentieth. The nature of that life permeates most of Conrad's subsequent philosophical ideas.

The danger of a sea-faring life sprang from two basic factors: the relative smallness, and sometimes the unseaworthiness of ships, which left them vulnerable to all manner of accidents; and the unpredictability and potential ferocity of weather conditions. These could be related aspects of experience at sea, and the weather is not a factor over which there is any real control, but its effects were intensified by the state of the shipping.

It is important to realise that the number of commercial sailing vessels outnumbered steamships until just into the twentieth century. The change occurred during Conrad's career as a sailor. In the United Kingdom the numbers of ships registered in 1875, just after Conrad had begun his first career, were: 'sailing vessels 21,291; steam vessels 4,170'. It was not until 1904 that the numerical balance finally tipped in favour of steam, when the statistics were: 'sailing vessels 10,210; steam vessels 10,370'.³ These were working craft, often plying long routes and carrying a lot of cargo. Over 10,000 sailing ships obviously did not go out of service overnight, and they remained a significant, even if diminishing, aspect of mercantile life well into the twentieth century. It might also be remembered that the figures relate to Britain, which was one of the (if not *the*) leading industrial nations; shipping in some other parts of the world was dominated by sail until much later. These ships were particularly vulnerable to vicissitudes of climate, and to accidents. These might be seen as manifestations of fate, a complex concept that is a recurring theme in Conrad's fiction.

Both those elements of risk were exacerbated, however, by controllable circumstances: the inefficiency of land-based operators, and the greed of some owners. It is because Conrad recognises the subtle interplay between forces that are external to humanity, such as weather, and mankind's actions – the way a crew is treated or a cargo loaded, for example – that his treatment of the theme of fate is complex.

Even human cargo was sometimes transported without consideration. John Pine, for example, wrote to his father of a journey to South Africa:

We arrived safe and sound at Algoa Bay after being in misery 89 days on board the *Magaera*. When we went out of Plymouth Sound we had nearly four feet of water in us, but we managed to stop the leak after pumping for days and nights. We had the misfortune to have the engine room on fire no less than three times to the great danger of the ship and all our lives. We had nearly 900 souls on board altogether and we were all packed as close as herrings.⁴

Pine's factual observations on the voyage give a perspective of veracity to a story such as *Youth*, in which the *Judea* is submitted to a series of accidents that may appear to be rather melodramatic. That fictional ship also springs a leak that takes several days of ceaseless pumping to withstand, and it suffers a recurrent fire – ordeals of the elements that have a metaphorical, thematic significance, but are also within the truth of Victorian sea-going experience. That John Pine's experience on the *Magaera* was not unique is indicated by his stoical comment in a later letter about another voyage:

I hope, my dear Father, you will excuse this dirty scrawl as I am nearly blinded with coal dust. Our vessel is in a dirty state and we have had shocking accommodation on board of her. If it had been a long voyage, I do not know what we should have done. In fact, it was ten times worse than the *Magaera*.⁵

Those sort of conditions continued into the twentieth century.

In Conrad's formative sea-going years, the period in which many of his sea stories are set, safety regulations governing ships were inadequate, and even such laws as existed were poorly supervised and implemented. The Plimsoll Line that all ships now carry to help prevent overloading dates from the Merchant Shipping Act of 1876, in which the MP Samuel Plimsoll sought to control shipping owners and operators more closely for the benefit of crews. This was a well-intentioned Act, but one which a later, very conservative, historian dismissed as 'not in itself very effective'.⁶ Yet the build up to it in the previous year had been spectacular in the sedate Victorian House of Commons, with Plimsoll – in full flood of indignation – being expelled from the sitting by the Speaker.

Plimsoll had eloquently pleaded with the prime minister, Disraeli, to allow discussion of the Shipping Bill, which the government

were abandoning, and 'not to consign some thousands of living beings to undeserved and miserable death'. These were sailors who would drown in unsafe ships. The MP went on to speak 'of shipowners of murderous tendencies' who had friends in the House who ensured measures such as the Shipping Bill were not passed into law. This kind of accusation naturally led Plimsoll into controversy, but he had evidence that some owners did insure an old ship for more than it was worth in the hope that it would be lost at sea. They would then be rid of a vessel that needed expensive repairs, and collect a profit from the insurance company into the bargain. The real losers, of course, were the hapless sailors who drowned. The insurance companies, of which Lloyd's was the main one, had a financial interest in what amounted to large-scale fraud, and they provided Plimsoll with arguments:

The Secretary of Lloyds . . . does not know a single ship which has been broken up voluntarily by the owners in the course of thirty years on account of its being worn out. Ships gradually pass from hand to hand, until bought by some needy and reckless speculators, who send them to sea with precious human lives . . . every winter, hundreds and hundreds of brave men are sent to death, their wives are made widows and their children are made orphans, in order that a few speculative scoundrels . . . may make unhallowed gains.

(Hansard, 22 July 1875)

Plimsoll went on to categorise these people as 'ship-knackers', and to blame them specifically for: 'the following ships – the *Tethys*, the *Melbourne*, the *Nora Greame*, which were all lost in 1874 with 87 lives' (ibid.). This parliamentary speech illustrates the seriousness of the dangers. The *Patna*, on which the eponymous Lord Jim met, and failed, his great test was not an exaggerated example: 'eaten up with rust worse than a condemned water-tank' (*Lord Jim*, p. 53). It is no wonder that Jim expects the ship to sink after the collision that rips a hole in it: 'Have you watched a ship floating head down, checked in sinking by a sheet of old iron too rotten to stand being shored up?' (p. 111). Understanding that he had chosen a career in which such risks were inherent, yet still following it, and knowing men who had survived desperate, potentially fatal, situations gave Conrad a greater perception of life than many other major novelists had experienced.