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Supplement to *British Book News*,:

JOSEPH CONRAD

By OLIVER WARNER

PUBLISHED FOR

THE BRITISH COUNCIL
and the NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE
BY LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.
LONDON. NEW YORK. TORONTO

' No one', concludes Mr. Warner, ' will ever again be able to write a story about the sea without having in his mind the chastening thought of the best of Conrad.*

Oliver Warner brings to his assessment of Conrad's works not only a wide experience of literary criticism, but highly specialized knowledge of sea subjects and of writers about the sea. Coming from a family which appreciates men of action—he is a direct descendant of Oliver Cromwell—Mr. Warner has worked in the Admiralty, and was a member of the War Artists Advisory Committee. He is a contributor on naval subjects to the *Mariners* Mirror*, and author of a book on British Marine Painting.

His career, on its purely literary side, began when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge with contributions to the *Cambridge Review* and the well-known University magazine *The Granta*. He is die author of a novel, a book of miniatures *Captains and Kings*, and a life of George Monck, who restored Charles II. He was for many years a publisher's reader with Chatto and Windus, and is well known as a contributor of articles and book reviews to the leading literary magazines of Great Britain.

Bibliographical Series
of Supplements to 'British Book News'



GENERAL EDITOR
T. O. Beachcroft



Walter Tittle

JOSEPH CONRAD
*etching from life by WALTER TITTLE, 1924, in the
National Portrait Gallery*

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By OLIVER WARNER

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LONGMANS, GREEN & CO. LTD.
6 Sc 7 Clifford Street, London, W.I
Also at Melbourne and Cape Town

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO. INC.
55 Fifth Avenue, New York, 3

LONGMANS, GREEN & CO.
215 Victoria Street, Toronto, I

ORIENT LONGMANS LTD.
Bombay, Calcutta, Madras

First published in 1950

*Printed in Great Britain by Benham and Company Limited
Colchester*

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JOSEPH CONRAD

An Appreciation

NEWS of the death of Joseph Conrad came to one of his younger readers on the high seas. It was on 3 August 1924 ; further away in the mental climate of the world than the mere stretch of time suggests. The *Andania* was on her way towards America through the North Atlantic, and she had the news in the form of a laconic wireless message. The bouquets followed ; but meanwhile a handful of simple words were enough to set the imagination working. This was because the news, even to those who did not know him, was felt personally. It was the way that many felt the death of Byron just a century before. Conrad's message was to the heart as well as to the head, sailor-fashion.

The sea engenders reflection, and it is for his rendering of its moods and caprices, for his ranging, certain knowledge of the mariner in his good and less good qualities, that Conrad is remembered. His thoughts about ships and seamen, expressed in *The Mirror of the Sea*, provided one of his best books, ' the soul of my life ' he called it. Yet it would be an injustice if his name were held in repute for nothing else than this. He wrote of the sea unforgettably, of the actions, feelings, above all the fidelity which the maritime calling brings forth, but a principal re-discovery of that same reader who had tidings of his death in the old *Andania* when, a quarter of a century later, he came to take stock of Conrad's work in its entirety was that, independently of anything he wrote about the sea, he was a major novelist. *Nostromo*, *Victory*, *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* could all have been written by a man without professional knowledge of seafaring, though not without exceptional store of travel and observation. All are works of stature, though they have not had equal recognition. In fact, the nautical side of Conrad, essential as it is, was not always uppermost, and he was neither lost nor uneasy ashore.

As for the bouquets—sometimes even the choicest raise questions: Virginia Woolf, for instance, in *The Common Reader* (1925) thought that it was *Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* 'we shall re-read in their entirety'. Later assessment would amplify her choice, though no critic has bettered her tribute to his work in general. 'One opens his pages', she wrote, 'and feels as Helen must have felt when she looked in her glass and realized that, do what she would, she could never in any circumstances pass for a plain woman.'

II

The facts of a writer's personal life are sometimes an unimportant element in the understanding of his work. With Conrad it is otherwise. His life and his books are so closely integrated, that what passes for a story, as instanced by *Youth*, is sometimes autobiography, while who shall say that passages in *A Personal Record* lack the flavour of fiction? He was capable of creation in the large sense, but he drew upon and returned again and again to the store of direct experience he had acquired in his dealings with fellow men of almost every race and creed.

Conrad was born on 3 December 1857 at Berdyczew near Mohilow in Podolia, one of the southern provinces of Poland, then under Russian rule. He was christened Józef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, and was the only son of Apollo Nalecz Korzeniowski and his wife Evelina Dobrowska. His father was of a landed family, a man in whom two passions burnt, both inherited by his son: one was for the liberty of his country, the other for letters. One of Conrad's most vivid memories is of reading aloud to his father, at the age of nine, Apollo's translation of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Apollo also translated Victor Hugo's *Travailleurs de la Mer*. Hugo was, in fact, an abiding influence with the younger Conrad, and gave him a foretaste of the seafarer's life.

Apollo's work for the Polish National Committee led to his arrest in 1862, and exile first to Northern Russia, and then further south, to Tchernickow, where his wife died. In 1866 and the year following the boy lived with his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, at Nowofastow in the Polish Ukraine. He then rejoined his father, who had been granted conditional freedom, living first in Lemberg, Galicia and later in Cracow. There, in 1869, Apollo died.

Conrad continued to study at the University of Cracow under a tutor, to whom he was much attached, and to whom he confided his wish—it was a determination—to go to sea. Much persuasion was necessary. His family were by tradition inland and agricultural people, and the Poles had not then revealed, what was made clear in the second world war, that they have special aptitude afloat.

By 1873 opposition had finally been overcome—on top of an alpine pass, as Conrad records in *A Personal Record*. In the autumn of the year following he left Cracow for Marseilles. He spoke fluent French, and was soon in the first stages of his varied sea apprenticeship. He served at first locally in small sailing ships, became involved in minor royalist intrigues, and in fact sowed a reasonable crop of wild oats. But the world was wide, and in 1875 came his first long voyage, to Martinique. It lasted, all told, about six months.

He visited the West Indies again the following year, this time in the *Saint-Antoine*, among whose officers was a Corsican, Dominic Cervoni, who was by confession Conrad's true 'sea-daddy'. Cervoni is one of his staple characters. He appears in person in *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Arrow of Gold*. Conrad gave him credit for being the inspiration of Nostromo in his novel of that name, of Jean Peyrol of *The Rover*, of Tom Lingard of *The Rescue* and Attilio of *Suspense*. He was an individual blend of braggart, loyal friend and experienced seaman.

With Cervoni, on his return to Europe, he shared in adventures in the tartane *Tremolino* on behalf of the Spanish

claimant, Dçm Carlos, became involved in an unhappy love affair, and fought a duel. These affairs are touched upon in *The Mirror of the Sea* and related fully in *The Arrow of Gold*. It is just such a vessel as the *Tremolino* which delights Peyrol's last days, as affectionately described in *The Rover*.

In 1878 Conrad joined an English steamer, *the Mavis*. He says in *A Personal Record* that 'I never went into steam—not really'. Figuratively, that may be true, but his acquaintanceship with steam-ships was anything but casual. In the *Mavis* he voyaged to Constantinople and the Sea of Azov. In her, on 18 June 1878, he arrived at Lowestoft.

It was a momentous date. 'If I was to be a seaman', he wrote in *A Personal Record*, 'I would be a British Seaman and no other.' Leaving the *Mavis*, he joined a coastal barquentine, *The Skimmer of the Seas*, working between Lowestoft and Newcastle. Here he began to learn English thoroughly. 'My teachers', he says in *Notes on Life and Letters*, 'were the sailors of the Norfolk shore; coast men, with steady eyes, mighty limbs and gentle voice; men of very few words, which at least were never bare of meaning.' This description he amplified in a letter to R. B. Cunningham-Graham: 'East Coast chaps, each built as though to last for ever, and coloured like a Christmas card . . . from Lowestoft to Newcastle and back again. Good school for a seaman'.

His next ship was the wool-clipper *Duke of Sutherland*, in which he voyaged to Sydney. In 1879 he was once more in the Mediterranean, in the steamer *Europa*, and in the following year passed his Board of Trade examination as third mate. He made a further journey to Australia, his first as an officer, and then—after passing for second mate—joined the barque *Palestine* bound for Bangkok. She is the *Judea of Youth*. She caught fire at sea, and from an open boat, in 1882, he had his first sight of the East.

Conrad returned to England in a steam-ship, and passed his chief mate's examination in 1883. After a brief holiday with his uncle Tadeusz he joined the *Riversdale*, bound for

Madras. Thence he went to Bombay, to the 1,300 ton *Narcissus*, proceeding in her to Dunkirk. He arrived in April 1884 after a voyage described in the earlier of his two storm-pieces, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, to which the companion is *Typhoon*.

He then sailed in the *Tilkhurst* from Hull to Singapore, thence to Calcutta, and home to Dundee. Home it was now to be, for on 19 August 1886, eight years after he had first landed at Lowestoft, 'J. C. Korzeniowski, subject of the Russian Empire' became a naturalized Briton. In the same year he passed the examination for his Master Mariner's certificate, vivid details of which are set forth in *A Personal Record*.

Command did not come quickly. In 1887 he served as chief mate in the sailing ship *Highland Forest*, bound for Java out of Amsterdam, captain, John McWhirr of *Typhoon*, although in the story the vessel is a steamer. From the *Highland Forest* he transferred to the small steam-ship *Vidar* as second mate. In her he learnt of the life of Malaya with an intimacy few have exceeded. *Almaye's Folly*, *An Out-cast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim*, *The Rescue* and many other stories have as their background these enchanted Eastern seas and the Spice Islands of the old adventurers, 'from which', as he records in a Note to *The Shadow Line*, 'I have carried away into my writing life the greatest number of suggestions'.

In 1888 Conrad had his first command, inherited at Bangkok from a dead captain. She was the *Otago*, and she is the subject of *The Shadow Line*, *Falk* and other stories. He took her to Singapore, to Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Mauritius, including a passage through the Torres Strait. He resigned, to the owner's regret, after about a year's service, and soon afterwards proceeded to the Belgian Congo and the scenes of *Heart of Darkness*. Africa affected him profoundly both in health and outlook. It was by his own wish that he visited the Congo, but his experiences were bitter, and he felt himself lucky to have survived them.

Towards the end of 1891 he joined the 1,300-ton sailing ship *Torrens*, making two voyages in her to Australia. It was his last long experience of deep water. There were later episodes ; charge of a French ship which he took to Rouen ; a brief glimpse of the first world war in an anti-submarine vessel; and a still briefer aerial perspective from a Short biplane of the Royal Navy at the age of fifty-eight. Of this he wrote in *Notes on Life and Letters*, ' I reckon every minute like a miser counting his hoard '. He spoke of the ' mysterious fascination ' of flight, ' whose invisible wing had touched my heart up there '.

The date of Conrad's last regular service in the Merchant Marine was 14 January 1894. He had accumulated twenty years' experience of the face of the waters. He knew sail, and saw it vanishing. ' History repeats itself,' he says in *The Mirror of the Sea*, ' but the special call of an art which has passed away is never reproduced. . . . Whatever craft he handles with skill, the seaman of the future shall not be our descendant, but only our successor.'

III

The rest of Conrad's life belongs to letters. He was as incapable of half-heartedness as he was of mediocrity. He had been a prime seaman, ' but', to quote *The Mirror of the Sea*, ' to deal with men is as fine an art as to deal with ships. Both men and ships live in an unstable element, are subject to subtle and powerful influences, and want to have their merits understood rather than their faults found out'. Mankind was his new and final calling.

His equipment was remarkable. He was a good linguist, exceptionally well read in French and English literature. Knowing Poland and Russia from within, by temperament and heredity he was, as he told Mr. Megroz, ' Western European, descending from the Roman Empire and the ancient western world'. Well as he knew French, he recorded to the same author that he always thought in

English, a remark he reinforces in *A Personal Record* by the conclusive sentence, 'If I had not written in English I would not have written at all'. He took to letters an experience which was exceptional in its range, and an outlook wholly individual. He was shy of 'isms'—internationalism, cosmopolitanism, what you will: he had single-mindedness, and a Latin desire for clarity. What he achieved (and indeed it enriches every book he wrote) was a background devoid of insularity. He was proud of his adopted country, few prouder, but from the very circumstances of his life, he saw her from without. No one has dwelt upon her with more affection. He would have been the first to appreciate the pleasing irony that the two writers who have written most perceptively about her seamen generally, and in particular of Nelson, should have been himself a Pole, and Alfred Mahan an American.

Conrad's earliest story, *The Black Mate*, preserved in *Tales of Hearsay*, and written for a competition, presents one of those very rare glimpses of his quality as a humorist. It might almost have been written by W. W. Jacobs, a man about whom Conrad said that he was so gifted that he must have made his nurse laugh. His first extensive work was *Almayer's Folly*, a novel of Malaya with which he wrestled for some years, even before he left the sea. In the *Torrens* he showed the manuscript to a passenger, a Cambridge man, by name Jacques, who spoke tolerantly of it. A few months later John Galsworthy took passage in the same ship, but although deeply attracted by Conrad's personality he was not then himself a writer, and did not share the privilege of Mr. Jacques.

Almayer took about five years to finish. When it was done, he sent it to the London publisher, Fisher Unwin. It came into the hands of Edward Garnett, who had begun that long career so notable for the discovery and encouragement of writers. Unwin accepted *Almayer*; Conrad and Garnett became lifelong friends. *Almayer* appeared in 1895, dedicated 'to the memory of T. B.'—Tadeusz

Bobrowski, his guardian, who had died in the previous year.

In 1896 appeared *An Outcast of the Islands*, a story in which Almayer again figured. Three weeks after publication, Conrad married Miss Jessie George, a London girl of twenty-two, daughter of a bookseller. Their married life of nearly thirty years was not in its earlier stages free from material cares ; moreover, Conrad found it as difficult to settle in one particular home as in one particular ship. Travel was a necessity to him, and the pair made frequent visits abroad. They had two sons. Conrad sometimes signed himself, in letters to his wife, ' your own property '.

He had won recognition from his fellow writers almost from the first. They were quick to perceive an outlook of high seriousness. His reputation, indeed, grew quicker than his income. H. G. Wells, so different in temperament, was an early, generous and acute critic. R. B. Cunninghame Graham, Henry James, Stephen Crane, W. H. Hudson and Edward Thomas were soon added to his admirers. Quite early in his career he collaborated with Ford Madox Hueffer in two novels, *The Inheritors* (1901) and *Romance* (1903). Hueffer brought him into contact with a still wider circle ; for he was founder and editor of *The English Review*, and he lived to become a novelist of stature, in his own right.

Publishers were men of vision where Conrad's work was concerned. Fisher Unwin's example was followed by the loyal patronage of others, such as Heinemann and Dent; while in his Notes to the Collected Edition there are warm references to the generosity of the firm of Blackwood, for whose magazine he wrote *Youth* and other stories.

But even the publication by Dent in 1904 of his longest and most ambitious novel, *Nostromo*, did not bring him prosperity. Mr. Michael Sadleir in his notice of Conrad in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, speaks of his ' bitter chagrin ' at its ill success. His financial stress was not markedly eased until 1905, when a Civil List pension was

granted him, largely through the mediation of Edmund Gosse and William Rothenstein. When, at last, popularity came, it was by way of America. Thanks to F. N. Doubleday, his New York publisher, and high-pressure efforts to push *Chance* (1914) in the United States, this book became a turning point in his career. Although good, it was not equal to his best work, but it was successful, and for the last ten years of his life his writing was acclaimed—sometimes too shrilly—and widely read. Always an ironist, Conrad savoured the circumstances of his translation from an author for the comparatively few to a 'public figure'.

His visits abroad continued. He and his family narrowly escaped internment in Austria on their way home from Poland after the outbreak of the first world war. His last excursion was to America, in 1923, when he visited Mr. Doubleday. His final voyage home was in the great White Star liner *Majestic*, of 56,000 tons. He had known sail; he had flown; now he had acquaintance with sheer size and speed. He was not impressed.

Conrad never ceased to write, and was working on a Napoleonic novel *Suspense* until shortly before his death at Bishopsbourne in Kent. He is buried at Canterbury, the stone on his grave bearing his full name, though in hybrid spelling, and the most appropriate lines from Spenser which appear on the title-page of *The Rover*:

' Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.'

Mr. Megroz has described his manner as 'a curious mixture of warm-hearted courtesy and a child-like irritability'. The impression is general. He was well aware of his own genius and, despite his warm heart, had no great tolerance for fools. John Galsworthy, recording his personality in *Castles in Spain*, says: 'My memory is of a dark-haired man, short but extremely graceful in his nervous gestures, with brilliant eyes, now narrowed and penetrating, now soft and warm, with a manner alert yet

caressing, whose speech was ingratiating, guarded and brusque by turn. I had never *seen* before a man so masculinely keen yet so femininely sensitive. . . .' Ford Madox Hueffer said that 'when you had really secured his attention he would insert a monocle into his right eye and scrutinize your face as a watchmaker looks into the works of a watch'.

'Fascination', says Galsworthy, 'was Conrad's greatest characteristic—the fascination of vivid expressiveness and zest, of his deeply affectionate heart, and his far-ranging subtle mind.'

IV

Readers of Conrad are invariably struck with his command of language. To one who knew nothing of his origin, the thought would surely never occur that English was not his native tongue. Indeed his most persistent grammatical fault, the use of the word 'shall' where he intends 'will', is a peculiarity common enough even in those to whom English is an inheritance.

How he first learnt the language in which he wrote has been related. 'After hearing it spoken,' he told Mr. Megroz, 'and when I could talk enough, I read. I have a thick green-covered volume of Shakespeare I bought with my first earnings.' He learnt much from Mill's *Political Economy*, and from reading newspapers. Keats was his favourite English poet. Fennimore Cooper was known to his childhood from translations. In *Notes on Life and Letters* he says that, apart from his father's version of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Nicholas Nickleby* in Polish was his first introduction to English literature. He retained his affection for Dickens when he came to know the originals, particularly for *Bleak House*.

Conrad was not a professional critic, but he was a shrewd one. Having once mastered English, he read continuously and with discrimination. Henry James was one of his favourites: 'his mind', he said in an essay on his work,

'is steeped in the waters flowing from the fountain of intellectual youth'. He called him 'the historian of fine consciences'. The admiration was mutual: James said 'I read you as I listen to rare music—with deepest depths of surrender'. Marryat, 'the enslaver of youth', remained a particular friend. 'What sets him apart', wrote Conrad, 'is his fidelity'. To these firm affections must be added important elders and contemporaries of whom he spoke appreciatively—they included Alphonse Daudet, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Anatole France and Turgenev. The miraculous upshot of his curious literary education, which in a technical sense was greatly strengthened by practical treatises on seamanship, of which Conrad required the most exact knowledge, and whose importance can scarcely be over-emphasized, was a flexible and finely tempered style. Evident from his first book, it grew in subtlety until, in *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907, he brought off in triumph an elaborate study of the macabre, its background a London almost Dickensian in atmosphere. Of this book Arnold Bennett said that, while it was the kind of thing 'I reckon to handle myself—I respectfully retire from the comparison'. The remark was generous but deserved. It held assurance that, technically, nothing was beyond him.

Apart from three experiments in dramatic writing, from his autobiographical works, *A Personal Record* and *The Mirror of the Sea*, and from comments on affairs which were collected in *Notes on Life and Letters* and *Last Essays*, Conrad's output falls wholly within the sphere of fiction. Thirteen completed novels, and seven volumes of short stories were published between 1895 and 1925, not including the two collaborations with Madox Hueffer. They represent a body of work which shows not so much how promise turned into fulfilment, as how fulfilment amplified itself; how he gratified that 'avarice' of which he speaks in a Note to *The Rescue*, the 'artist's avarice which seeks its treasure in the hearts of men and women'.

V

Conrad's first two novels, *Almayer's Folly—a Story of an Eastern River* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), may be considered together. The background of both is Malaya, but as, in the second story Almayer figures as a much younger man than in the first, it will perhaps be as well to describe them in order of events.

The theme of *An Outcast of the Islands* is betrayal. Willems, confidential clerk in a merchant house, believes himself wily, and on the way to success. In point of fact, he has been tricked by his employer into marrying a Sirani girl, his natural daughter. Willems embezzles, is found out, and in his turn betrays the trading secret of a little known but exploitable island to Arab sea-rovers. The medium of his betrayal is Aissa, a girl with whom he falls in love while staying with Almayer, who till his coming is the only white man on the island. Almayer works on behalf of Tom Lingard, a buccaneering character who appears and reappears throughout the Malayan stories.

An Outcast culminates in a scene of melodrama, in which Aissa and Willems's Sirani wife and child confront one another. Willems in the end is shot by Aissa. The story is not one of Conrad's greater works : it is not, in fact, as good as *Almayer*, which is a rounded portrait of a man in disintegration. The Arabs have done their work by the time this story opens. Almayer is materially ruined, and only saved from complete demoralization by his love for his half-caste daughter Nina. Yet even Nina, whom he has hoped will prefer his own race to her Malayan mother's, betrays him by her love for a local chief, Dian. This breaks Almayer's heart. The story would be wholly tragic but for the happiness which Nina and Dian find in one another.

It can be said of these two novels that they are those of a man of mature experience, already master of the atmosphere of the Eastern islands, and with profound interest in natural beauty, in racial differences, in the processes of despair, and

in ironic twists of circumstance. All these characteristics were developed in Conrad's future novels: in *Almayer* and *An Outcast*, although he had shown the principal weapons of his armoury, they were not sharpened to the fine edge they later attained. Narrative power he never lacked, and it is a virtue of his early books that it seldom got out of hand; but when he again returned to Malaya in a full length book it was with perceptible addition of strength.

Meanwhile, there was *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', a Tale of the Sea* (1897). This long-short story is given unity by two figures, the nigger himself, and Allistoun, the master of the vessel. Neither, in a sense, are paramount characters. The nigger holds the reader in suspense in that it is for long uncertain whether an illness from which he appears to be suffering throughout the ship's stormy passage is genuine or sham. Of the Captain, it is certain from the first that he will defeat the weather that assails him, and that an unruly crew will be, by comparison, child's play. Ship and foul weather are in fact the true subject of *The Nigger*—they, the gossip, the grievances and the hardship of the fore-castle. Although he nearly always wrote from the point of view of an officer, Conrad knew the fore-castle from within, and his impressions are in this book powerfully conveyed.

The Nigger was an important interlude. It was followed by *Lord Jim* (1900), the novel by which Conrad is oftenest remembered by perhaps a majority of readers. It is the first considerable novel he wrote. Once more the scene is the East, this time at sea. The theme is redemption. His hero, 'Lord' Jim (the 'Lord' is a translation of the Malay 'Tuan') had 'jumped into an everlasting deep hole', or so it seemed. He had, in fact, leaped in the darkness from what he thought to be a sinking steamer, which was carrying a mass of pilgrims for whom there were no boats. The other officers were by nature deceitful and cowardly, but Jim found himself inevitably branded with them. As for his conduct, 'there was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and wrong of his affair'.

In the boat, the officers believe they see the lights of the ship disappear : Jim even thinks he hears cries. In fact, she is salvaged by a French gunboat, and Jim feels it his duty to stand full examination. This process is described in detail by one of Conrad's Narrators, who, under the guise of Marlow or another, pervades so many of his books. To some, they cause irritation : it should be remembered that they often serve a valuable purpose, and, moreover, that *Lord Jim* and other stories of the kind first appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, where the technique was well established.

The second part of *Lord Jim* describes the man's opportunity for redemption. He rules, with skill, daring and justice, a far-away community. He is honoured, he is loved, and he is—betrayed. A party of white men penetrate his secret, and, although he has given his word that, if allowed to leave the country unharmed they will take no life, they in fact do so, and Lord Jim forfeits his own.

In his Author's Note Conrad records that 'when this novel first appeared in book form a notion got about that I had been bolted away with '. The accusation was that a short story had got out of hand, and become a novel. It would be truer to say that it is a novel of very distinct parts, but that they coalesce. There is self-betrayal; there is redemption.

In the first part of the book there is an atmosphere of *The Ancient Mariner*. One has the sense of being button-holed by a most unhappy story. In the second, although quickly realizing that tragedy is probable, it is evident to the reader that the inherent honour of Jim's character will have scope to assert itself. It is an involved book, but it has a depth of feeling greater than in the earlier novels, for all their beauties. The surprise is not that it should have lasted well, but that it was not a wide success from the first.

VI

The two succeeding full-length books, *The Inheritors—an Extravagant Story* (1901) and *Romance—a Novel* (1903), were

collaborations with Ford Madox Hueffer. Conrad had been disturbed at the lack of general popularity of his earlier work, and the very theme of *The Inheritors* suggests it. The hero of the story is, as was Conrad and, indeed, Hueffer at the time, an obscure writer of integrity. He meets a strange girl in Canterbury, who tells him she belongs to the Fourth Dimension. By her instrumentality he is whirled into an atmosphere of success as a journalist; he becomes acquainted with high finance; he collaborates in a book on Cromwell with the Foreign Secretary (whose name by the way is Churchill); he falls in love with his Fourth Dimensional lady, and the end of the story is financial crash, suicides, the fall of Churchill, and the return of the writer to a different kind of obscurity. *The Inheritors* exposes popular writers, journalists, politicians, high finance, publishers, everything it touches except the honest craftsman. It contains certain timeless lessons, and the vitality of the story is unquestionable. But it is a puff of a book beside *Romance*.

In *The Inheritors*, whose title is explained by the fact that the Fourth Dimensional people, with a genius for power, were to inherit the earth, Conrad had strayed to London and Paris. There is no breath of the East, or the sea. In *Romance*, on the other hand, the collaborators drew to the full on Conrad's early experiences of the Caribbean. It is a long book, and for sustained excitement has few superiors in its genre. Action is continuous, the romance between the hero, John Kemp, and the aristocratic Spanish Seraphina, is both tender, chivalrous and, within its particular rather porcelain convention, convincing, while in their friend Castro, Crevoni undoubtedly appears once more. Packed with action, it contains an ample picture of the true squalor of piracy, and of the Caribbean in the early years of the nineteenth century. More than this, the enmity between Kemp and O'Brien, the principal protagonists, is made to symbolize the eternal distrust of the Irish for the English, the Catholic for the heretic, the outcast for the established.

Since Conrad's day there has been increasing taste for stories of this kind, perfectly adapted as they are for the cinematograph. That *Romance* did not sell widely when it first appeared does not reflect on the craftsmanship which went to the making of it. This was masterly. Madox Hueffer, with characteristic exaggeration, used to say that he taught Conrad to write. It was not true ; but Conrad gained from the collaboration's, and they were, indeed, the immediate precursors of his greatest imaginative effort, *Nostromo* (1904).

Nostromo—A Tale of the Seaboard, runs the title-page. It is a piece of under-statement. There is more than a tale, and much more than a seaboard. Conrad created an entire republic ; geography, topography, railways, mines, people, a revolution, everything—Costaguana. It is a vast effort of the imagination, ' the most anxiously meditated of the longer novels', as the author confesses. What makes *Nostromo* so remarkable is that, while all Conrad's obvious gifts are apparent in it, strong characterization, flawless atmosphere, tension, adventure, mystery, it is in essence a picture of political instability, ' the fundamental causes the same as ever, rooted in the political immaturity of the people, in the indolence of the upper classes and the mental darkness of the lower ', and of the effects, good and bad, which follow in the train of material wealth, as represented by the San Tome'silver mine. It is all utterly convincing, and the book is overflowing with detailed characterization in Conrad's best manner. Its fault is perhaps its excess of virtues ; it is too rich and involved in theme and emotion to be enjoyed without far more surrender than even Conrad usually exacts. If it is a masterpiece, it is not, on the other hand, a book which has gained very general affection.

Nostromo took two years to write, and proved as difficult a task as the author ever set himself. In *A Personal Record* (1912) he gives a vivid account of an interruption while he was in the throes of composition. The ' person from Porlock ' in this case was a general's daughter. She did

not spoil another *Kubla Khan* like the Porlock visitor to Coleridge, but her reception would probably have frozen one of thinner skin. As a respite from its ardours, 'I pack my bag/ said Conrad, 'rush away and write a few pages of *The Mirror of the Sea*'. The transition was from a canvas on the heroic scale to a nautical miniature of exquisite proportions.

Nostromo was to be followed by two more novels of the highest quality, *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). There is conscious irony in the sub-title of *A Secret Agent*: a 'Simple Tale': simple is the last word by which to describe it. Like his first two published novels, these two books may be considered as a pair, although the affinities are not so close as those between *Almayer* and *An Outcast*. Both are studies of Continental revolutionaries. *The Secret Agent* has London for its setting, a grubby, sordid London seen from within. The action of *Under Western Eyes* takes place in Tsarist Russia, and in Switzerland, that place of refuge for revolutionaries.

'The way of even the most justifiable revolutions', says Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, 'is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds/ Although wisdom, as well as beauty, is widely scattered throughout Conrad's pages, he never made a truer analysis. 'In their own way', he continues later, 'the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing nothing but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience/

In *The Secret Agent* the Verloc family is one of the most living units of people Conrad ever created: the heroic wife Winnie, who 'felt profoundly that things do not stand much looking into'; Verloc, the secret agent; his dim-witted brother-in-law; Winnie's old mother. It is Dickensian in spirit, in its rare touches of exaggeration, in its muddy urban background, but the cosmopolitan quality of many of the main characters could only belong to Conrad's gallery.

As for *Under Western Eyes*, besides being an exciting story of assassination and betrayal, it reveals, as does nothing else in Conrad's writing, his attitude to Russia. Of this country he says in *Notes on Life and Letters*, 'from the very first ghastly dawn of her existence as a state she had to breathe the atmosphere of despotism ; she found nothing but the arbitrary will of an obscure autocrat at the beginning and end of her organization '.

' I suppose one must be a Russian ', he says in *Under Western Eyes*, ' to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naive and hopeless cynicism. I sometimes think that the psychological secret of the profound difference of that people consists in this, that they detest life, the irremediable life of the earth as it is, whereas we westerners cherish it with perhaps an equal exaggeration of its sentimental value.'

Once more *Under Western Eyes* is the story of a betrayal. In *The Secret Agent* Verloc betrays his wife by using her brother for his work of destruction ; in *Under Western Eyes* Razumov betrays a fellow student who has committed a political assassination. He does not mean to ; but a man who would have contrived his escape happens to be drunk at the moment he is needed, and Razumov then goes straight to the authorities. Both books are brilliantly narrated. They are in the main direct, and *The Secret Agent* has something of the force of that grotesque explosion under the trees in Greenwich Park, which is the culmination of the story. Both interpret the revolutionary in terms of the ordinary man ; and that is their ultimate value.

Conrad's next novel was *Chance* (1914). It made his fortune, but it is not one of his greatest books, having many of those idiosyncrasies which make him occasionally an irritating craftsman. In the character of Captain Anthony is a study of nobility, sharply contrasted with the meanness of de Barral, who (like Willems in *An Outcast*), is a little clerk grown too big, having by advertisement elevated himself into the realms of high finance. The heroine, Flora

de Barral, has been badly bruised by life, and it is the working out of her happiness, through her marriage with the generous Anthony, which gives the story its accomplished **plot**. Where it fails is in the unconvincing characters of the contrasted pair. One is impossibly warped, the other incredibly noble ; between these two unreal people, Flora seems almost to slip away.

It was with an almost visible relief that in *Victory* (1915) Conrad returned to Malaya. *Victory* is a story of a man, Heyst, who, seeking detachment in life, is impelled almost by chance to an act of chivalrous fortitude. He rescues a girl, Lena, from unscrupulous hands, and in her turn Lena tries in vain to save him from a trio of evil creatures bent on his destruction. It is a tragedy of mounting tension and excitement. Its final chapters, while having all the ingredients of melodrama that were evident in *An Outcast of the Islands* are composed with so much more assurance and proportion that the impression left on the reader is of sheer beauty rather than of strain. It is a book whose appeal is to the heart. There is certainly nothing finer in the Eastern series.

Equally good in its own way is *The Shadow Line—a Confession* (1917), which like *The Nigger* takes rank as a short novel. Written amidst the cataclysm of the first world war, it is, as was *Youth*, a reminiscence of Conrad's life at sea, the story of the early days of his first command, with a sick crew, and the oppressive air of being haunted by the ghost of the captain from whom he has inherited the ship. No story of Conrad's is more charged with feeling, and it records an inner crisis : ' one goes on/ he says, ' and the time, too, goes on, till one perceives ahead a shadow line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind '.

There followed *The Arrow of Gold—a Story between Two Notes* (1919). It was the first book he dictated, and it is one of the least satisfactory. It harks back to his early days in **the** Mediterranean, to his experience of royalist intrigue,

and he has attempted to cast over the whole plot the glamour of one of his least convincing women, Rita. Even Conrad's comparative failures have their beauty, and they are nearly always followed by a return to his best form. It was so now: for, taking up a story he had begun many years before, he completed another novel of the East, *The Rescue—a Romance of the Shallows* (1920).

The Rescue challenges *Lord Jim* among his Malayan books. It is a story of the hey-day of a favourite character, Tom Lingard, and of his rescue of a small party of society people, stranded in a yacht off a coast bristling with danger. To save them, he betrays Malayan friends, and himself falls more than a little in love with the courageous woman who has spoilt his own adventure. The point and beauty of the book is mainly in the contrast drawn between artificial civilization and the untamed fierceness of the Eastern seaboard, and in the full-length portrait of Lingard in his prime.

Only one novel remains to be considered, for Conrad's unfinished *Suspense* (1925), a story of Napoleon, although it has a rare flash of his old self, lacks in essence the quality of its title. Mr. Richard Curie says in his Introduction, 'the suspense will last for ever'. It would be truer to say that it never quite begins. But *The Rover* (1924) is flawless. Again the scene is the Mediterranean, the time that of Nelson's blockade of Toulon, when, to quote a famous sentence of Mahan, 'those far distant, storm-beaten ships, upon which the Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world'. Jean Peyrol, an old 'brother of the coast', has come back with a belt full of gold to live his last years where he first felt the hardships and beauty of life, the district which looks upon the Bay of Hyères. The story is of how he deceives the English as to Napoleon's intention in the Near East. It is brilliantly contrived, and the character of Peyrol drawn with delighted detail. Mrs. Conrad said that a sort of homing instinct was on Conrad towards the end of his life. It is expressed perfectly in *The Rover*, which, from an artistic point of view,

is the best of his later books. Though in a formal sense tragic, it has serenity, assurance, generosity, all the qualities which make Conrad so endearing, with none of the involu- tion of manner with which he could sometimes distract the reader.

VII

The demarcation line in Conrad between the novel and the short story is sometimes a vague one, as indeed it is between the short story and a fragment of autobiography. It is true to say that all of his books of short stories contain work which is equal to his best, and that in one case, that of the volume called *Youth—A Narrative : and two other Stories* (1902), seldom in literary history can three such remarkable stories as *Youth* itself, *Heart of Darkness* and *The End of the Tether* have appeared together.

Youth has already been referred to. *Heart of Darkness* marvellously summarizes Conrad's bitter experiences in the Congo ; while of *The End of the Tether* it can be said that it would in itself have been good enough to make the reputation of most writers. The scene is Malaya ; the theme the slow oncoming of blindness of a man who is one of Conrad's supreme characters, Captain Whalley. He is a man into whom the author poured all his feelings as to what should be the essence of chivalry, self sacrifice and seaman- ship. As a picture of dignified age he stands by himself in Conrad's gallery.

Youth had been preceded by *Tales of Unrest* (1898), the best of whose stories, *An Outpost of Progress*, foreshadowed the fierce Congo horror of *Heart of Darkness*. It was followed by *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903), which, besides the famous title-piece, contains, in *Amy Foster*, a slight but vivid study of the impact of the English country- side on a stranded foreign seaman. In *Falk* there is another reminiscence of Conrad's first command ; and in *Tomorrow*, a story of fantastic humour which he later dramatized as a one-act play.

The next volume was *A Set of Six* (1908), Here, the sea is absent, but the collection holds reminiscences of many of the themes and settings of his novels; it includes, in *Gaspar Ruiz* and *The Duel*, excellent examples of his craft. Then came *'Twiixt Land and Sea* (1912). As in *Youth*, all the three stories in this volume are long and considerable. *A Smile of Fortune* and *The Secret Sharer* refer, obliquely but definitely, to the days of his first command *Freya of the Seven Isles* is pure tragedy, and, in the Dutch naval officer Heemskirk, he drew perhaps the most brutal character in all his series. If it has a fault, it is that the reader is too soon made aware that Freya's romance will end disastrously, and the story has no real indication that justice will overtake the unrighteous.

Within the Tides (1915) contains, in *The Inn of the Two Witches*, one of the most exquisite stories Conrad ever wrote, based on an old legend. Its setting is Spain at the time of the Peninsular War, and it is a blend of horror, superstition and the particular tension of the time. The last volume, *Tales of Hearsay* (1925), includes his own Polish story, *Prince Roman*, and *The Black Mate*, his earliest. As a collection it is not comparable with his best.

It is as true as any generalization can be that Conrad needed time and space to develop his themes. Ruminantion, reminiscence, the art of getting the utmost value from every piece of experience, these were of his essence. For this reason his longer stories are usually his best. They are, with rare exceptions, the equal of his novels.

VIII

' Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma ', says Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. ' There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, come and find out/ The observation is equally true in considering an author of stature. Scene after

scene is evoked, and the reader, excited or lulled by the Impression conveyed, is always aware that it is only the fringe that slips so colourfully past his eye. When it has gone, when the ship has left the land away in the darkness, and the reader turned the last page, it is the integration, and the echoes, which matter.

Conrad stressed the idea of unswerving devotion to one end, both in his own writing and in that of men he admired. In his Familiar Preface to *A Personal Record* he wrote ; ' Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few, very simple ideas ; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably among others on fidelity '. The narrator's fidelity to the truth as he sees it he takes for granted ; the more important fidelity is that of characters to ideas or to other people. In his own earlier novels, this is well illustrated in the personality of Tom Lingard, who is faithful to his ship, to his luck, to adventure, and to those, even the weakest, whom he has befriended. He himself does not come into the foreground until *The Rescue*, but his ' idea ' inhabits many of the earlier stories.

In Conrad's largest canvas, *Nostromo* is faithful to the popular idea of himself. His passion is to be esteemed, and to be worthy of estimation by being able, sailor-fashion, to deal with every emergency as it arises, however fantastic it may be. Heyst, in *Victory*, is faithful to the idea of detachment until, after his rescue of Lena, he becomes involved, despite himself, in the security of another. The same theme presents itself in *Chance*, in different terms. Again, Peyrol in *The Rover*, seeking nothing but to end his days in peace, finds himself involved in an effort to mislead the enemies of his country, and dedicates himself to this task. In every case, there are no half measures. Fidelity will be till death.

Such single-heartedness implies discipline and responsibility. Lack of the finer shades of the later quality was one of his major charges against the revolutionary. ' The revolutionary spirit is mighty convenient in this/ he says

in *A Personal Record*, ' that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas. Its hard absolute optimism is repulsive to my mind by the menace of fanaticism and intolerance it contains/ To be faithful to a political doctrine in fact releases its adherents from every other tie. Conrad preferred a more particular awareness, a care for *individual* life and action. He did not always find it in high places. Like Tom Lingard in *The Rescue* he discovered by experience that ' many men ambitious of directing the affairs of a nation dislike the sense of responsibility '. As a master mariner, under the necessity of being wholly responsible for the safety and well-being of ship and crew, his was a sense of practical control, too ingrained ever to be forgotten.

As with persons, so with nations. He believed in England's fidelity. It was one of the reasons for his respect. He said that Europe had need of her. When he visited Poland just before the first world war, he tells us in *Notes on Life and Letters*, he was asked to prognosticate the behaviour of this country. He was at first reluctant to do so, but said at length : ' If England comes into the war, then, no matter who may want to make peace at the end of six months at the cost of right and justice, England will keep on fighting for years if necessary, you may reckon on that. " What, even alone ? " asked someone. I said : " Yes, even alone. But if things go as far as that, England will not be alone "' .

' I think', he adds, ' that at that moment I must have been inspired/

Inspired or not, he was right, for two reasons ; the first was that he never lost sight of the moral issue in men and affairs—indeed, it was to him the cardinal factor ; the second was because he had studied history, particularly that of the era of Napoleon. From that age he, like Hardy in *The Dynasts*, and many other writers, had sought and found lessons of permanent validity. He had that rare gift, political acuteness, based both upon intuition and long observation. It is revealed most often in asides, as when, for instance, in *The Mirror of the Sea*, he says : ' In the policy

of winds, as amongst the tribes of the earth, the real struggle lies between east and west '.

The idea of faithfulness in men and nations came with all the more force to a man of a race which, as he saw it, had been outrageously betrayed. Russia and Prussia had been the principal instruments of her loss. His feelings about Russia are implicit in at least two of his novels, and more than one of his stories. About Germany he felt little less strongly. There is a contemptuous sentence in the story *Falk* about the German custom of calling the master of a vessel a 'Schiff-fuhrer', which he translated 'ship-conductor'. To a seaman, nothing could have been more revealing : and in *Notes on Life and Letters* he says : ' German genius has a hypnotizing power over half-baked souls and half-lighted minds. There is an immense force of suggestion in highly organized mediocrity '. His affections were, in fact, as settled as the points of the compass, as were his antipathies. He reserved his love for his own country, for the land of his adoption, for Spain, France, and Italy. D'Alcacer in *The Rescue* may stand for his type of highly civilized Latin, Cervoni for those humbler men of whom, as he says in a Note to *An Outcast of the Islands*, ' the sea, perhaps because of its saltness, roughens the outside but keeps sweet the kernel '. A great measure of the force and beauty of his tribute to Nelson's navy in *The Mirror of the Sea* derives from his feeling that at that time England had, in France and Spain, foes worthy to bring out all that was best in her seamen. Above all, she had luck. ' The God of gales and battles ', as he says, ' favouring her arms to the last, has let the sun of England's sailing fleet and of its greatest master set in unclouded glory. ' Conrad valued luck, though he did not trust it.

IX

There are many living who knew Conrad : some have written books of personal reminiscence and thoughtful

interpretation, the best of which are essential to the full portrait. The most that can here be offered is a tribute, and an assurance of the value of the advice given to M. Andre Gide, who asked which of Conrad's books he should read. 'All' was the reply. The reason is that no book, even the least perfect, lacks its beauties (they have, in fact, been combed again and again for the anthologies) ; also Conrad's power to charm is, like Horace's, a lasting one. He is a writer to whom one can return, at any time of life, with the assurance of refreshment.

Unique in his experience, his vision, his blend of racial characteristics and natural gifts, he stood alone in his own time, and he has had no close pupils and successors. But no one will ever again be able to write a serious story about the sea without having in his mind the chastening thought of the best of Conrad.

'There is something fine', he wrote in *The Mirror of the Sea*, 'in the sudden passing away of these hearts from the extremity of struggle and stress and tremendous uproar—from the vast unrestful rage of the surface to the profound peace of the depths, sleeping untroubled since the beginning of ages.' He was writing of that breed of sailor to which he himself belonged ; it may serve as his own epitaph. As for his books, he wrote in his Note to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: 'The artist . . . 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'. The words are true of his own work. He was many things as a writer, but seldom less than an artist, and never so by intention.

Conrad's was a western mind, strongly infused with Latin individuality, with an English awareness of moral issues, and a sense of form rare in writers of fiction. If, as seems likely, the best of his work has lasting vitality, it will surely be for these characteristics. He would be a pessimist indeed who thought their value ephemeral.

JOSEPH CONRAD

A

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The Collected Edition of Conrad's Works (Dent) is published at 75. 6d. net per volume. There are 6s. net editions of *Chance*, *Under Western Eyes*, *A Set of Six*, *Victory*, *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Secret Agent* (Methuen); *Lord Jim* and *Youth* (Blackwood); *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Typhoon* (Hcinemann); *The Rover* (Benn). In Everyman's Library are published at 4s. 6d. net *Lord Jim* (No. 925); and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Typhoon* and *The Shadow Line* in one volume (No. 980). *Lord Jim* is also published at 2s. 6d. net (Penguin Books).

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