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Joseph Conrad

I

"I *never mean* to be slow," Joseph Conrad wrote to David Meldrum of the Blackwood publishing house in 1899, but "The stuff comes out at its own rate . . . [and] too often—alas!—I've to wait for the sentence—for the word." The process of writing involved long hours of incapacitating doubt that left him caught like a ship in a calm, an unrestful paralysis in which his mind remained "extremely active," producing "descriptions, dialogue, reflexion —everything—everything but the belief, the conviction, the only thing needed to make me put pen to paper." Days would pass without his writing a line, and Conrad would take to his bed, sick of a labor so great that it should have given "birth to masterpieces" instead of what he termed the "ridiculous mouse" his struggles would sometimes produce. Few of his letters are without some plaintive or even desperate note, and if it wasn't the fight with words then it was his worries about money or housing, the illnesses of his wife and children, or the crippling attacks of gout with which his working life was spiked.

The difficulties were real. Conrad may, as his biographer Zdzislaw Najder writes, have suffered from "depression in the strict psychiatric sense of the term," but money was indeed tight, the family health poor, and the novelist was no hypochondriac, however detailed his account of his symptoms. Only he, however, would have compared the work he was doing at the time he wrote Meldrum to a household rodent. The previous year had seen the publication of both "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness," and the letter itself concerns the serialization of *Lord Jim*. Only Conrad would think of himself as writing slowly in the astonishing decade that began in 1897, a period that saw the publication not only of

these works, but also of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Agent* (1907). Yet Conrad never had what Morton Dauwen Zabel has called a sense of "fluent ease or assurance in his craft." To write at all was an achievement, a trouble that only the most strenuous of efforts could surmount.

Some of that has, doubtless, to do with the particular circumstances of Conrad's life. He was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski in 1857, in a part of Poland that after the partition of 1793 had fallen under Russian rule. His parents were members of the Polish gentry, and patriots—his father a poet—and before his fifth birthday the Tsarist government had sent the family into an exile, north of Moscow, that broke the health of both husband and wife. His mother died in 1865 and his father four years later, leaving the boy to the guardianship of his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. In 1874, facing the unacceptable possibility of Russian military service, and with an almost inexplicable hankering for a sea that he had as yet just glimpsed, the future Conrad left his Cracow home and schooling for Marseilles. There he drew upon both Bobrowski's money and his contacts to learn the trade of an officer in the merchant marine. Much about the boy's four years in France remains cloudy, and Conrad would later depict that time with a degree of romantic retrospection that has made his biographers sweat. But by 1878 he had signed on to a British steamer and begun his move toward England.

Conrad's spoken English remained heavily accented, but in *A Personal Record* (1912) he described the language as having "adopted" him and maintained "that if I had not known English I wouldn't have written a line for print in my life." Nevertheless he also complained, according to Ford Madox Ford, that the language was incapable of "direct statement" and that "no English word has clean edges." French seemed to him too perfectly "crystallized," but its vocabulary did at least have a limpid clarity of meaning. English words, in contrast, carried so many connotations as to be little more than "instruments for exciting blurred emotions." And some readers have, accordingly, always found his prose rather muddy—"obscure, obscure," in E. M. Forster's words, and "misty," with his sentences serving as a "smoke screen" that hides not a "jewel" but a "vapour." Yet while Conrad may have seen English as an alien medium, something he needed to wrestle with and subdue, we cannot with any precision link that

tussle to his trials before the empty page. What we can do, though, is to connect both the language itself and the difficulty Conrad had *in* writing to the difficulty *of* his writing.

No one has ever thought him easy, and to his first readers the exoticism of his early material was in itself a bar. The late Victorian audience knew about imperial adventure in India and Africa, but a Borneo where the adventures never quite came off was something else entirely. Then there was the fact that Conrad stood, in Henry James's phrase, "absolutely alone as a votary of the way to do a thing that shall make it undergo most doing." There were the involutions of his syntax and what F. R. Leavis has called his "adjectival insistence." There was the elaborate framing of his tales, the nesting of one narrative within another; there was his persistent violation of chronology, the retrospection and temporal looping that make *Nostromo* seem to take two steps back for each one forward. And what could one do with the way his books seemed to dwindle off, so that at the end of *Lord Jim* we have a man waving "sadly at his butterflies"? Nothing about him seemed designed for comfort, and those readers who got past Conrad's difficulties of form still had to confront his sardonic view of human endeavor and his unforgiving scrutiny of a world that does not much bear looking into. All these things ensured that his audience remained small during the years of his greatest achievement; and all of them now stand among the reasons why he seems with each decade more central.

In "Heart of Darkness," Marlow sits aboard the *Nellie* and asks his listeners if they can "see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream, making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation . . ." His statement implies that words themselves can never quite capture the sensations they seek to convey, and yet it also suggests that the writer's job is nevertheless "to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*." That is how Conrad put it in the famous preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* and so Marlow insists as well, maintaining that his task lies in making his experience stand immanent before us; in attempting, as Edward Said has written, "to rescue meaning from his undisciplined experience." That awareness of the intractability of language—that concern with the very possibility of representation—makes Conrad an exemplary figure in the history of

modernism. It is as though his individual struggle with English were but an instance of the larger struggle that all writers face with language itself.

Let me quote another well-known passage as a way to clarify both Conrad's difficulty and his concern with the questions of representation and interpretation alike. Early in "Heart of Darkness" the nameless narrator of the frame-tale tells us that:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze . . .

Conrad himself did not entirely eschew the cracked-nut method of storytelling; the term can fit such tales as "An Outpost of Progress" (1897) or even the pellucid mysteries of "The Secret Sharer" (1910). But there can be little doubt that these words provide us with a kind of owner's manual, a set of instructions on the tale's proper use. They warn us that narration will not lead toward some hidden nugget of truth, some secret to be unlocked; in Ian Watt's words, "Marlow's tale will not be centered on, but surrounded by, its meaning." Still, the passage's "spectral" glow of enveloping suggestion looks so tricky to unpack that its very language has provided the terms of Forster's critique, and some of the tale's other aspects do at first seem to parry the thrust of Conrad's image.

The story is, after all, called "Heart of Darkness." It describes a journey up a great African river, and its principal action is that of penetration, of movement toward a core; a voyage into the interior of both a continent and one's own psychic being. As Said notes, the tale "draws attention to itself as a process of getting closer and closer to the center," and "process" does indeed seem the right word. For Marlow's narration concerns itself less with the physical journey than with his groping attempt to define the meaning of his own experience, and when he asks his audience if they can see the story, he is really asking himself. Once he does reach that center, however, he finds—well, something hollow. The kernel of revelation has rotted away, if indeed it ever existed. That in itself might well provide a motive for his inquiry, and yet

the Inner Station's apparent absence of an inner meaning does initially appear to justify Forster's attack. But let us lean on Conrad's language just a little bit more. Not inside but outside—that's where we should look for meaning, in a murk illuminated from within. In Marlow's words "This also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth," and though "Heart of Darkness" may not tell us much about the Africa that is its ostensible subject, it does say a great deal about Europe, and about the enshrouding imperial system that has sent Marlow on his way.

Conrad's readers cannot be passive ones. In an early essay on Henry James he compares the act of writing "to rescue work carried out in darkness against cross gusts of wind," and he speaks of it in similarly heroic terms in the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* defining the writer as one who seizes "in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life." His sense of his own achievement is inseparable from his sense of difficulty, as though the struggle into narrative might provide in itself a kind of victory. Reading him requires that we too undertake the "rescue work" that the creation of meaning entails. It requires, among other things, that we both fight with and parse out his imagery; that we reconstruct the sequence of a novel's action and grapple with the significance, at once proleptic and delayed, that his very violation of chronology has produced. And if we can do that, his fiction will yield a most peculiar reward. For no matter how dark his world and how miserable the fates of his characters, his books are almost never depressing. Instead we read them with an exhilarating sense of difficulties faced and met, held by the drama of the writing itself, as if we have submitted ourselves to the destructive element, and kept our heads up.

II

Conrad's years at sea took him to many parts of the world. From Marseilles the young man sailed for the Caribbean, and in 1878 his first British vessel, the *Mavis*, took him to Istanbul. Over the next dozen years he would serve on as many ships, making voyages from London to Australia and from Bombay to Dunkirk; sailing out of Bangkok and Calcutta, Amsterdam and Port

Adelaide. Ships were not always easy to find, however, and Conrad spent long months on shore, an anonymous life in lodgings broken by at least one spell of work in a portside warehouse. He became a British citizen in 1886, the same year he received his master's certificate, but his spells of unemployment grew longer as his qualifications increased. That is one reason why in 1890 this blue water sailor sought out a very different kind of job and found himself aboard a riverboat in the Belgian Congo.

That experience led to "Heart of Darkness," the work for which Conrad is today best known. But the part of the globe with which he's most fully identified remains that which he calls "the East," and in particular the Malay Archipelago, a region that for Conrad included Siam, Singapore, and the great islands of what was then the Dutch East Indies. Both his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), and its successor, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), were set along the Berau River in eastern Borneo, a site that he visited in 1887 as the mate of a coasting steamer, the *Vidar*. Those voyages also contributed to Conrad's picture of Patusan in *Lord Jim*, and much of his shorter fiction seems inseparable from his experience of that region, from the hidden rivers of "The Lagoon" (1897) and the waterfront rivalries of "Falk" (1903), to those haunted tales of first command, "The Secret Sharer" and *The Shadow-Line* (1917). What's surprising, then, is how little time he actually passed in those islands: something under a year, and only four months with the *Vidar*. He spent more time in Australia, a place that has left almost no trace in his fiction at all.

Conrad himself claimed that if in Borneo he had not met a Eurasian named Olmeijer "it is almost certain there would never have been a line of mine in print." And even allowing for hyperbole, the fact remains that soon afterwards Conrad did indeed begin to write about the man he called Kaspar Almayer, carrying the manuscript with him from England to the Congo, Australia, and on to Poland before completing it in 1894. Olmeijer managed a trading post at an upriver port on the Berau where the *Vidar* made a monthly stop, and Conrad's picture of him in *A Personal Record* suggests a man of querulous self-importance. It's a type that appears throughout his fiction, and perhaps, once given the mysteries of talent, we needn't look far to discover why such a man, and such a place, should have started

Conrad off. For how, in Watt's words, "had this particular lonely derelict come to be stranded?" To the displaced Polish sailor, a man about to turn thirty and with nothing to show for it, Olmeijer's situation would have raised a "personal question of absorbing interest."

Born on Java, the fictional Almayer has moved down the food chain of colonial society, longing all the while for an Amsterdam he has never seen. And his world seems full of those who have been similarly, if more successfully, washed ashore. Conrad is frequently seen as a novelist of empire, and yet he doesn't often describe the colonial administrators of a writer like Kipling. His concern lies instead with the commercial life that operates around and between the institutions of colonialism itself. So the English smugglers of "Karain" live by avoiding the Dutch customs officers, while in *Lord Jim* the port officials—the boards of enquiry, the harbormasters—prove effective substitutes for any actual government. *Almayer's Folly* defines an *ad hoc* culture in which nobody seems to live where he might belong: the Europeans by definition, but also the Malay pirates, the Arab traders, and the Balinese prince with whom Almayer's daughter will run away. It is a vision Conrad would refine throughout the years of his great achievement; a vision that would lead him to *Nostromo*, that great novel of a fully globalized society. Yet even such entirely European novels as *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* owe more than they seem to the jerkwater village of Conrad's earliest work, with its picture of human jetsam on an alien coast.

Other points of resemblance between Conrad's first books and their successors are perhaps easier to trace—and not always for the good. *An Outcast of the Islands* was written later than but set before *Almayer's Folly*, with whom it shares some characters, and in places its prose also appears to have slipped back into something other than fluency: "When he stepped off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty, it was with an inward assertion of unflinching resolve to fall back again into the monotonous but safe stride of virtue as soon as his little excursion into the wayside quagmires had produced the desired effect." That's the novel's first sentence, one that seems to anticipate the memory of an action it doesn't fully describe. In both pace and vocabulary—"unflinching"—its authorship appears unmistakable, but the sentence isn't Conradian so much as what's been

called "Conradese," as though it were a self-parody of the style he hasn't quite yet formed. And one can trace the *pentimenti* of that ungainliness in some of his greatest lines: "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull." Less than five years separate *An Outcast of the Islands* from the opening words of *Lord Jim*; and what a difference they have made! It is the same voice, but Conrad has replaced the blurred temporality of the one with a kind of quaver produced by his commas, and the nouns themselves have the punch to make one see.

Still, some aspects of these early books show that Conrad has already come into his own; when he describes the old pirate Babalatchi as a "diplomatist" we are but a step away from the terse ironies of *The Secret Agent*. *Almayer's Folly* got good reviews, but Conrad remained diffident and continued to seek another command. There doesn't appear to have been a deciding moment at which he chose to leave the sea behind; one might, indeed, say that the sea left him. He had already begun *An Outcast of the Islands*, conceiving of it as a tale but soon finding that it had outgrown its initial shape. That would set a pattern. Every one of his major novels began as a story, a story forced into length by Conrad's need to explain, to circle back through time, excavating motive and pursuing its consequences. In fact, the one book that he saw from the start as a novel proved the hardest of all to write. In March 1896 he married Jessie George, a London typist, and on their wedding trip began the book that after many years, interruptions, and resumptions would be published as *The Rescue*. But though its opening chapters went well, the narrative soon lost headway, and Conrad turned to something else. That too established a pattern, for he often worked on several stories at once, stealing time from each until the day when one of them would explode into the sole possession of his mind.

The new tale was called *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* an account of a voyage out of Bombay that its author described as a "shrine for the memory of men with whom I have, through many hard years lived and worked." In *Victory* (1915), Conrad would make one of his characters claim that "He who forms a tie is lost," that linking yourself to another person allows a "germ of corruption"

to enter the soul. That sentiment provides a major interpretative crux in his work, an *oeuvre* in which it seems that every human connection must carry the heaviest of costs. Yet even in *Victory* that loss can provide a way to save the very self it threatens. For Conrad also knows such ties are necessary, and nowhere more so than on a ship like the *Narcissus*, where the safety of all requires the cooperation of each. Indeed the narrative procedures of the tale serve in themselves to dramatize Conrad's belief in the human "solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts . . . [and] binds men to each other." *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* has a first-person narrator who is never named or particularized. In some places he speaks as an "I" and in others as a "we"; while at certain moments Conrad offers a third-person account of a meeting between two sailors, neither of whom can be identified with any possible speaker. Fractured and choral, limited and omniscient, the tale's narrator roves as freely from person to person as in other novels Conrad will move through time, a voice manifold and yet one that defines everything about this world but his own individual place within it. He speaks for every sailor aboard. He speaks for the ship.

Nor is Conrad's demonstration of that solidarity limited to style alone. Halfway through, the ship's people must fight their way across a flooded deck, "swinging from belaying pin to cleat above the seas" in order to rescue the book's title figure, James Wait. I'll consider Conrad's handling of race in greater detail below, but for now will simply note his 1914 comment that "A negro in a British forecastle is a lonely being. He has no chums," not even on the polygot *Narcissus*, with its mixed crew of Cockney and Celt, Norwegian and "Russian Finn." Wait is a sick man when he joins the ship: strong enough to answer the muster and pass for able, but not strong enough to work. Some of the crew think he's shamming, and indeed he is: shamming sick as a way to hide from himself just how ill he actually is. His berth becomes the locus of all the discontent on board, with the crew divided in their view of him, and yet in that storm they act as one to save him, despite the "monstrous suspicion" that he has been "malingering heartlessly . . . in the face of our devotion." And other examples of that "solidarity" could be summoned from throughout the tale, enough to suggest the truth of Eloise Knapp Hay's claim that Conrad "could not think of men at all without thinking

of the individual's immediate reliance upon, and obligations to, a politically defined community." For Conrad is never *not* political, and even in dealing with the blasts and blows of the elements themselves, he remains always concerned with the questions of social order and cohesion.

III

By the time of his death in 1924, Conrad had become an unlikely bestseller, and sets of his collected works soon began to fill the shelves of both the libraries and the used bookstores of the English-speaking world. But his posthumous reputation was a curious one. His powers of description—his ability to bring his exotic experience into the light of the fictional page—continued to command respect. Nevertheless he was admired with faint praise as an adventure writer and for his early tales of the sea. That began to change with the 1947 publication of Morton Dauwen Zabel's *Portable Conrad*, a book that served to establish a canon of Conrad's short fiction, and yet one that has today the character of an historical document—a document that bears witness to the terms of criticism itself in the middle of the twentieth century.

Zabel saw Conrad as a writer for whom it was still necessary to make a case: first, because he had not yet emerged from the "probationary reaction of literary reputation" that strikes most writers after their deaths; and second, because what reputation did remain was based on the severely limited conception of his work that I've defined above. He offered a different account of Conrad's strengths, arguing, in the years immediately after the Second World War, that the writer's "sense of the crisis of moral isolation" was such as to demand "a larger reference, bringing him into the highest company the English, and the European, novel provides." Nor was he alone in that claim. At almost the same moment Leavis published *The Great Tradition*, which put its weight on the books that, like *Nostromo*, were then sometimes bracketed off as "political." Then came a flood. Much of the scholarship in the decades that followed was on a high level, and any student of Conrad today continues both to rely on and to respond to it. The period did have its biases. It put a heavy

emphasis on questions of evaluation and suffered from a predilection for both symbol-hunting and psychobiography. But Conrad was far from the only novelist to receive that treatment, and Zabel's *Portable* can be taken as inaugurating what one might call the "heroic" phase in Conrad criticism, a phase that reached its synthesis, and its *summa*, in the 1979 publication of Ian Watt's *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*.

I use that term advisedly, for it points not only to the period's enormous exercise of critical intelligence, but also to a particular conception of Conrad's work. Zabel's own introduction provides an example. His Conrad is a writer of "tragic vision" and "tenacious endurances," someone whose greatest books define the ways in which "the individual meets his first full test of character." The Conrad protagonist must stand ready for "the signal of his destiny," and the writer himself is someone who charts "the unfathomed depths of our secret natures" and explores the "constitution of man himself." Those words speak to an elevated sense of artistic vocation, of the writer as what Lionel Trilling calls "a hero of the spirit," caught in a lonely battle with the world, and indeed Conrad himself gives ample warrant for an appeal to the heroic. His letters are one long inventory of the obstacles he faced, and his great preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* invokes the "courage" with which the artist must snatch "from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life."

Part of Zabel's case depended on his persistent comparisons between Conrad and a range of other writers—predecessors like Flaubert or Turgenev, confrères like James or Mann—in order to suggest that he provides the hinge on which the modern novel turns. A second portion of his brief involved a "Conrad our contemporary" argument, locating him in terms of the particular concerns of the postwar era. It assigns him a totemic value as an analyst of what can only, in the language of the period, be termed "the human condition"; and a prophet too, the man who took an anticipatory scalpel to the century's heart of darkness. And if Zabel's terms seem outmoded today, it is perhaps because Conrad does indeed remain our contemporary. Each decade has found new things to say about him—new methods, new questions—not just because critical practice changes but also because, where Zabel's author had his antecedents and contemporaries, ours has a far-flung posterity. He has been fought with and

imitated by writers of thrillers and Nobel laureates alike; in Africa, Europe, and the Americas; and the response of his children has shaped our understanding of the whole postcolonial world.

No story has been so much a part of that changing response as "Heart of Darkness," the tale of a journey into the African interior to meet that "emissary of pity, and science, and progress," the mysterious Mr. Kurtz. The normative reading in the postwar period belongs to Albert J. Guerard, who describes the work as a "symbolic expression of Conrad's sense of isolation," defining Marlow's voyage up the Congo in terms of a "night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self." He admits that in its depiction of European rapacity, "Heart of Darkness" does have an "important public side," but he discounts its standing as an "angry document" and concentrates instead on its "introspective plunge," its account of a "spiritual voyage" toward an ineffable horror. On this reading, Africa is but the incidental setting for a narrative of self-discovery, a background that serves only to heighten the drama.

The picture of the isolated individual—of "Man"—that emerged in the Conrad scholarship of the postwar period often worked in tandem with the formalist emphasis of the New Criticism to strip his work of its context, to relieve it of its moorings in the world. Guerard's account of "Heart of Darkness" proved enormously persuasive. Some version of it was taught to several generations of American students, and yet it seems today to provide a cautionary tale about critical overreaching. It makes me think of Oscar Wilde's suggestion, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that "All art is both surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril." Or perhaps one should simply recall Marlow's own claim, as he tries to avoid snags and keep his boat's engine running, that "There was surface-truth enough in these things" to keep one busy.

Nothing written about Conrad since the days of Leavis and Zabel has been so influential as Chinua Achebe's 1975 essay, "An Image of Africa." If to Guerard the Congo provides but a backdrop for Marlow's voyage into the soul, for the Nigerian novelist it is central, a place with its own peoples and histories and its own claim to an autonomous place in the imagination.

Though in some sense Achebe agrees with Guerard—agrees that in "Heart of Darkness" Africa itself plays but a minimal role. Only he then turns to attack Conrad as a "bloody racist" for having written a book that treats the continent "as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril." And however overdrawn his argument, Achebe does have a point, even as he recognizes that Conrad himself "did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book."

Instead the tale relies on a set of commonly-held European assumptions about the continent as a whole—on an "Africanist discourse," in Christopher L. Miller's phrase. For Marlow, "going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," a journey in two directions at once, both back and in; though the two coalesce when Marlow announces that the Africans "were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman." And if you are man enough, he adds, you will admit the kinship you feel with them, and your "desire to go ashore for a howl and a dance." The river allows one both to underscore and to escape one's own modernity, making Africa into a primitivist metaphor for man's original state, even as it also provides an emblem for the human heart. It is the "Dark Continent," the home of "black" people to whose skin the language itself assigns a moral tinge. At the same time, as Miller notes, such a discourse takes the darkness of that skin as marking the absence of light, a sign that there's something missing. So as a boy Marlow looks at a map of Africa and thinks of it as a "blank space of delightful mystery," a blankness that provides the excuse for a land grab.

On the level of language, then, Conrad's story participates in the imperialism it appears to condemn; and I myself would argue that his reliance on an Africanist discourse matters far more than the epithet—sometimes ventriloquized, and sometimes not—with which he describes the black sailor of the *Narcissus*. Over the years Achebe's argument has been both fought with and applauded, challenged and complicated. Conrad's earlier critics had not entirely ignored the questions of race and empire, and his later ones have continued to produce fine close readings, the best of them located at that point where formalism meets

philosophy. But Achebe changed—no, broke—the interpretative paradigm. The paradox is that "Heart of Darkness" seems only the more central because of it. Achebe's attack made the piece into a locus of continuing debate about the relation, the inextricability, of imperialism and modernity itself. Many later readings have looked at the tale with an eye for its internal contradictions, using it to explore the relation between language and ideology, to consider the limits of what can and cannot be thought in a given culture at a given time. Said, for example, describes Conrad as unable to reconcile the differences between imperialism's official "idea" and its "remarkably disorienting actuality"; a willing participant in empire who nevertheless "shows its contingency, records its illusions." Marlow's narrative therefore remains inconclusive and his irony unstable, an attempt to probe the meaning of an experience that even at the end seems no more clear than the "black bank of clouds" that spreads over England itself.

Achebe's brickbat deserves much of the credit for the fact that our Conrad is more fully historicized than Zabel's, more firmly situated in his times, a man of 1900 with all its attendant blind spots and biases. But he did not work alone. Earlier scholars had already provided much of the biographical armature on which such contextual readings depend; later ones have followed that river around the sharpest of bends and up into its furthest reaches of implication. In fact Achebe presents only one aspect of Conrad's handling of empire, and to complicate the picture I want to look at another essay from the mid-1970s, another response by a writer from one of Britain's former colonies. V. S. Naipaul's 1974 "Conrad's Darkness" begins with the admission that "It has taken me a long time to come round to Conrad." The Polish writer's work had at first seemed to him marred by an overelaboration of method, an "unwillingness to let the story speak for itself." Yet Conrad's "originality, the news he is offering us, can go over our heads," and Naipaul soon finds that his books have already defined the "mixed and secondhand" world into which he himself was born. The Caribbean writer comes to realize that "Conrad . . . had been everywhere before me," and not only on the map. Indeed, to my mind Almayer's Borneo resembles the Trinidad of Naipaul's own Mr. Biswas. And it is this sense of Conrad, not as the voice of European racism, but as the most

comprehensive of guides to what Naipaul calls the "deep disorder" of our times, that delimits the terrain on which the best recent criticism has staked its claim.

When Naipaul turns to "Heart of Darkness," he concentrates on Marlow's discovery, in a riverside hut, of an obscure book on navigation. One approach to "Heart of Darkness" is to focus on the dialectic the tale enacts between "civilization" and "savagery"—a dialectic summed up in Marlow's account of his own desire for a "howl and a dance." But that tattered volume suggests something more complicated. For what is it doing in the Congo at all? *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* seems innocent enough, and yet both its presence and its subject speaks to the often appalling business of a world slowly knitting itself into one. So too does its owner, a young Russian whose "very existence" in Africa seems "improbable, inexplicable." It is, however, no more "inconceivable" than Marlow's own, and at the end of the story Conrad proffers a vision of a great "waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth," a vision that presents the cargo-carrying Thames—"this river"—as running out across the ocean and up into the mouth of "that river," of the Congo itself. The two become as one, a world in which the land is stitched together by water: a liquid world, through which both capital and people themselves seem perpetually to stream.

Every page that Conrad wrote both presumes and undermines an identity between person and place, for he relies on the fixities of nineteenth-century nationalism to define his characters even as he charts a world in which they are all out of joint. Take "Typhoon" (1902), in which the steamer *Nan-Shan* moves under its Irish captain through the China Sea, carrying a freight of what we would now call guest workers, "coolies returning to their village homes." Take *Nostromo*, set in what Naipaul describes as a "half-made" Latin American republic, where the indispensable man of the people is a Genoese sailor, the funding comes from San Francisco, and the country-born tycoon is ineradicably English. To read Conrad in this way is to remember that one of the places he had been before Naipaul was London itself, that great beach of the unsettled and the lost.

In fact, it sometimes seems that the hardest thing to find in his books is a British subject at work in a part of the map splotched red. Conrad saw what would come. He maps the upheaval and

the restlessness produced by a world system, an incipient global society, at the very moment it comes into being. The Congo's European outposts may cloak their greed in the fiction of progress, but the imperialism Conrad describes isn't concerned with administration so much as with money, with the movement of commodities like ivory and rubber and even, in one story, potatoes. It is a system so powerful that it can either supersede governments or bend them to its will, as it does in *Nostromo*, where the Occidental Republic comes into being for the sake of the San Tomé mine. For in the "development of material interests," as that novel's Dr. Monyngham says, "There is no peace and no rest," no true center and no final periphery, no border and no home.

And perhaps, with that system in mind and both Achebe's and Naipaul's essays before us, we can now weigh, and even in part recuperate, the interpretations Conrad received in the middle of the twentieth century. The critics of that period eschewed a political vocabulary, predicating their arguments instead on metaphysics or Freud, on the idea of "alienation" or an appeal to some transhistorical "human condition": a belief in certain truths that hold at all times and for all people. It's easy to see how Conrad could be read in such terms, for both his characters and he himself come to us estranged from their origins. Yet his apparent abstraction from the local, his seeming "universality," has an historical specificity of its own. It is grounded not only in the writer's own exile but also in the fact that the Poland of his birth could not be found on a map, a nation split between three states and yet with no territory of its own. It was then confirmed by his years at sea, and by the conditions of his life in England, where like Yanko in "Amy Foster" he continued to wear the "peculiar and indelible stamp" of the foreign, "separated by an immense space from his past." An argument like Naipaul's allows us to connect the Polish exile with the dislocations of British imperialism. It suggests a perspective from which *Nostromo* more closely resembles "Heart of Darkness" or *Lord Jim* than it does such other "political" novels as *The Secret Agent*; it demonstrates the degree to which Conrad's people are those who have left their ancestral worlds behind.

Achebe's essay, in turn, had such resonance precisely because it showed how Conrad's earlier critics, with their insistence on his

"tragic vision" and "introspective plunge," had worked to discount the particularity of local conditions and local knowledge. He showed the way in which their terms homogenized the separate nightmares from which we can none of us awake, and demonstrated that the very idea of the "universal" itself amounted to little more than a "synonym for the . . . parochialism of Europe." For such terms have a history of their own. The claims and presumptions of Conrad's mid-century critics were characteristic of the postwar consolidation—the institutionalization—of European modernism, with its belief that the past had been superseded and its corresponding and paradoxical emphasis on a few allegedly enduring truths. As such, their arguments were inseparable from and dependent upon the engirdling power of modernization itself. Conrad's readers, both then and now, stand as a part of the totalizing system that he himself defines, of the process that has placed that seaman's manual along an African river. The world he describes may take its motive, its centrifugal force from the West. Nevertheless he speaks, if not to some "human condition," then to a history in which we all increasingly share, and one that Achebe himself addresses in such books as *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*. Perhaps, indeed, Conrad's sense of his own "indelible stamp" served to confirm his "suspicion" that we are all of us "not inhuman." For the man who wrote *The Secret Agent* that double negative might be as good as it gets. He was not immune to the pressures and prejudices of his world. Nor are his critics. Yet though we might today assign a different source or valence to their universalizing claims, our predecessors were not entirely wrong to find in his work their warrant.

IV

"Heart of Darkness" will likely remain the work that Conrad's name most immediately recalls, its title so inescapably a part of our newspaper headlines that its author himself would now refuse its use. Still, its appeal isn't confined to—or by—the questions I've sketched above, for the tale also comes to us in the voice of Conrad's single most important character, "the man Marlow": the storyteller also of "Youth," the repository of the title

figure's confidence in *Lord Jim*, and the intelligence picking its way through the almost trackless marsh of *Chance* (1913). Marlow's narration, however, can never be identified with that of the work as a whole. The circumstances of his speech are always dramatized or framed, and with each successive use Conrad places him at a greater distance, so that his voice fills less of *Chance* than it does of *Lord Jim*, of *Lord Jim* than of "Heart of Darkness." Even in "Youth," where he sticks close to the facts of his own life, Conrad begins with a mahogany table and a bottle of claret, with four men listening as a fifth begins to talk. Sinewy, sardonic, and with as many twists as the Congo itself, Marlow's voice speaks to us out of an experience that however deep has never allowed itself to cross the shadow-line of cynicism. In this he might stand as Conrad's better self.

But Conrad did not stay with Marlow. The books that followed on *Lord Jim*, the great trio of "political" novels that begins with *Nostromo* and continues with *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, mark the point at which his work has outgrown his own biography. They demonstrate his determination to try new things: to move, in mid-career, away from the ever-changing and eternal sea and into a consideration of more ambiguous public questions. Conrad did not like to be called a writer of sea-stories and he didn't want to be known as what an early reviewer called "the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago." A reputation can, however, be a hard thing to shake, and Conrad's position with both readers and reviewers alike was only just starting to seem secure when he confounded them with the South America of *Nostromo*.

That book, as he wrote to his agent, J. B. Pinker, "is a very genuine Conrad," and yet at the time almost nobody agreed with him. The three novels that now seem at the core of his achievement began to find their audience only after the Second World War, when a generation's experience of ideological combat—the coming of the Cold War, the struggles of decolonization—gave them a new resonance, as though they had been retrospectively endowed with a predictive force. Still, what attention those books got from specialists was but a corrective, a trimming of the sails. Zabel himself admired them and wrote a notable account of *Under Western Eyes*. Nevertheless his *Portable* scanted that aspect of Conrad's *oeuvre*, and once again it has required the critical movement signaled by Achebe to suggest the superficiality of the old

divisions in Conrad criticism. The changes in our understanding of "Heart of Darkness" signal something more than a shift in critical practice. In making that tale appear more central than ever, those changes have brought to light the degree to which, for all his variations of subject and setting, Conrad's work nevertheless remains, in the words of the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* all "manifold and one." Emphasizing the historical specificities of both Marlow's river journey and the language in which Conrad described it allows us to assimilate this symbolist masterpiece to his later work, to see the consistency with which, as *Nostromo* puts it, "the working of the usual public institutions presented itself to him most distinctly as a series of calamities overtaking private individuals."

In 1897 Conrad wrote to R. B. Cunninghame Graham that he shared his desire that people should value "faith, honour, fidelity to truth in themselves and others . . . [and] make out of these words their rule of life." There was, however, "one point of difference" between them. Cunninghame Graham had the "unwarrantable belief" that such a desire could be "realized." But Conrad himself did "not believe," and he went on to evoke a machine "evolved . . . out of a chaos of scraps" that could not be adjusted or made to do anything other than its own "horrible work . . . You can't interfere with it . . . you can't even smash it." The machine obeys no human law, and Conrad's response to that image—to that mechanism hatched of his own brain and experience—is a terminal skepticism, a sense that "nothing matters," even if he does admit "that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing." One might almost say that Conrad has preferences but no principles, as if Martin Decoud in *Nostromo* were speaking for his creator when he defines a "conviction" as nothing more than "A particular view of our personal advantage either practical or emotional."

Maybe that goes too far. Conrad was a great reader of Henry James, and an account of the American writer by Richard Brodhead may serve to characterize the Polish one as well. In Brodhead's terms, James "sees the struggle for public social change as growing out of private emotional distress and as disguising the pursuit of private emotional ends." Conrad differs from his predecessor in his refusal to see the private life as a refuge, free from the calamities of "public institutions." But he

places an equivalent weight on the motive force of "private distress." Or as he himself puts it, "in their own way the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience." That knowledge gives Conrad the ability to see through his own beliefs and biases without feeling the need to discard them; recognizing that, as his own, they have no more validity, but also no less, than do any other "particular" views. It is an ability that reaches its peak in the self-corroding ironies of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, books far more unsettling than the almost normative tragedy of *Lord Jim*.

Still, as Zabel himself argues, what Conrad "had to say was indissociable from his way of learning to say it." Any full account of his work must also stress its extraordinary reliance on frame-tales and flashbacks, on the way he sometimes seems to begin a narrative only so that he may disrupt it. His letters show him as an effective and at times devastating practical critic. Yet there's little in Conrad's essays that serves to lay out an aesthetic. The preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* does, admittedly, invoke the majesty of the creative act, defining it as an attempt "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe . . . to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows . . . what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential." The pace and the force of those words carry an inspiriting and incantatory power. But it is a *credo*, something comparable to Lawrence's "Why the Novel Matters" rather than to the critical manifestoes with which James or Woolf attempted to sweep the decks of their competition, to create the taste by which they would be appreciated.

The best account of Conrad's purpose comes not in anything he himself wrote, but in Ford Madox Ford's memoir of him, which now seems a kind of primer on the writing of fiction, a guide to such things as the handling of dialogue and the introduction of minor characters. Ford writes that "we accepted without much protest" the then-pejorative term "'Impressionists' that was thrown at us." No exact corollary can be drawn between literary impressionism and the French paintings that gave the term its currency. Yet both are concerned with registering the most flickering acts of perception, the perception that precedes comprehension: the blobs of paint that resolve themselves into a

cathedral, the "little sticks . . . whizzing before my nose" that Marlow in "Heart of Darkness" hasn't yet recognized as arrows. Ford argues that "we saw that Life did not narrate, but made impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions." The words are cryptic, but we can clarify them by distinguishing Conrad's work from that of the other writers to whom Ford's epithet applies. Conrad's concern in his early fiction lies in defining the process, and the consequences, of his characters' growing understanding of their own perceptions; and for this purpose no better instrument than Marlow can be imagined. In contrast, Ford's own greatest book, *The Good Soldier*, dramatizes its narrator's absence of any understanding whatsoever, as though the impressions he receives had left, as it were, no impress. A second comparison would be to Woolf's concern with the flux and flow of a consciousness caught in what she calls an "incessant shower" of sensation. Yet Conrad isn't interested in the pulse of experience so much as in what Watt calls "the gap between impression and understanding," and his work dramatizes the process of "delayed decoding" by which we make sense of our experience.

Put it another way: the job Conrad gives both his characters and his readers is that of interpreting something that doesn't at first look clear, that refuses explanation or belief. Or as Jim tells Marlow, in trying to remember the moment at which he abandoned the *Patna*, "I had jumped. . . . It seems." Some of that incoherence comes from the particular kind of impressions—the violent seas and more violent deaths—with which Conrad works. Rather more of it, however, grows from the belief that "Life [does] not narrate." It does not disclose its meanings with the smooth linearity of a Victorian serial, an orderly unspooling of one event after another. Such a linearity suggests that some objective value or quality of meaning inheres in the world itself, that "the remorseless rush of time" alone can be enough to make us see. To Conrad, however, that meaning does not lie so readily to hand. Life does not narrate, it produces impressions instead, and the mind's task lies in unfolding, in disentangling, whatever of the "enduring and essential" may be snatched from that undifferentiated stream of experience; as though truth were not given, but made.

One mark of Conrad's developing mastery lies in the ever-changing nature of his impressionism. In "Heart of Darkness" and *Lord Jim* he is concerned above all with Marlow's act of understanding, which stands for and indeed subsumes our own. The later books don't limit themselves that way. Halfway through *Nostromo*, Conrad puts both the title figure and the gentleman-journalist Decoud aboard a boat loaded with silver. It is a foggy and moonless night, on which "no intelligence could penetrate the darkness," and when they are rammed by a steamship the two men realize that they have "nothing in common between them . . . as if they had discovered in the very shock of the collision that the loss of the lighter would not mean the same thing to them both." They may be caught by the same event, but they cannot be said to share it except in their mutual recognition that they each remain isolated within a "private vision . . . [with] no bond of conviction, of common idea." And that recognition will shape the form of Conrad's fiction itself. His work from *Nostromo* on is marked by a growing inability to rest within a single version of any event, by an insistence on the plurality of meaning that makes him swap the narration around from one point of view to another, less concerned with the perceptions of individual characters than with the reader's cumulative and many-layered impression of the book as a whole. The result can be dizzying. It often makes our judgment of individual scenes reflect the discovery of Winnie Verloc, in *The Secret Agent*, "that a simple sentence may hold several diverse meanings—mostly disagreeable."

Conrad's impressionism found its most important tool in his handling of time, his manipulation of chronology. The whole first half of *Nostromo* can be seen as one massive act of delayed decoding, in which over the course of two hundred pages Conrad's third-person narration brings us unsteadily closer to an interpretation of the events we have seen in its opening pages. The book begins on a day of riot that we only later learn is in fact a day of revolution. Then it steps back some eighteen months, before retreating to an indeterminate moment in a further past, beyond which are allusions to days even more remote. We slip forward, and then back again, change continents, cross mountains, and the gears with which Conrad handles what Ford calls the "time-shift" are so perfectly meshed that the transitions seem almost invisible. Troops walk onboard a steamer, and a few pages

later we see them embark once more. The moment repeats itself, as though this chronicle of a Latin American republic were never quite able to get past its starting point, and when we finally do return to the riot it's only to learn that we have not yet seen it correctly. It is as if Conrad were searching for the right way to tell this story. Or perhaps that quality of endless recurrence is indeed the best way to make us see this society, to give us an impression of what one character calls its "Fifty Years of Misrule." Suppose, however, that we had started at the "beginning"—suppose Conrad had allowed the order of events to dictate the order of his narration? He would, I think, have had to start with one or another of his many characters; with an individual, not a nation. It wouldn't be the book he wants, a dispassionate analysis of an historical process that does indeed seem "indissociable from his way of learning to tell it." Yet once he has made us understand the workings of this country's "public institutions," the pulse and pause of its coups and counterrevolutions, the end may then come quickly. The novel's final chapters may define a dialectic in which the seemingly stable prosperity of the new Occidental Republic faces troubles born of that very prosperity itself, but they also ravel out in a straight line of narrative, "a series of calamities overtaking private individuals."

Conrad himself called *Nostromo* the "most anxiously meditated" of his novels, a book that carries its indirection with a kind of stately grandeur. *The Secret Agent* appears, in comparison, to deserve its subtitle: "A Simple Tale." But no: it is rather one that hides its difficulties behind a mask of streamlined assurance. Conrad described the book as both a "new departure in *genre*," and his "first story . . . dealing with London," but he also wrote of it dismissively as a kind of *tour de force*, "a sustained effort in ironical treatment of a melodramatic subject." Nevertheless he prepared for it carefully, making a close study of London's anarchist milieu and of the actual 1894 explosion from which he drew his plot. Conrad devotes much of the novel to a taxonomy of different revolutionary types, from the bomb-making Professor to the wheezy "ticket-of-leave apostle" Michaelis. Yet that is not what gives the book its edge. Soon after finishing *Nostromo* he had written an essay called "Autocracy and War," an examination of the Russian empire that one reviewer described as "condemnation in the form of rhapsody," and its masterly invective would

seem to have determined the subject of both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. Conrad may direct an unforgiving stare at his anarchists. What drives *The Secret Agent*, however, is not its analysis of the disturbance they themselves produce, but rather its account of the disorder sparked by the attempt of a "senseless tyranny" to control them.

The novel opens in the Soho shop of Adolf Verloc, a place with "photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls" in the window and the gas jets turned low, "either for economy's sake or for the sake of the customers." Though Mr. Verloc's business is but his "ostensible business." The real work happens in the house behind, where he meets the anarchists among whom he passes as one of themselves, gathering what information he can for the foreign government that employs him. He is an indolent creature, "constitutionally averse from every superfluous exercise," but now that indolence receives a challenge. His masters want him to earn his keep, to do something that will provoke "a universal repressive legislation."

The book's opening chapters walk us through Verloc's grimy duplicitous world, and then the novel skips forward to the day of an "attempted bomb outrage in Greenwich Park," an explosion in which only the bomber himself has perished. But then Conrad dives back in time, back into Verloc's family life: a life that includes not only his wife, Winnie, but also her beloved brother Stevie, a "sensitive" boy marked by "the vacant droop of his lower lip." That violation of chronology allows Conrad to defer the novel's climax, and yet it does something more than turn the screws of suspense. For it tells us, too, of the hopes that Winnie has placed in Verloc's apparent kindliness. Those hopes would mean little to a reader in their proper sequence, but they assume an enormous retrospective importance; as so often in Conrad, we need the end of the story to make sense of its beginning. Breaking sequence lets Conrad establish the terms on which *The Secret Agent* will conclude by making us understand that, as one policeman will put it, "From a certain point of view we are here in the presence of a domestic drama," a household tragedy embedded within a tale of political terror.

From a certain point of view—though not, perhaps, from others. In this world any given event may have several diverse and disagreeable meanings: any event, and indeed any sentence.

Conrad's own attraction to the anarchism he spurns manifests itself in the slippery glitter of his irony, in the perfect detonator of his prose. So he tells us repeatedly that Mr. Verloc is "no fool," that he is both "humane" and "thoroughly domesticated," and even that he "was not a debauched man. In his conduct he was respectable." It is a characterization at once entirely inadequate, and true. Time and again the novel echoes the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* with its insistence on "bringing to light the truth," making us probe beneath the surface of an affair in which "there is much . . . that does not meet the eye." Yet when Conrad does make us see, what he shows us are the remains of the Greenwich bomber: remains that, once the police have shoveled them up, resemble "what may be called the by-products of a butcher's shop with a view to an inexpensive Sunday dinner." It seems typical of this book that the Inspector in charge "had not managed to get anything to eat," and *The Secret Agent* stands as Conrad's most relentless novel, a darkness visible that shares Winnie Verloc's belief "that things did not stand being looked into" even as it rubs them in our faces.

"The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds." The novel's words testify not only to Conrad's disbelief in the possibility of disinterested action, but also to his equal and complementary belief that ideology is always preceded and indeed determined by "private emotional ends." One of the wisest things anyone has ever said about him can be found in a little 1919 essay in which T. S. Eliot presents Conrad as "the antithesis of Mr. Kipling. He is, for one thing, the antithesis of Empire (as well as of democracy) . . . Mr. Conrad has no ideas, but he has a point of view, a world; it can hardly be defined, but it pervades his work and is unmistakable." We might disagree about the absence of ideas, and almost a century's worth of criticism has gone into defining that point of view. Still, Conrad's politics can best be summarized in terms of what he himself described, in a letter to Edward Garnett, as his inability to "swallow *any* formula"; an inability that makes him wear "the aspect of enemy to all mankind." But Conrad also knows that there is no escape from the world those formulae have made. In *Under Western Eyes*, the student Razumov, having betrayed a man who had trusted him with his secrets and his life, tells Councilor Mikulin that he wants to be done with it all, that

he wants "simply to retire." Which makes his confessor ask, softly, "Where to?" No reader of Conrad will be surprised to learn that what then happens both fulfills the literal terms of Razumov's desire and proves no retirement at all.

V

Conrad changed publishers regularly, moving in the early years of his career from Unwin to Heinemann and back again, and on to Blackwood for both the magazine and book publication of *Lord Jim* and *Youth*. He tried Harper and then Methuen, before in his last years settling into an alternation of Dent and Unwin. The picture in America was simpler—a mix of houses at first, and then a steady commitment to Doubleday, where the young Alfred A. Knopf would make *Chance* a bestseller. Some of those changes grew from the attempts of his agent, J. B. Pinker, to strike the best deal in an increasingly segmented and competitive marketplace, and some came from the fact that Conrad looked to be losing the competition. He probably would have been happy to stay with Blackwood, and the lucrative serial possibilities of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, if the publisher, who was already carrying him at a loss, hadn't refused his request for a loan.

He was never good with money, and though not improvident was certainly unthrifty, living open-handedly and hand to mouth. His friend John Galsworthy helped him with some regularity, there was a series of government grants, and eventually Pinker became his banker, so that Conrad's letters to him are full of requests for small and precisely calculated sums to cover one expense or another. And sometimes they weren't so small. There were family trips to Capri and Provence, and it seems typical of Conrad's bad luck that almost any trip abroad was punctuated by illness and doctors' fees. By the time of *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's debt to Pinker amounted to £2,700, and they were arguing over what and where he could publish, with the agent threatening to cut off supplies; their quarrel undoubtedly contributed to Conrad's collapse once the book itself was done.

Then things changed. After his breakdown of 1910, Conrad never again attempted a "political" novel. He wrote some stories, moved house, and then, as he would do repeatedly in the years to

come, he plucked an old manuscript from its drawer. Conrad had spoken of a book called *Chance* as early as 1905, though some aspects of it go back even further, to the *fin de siècle* invention of Marlow, and its protracted composition is perhaps responsible for its labored quality, its convolutions of narrative within narrative. Yet the book was cannily promoted, in the United States in particular. The advertising described it as "a sea story that appeals to women," and however oblique in form the novel did tell a familiar story of romantic rescue, in which an upright sea captain saves a troubled young woman from the tangles of her past. Conrad even called its two parts "The Damsel" and "The Knight." The reviews were strong, though there's some truth to Garnett's comment that "the figure of the lady on the 'jacket' . . . did more" than anything else "to bring the novel into popular favour." For it was popular, with sales that dwarfed Conrad's previous figures. In America, 10,000 copies went in the first week alone—and once the readers had arrived, they stayed.

"The lady on the 'jacket'" was called Flora de Barral, and if her presence got *Chance* to sell, it was perhaps because her story offered a point of contrast with its author's earlier books. The manners that interest Conrad are usually those of a ship or a port, not a drawing room, and even those novels set away from the water rely on the idea of separate spheres, in which the space given to women tends in all senses to be narrow. His repertoire of female characters is a limited one, and he portions them out, like Shakespeare, with only two or three speaking roles per book. The bit parts go to the exoticized: Jewel in *Lord Jim*, or the "barbarous and superb woman" who stretches out her arms at Kurtz' departure in "Heart of Darkness." The star turns Conrad reserves for the idealized, like the dry-eyed survivors of *Nostromo*, the Doñas Emilia and Antonia, or Natalya Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*, who owes something to his reading of Turgenev and maybe more to the ghostly memory of his own mother. Conrad does acknowledge the stakes men have in keeping such women in what Marlow calls "a beautiful world of their own," but judging the degree of irony behind those words has been a nice question for the growing body of feminist readings his work has received. In some books he does recognize that that "beautiful world" is itself a fiction; so with both Flora in *Chance* and Lena in *Victory* he takes care to show us the gap between what their men imagine

them to be, and the way the really are. More often, however, Conrad seems to fall under the spell himself, as he does with the conventionally sultry Rita de Lastaola in *The Arrow of Gold*. Of all his female characters, he grants only Winnie Verloc the kind of imaginative weight that places her at the book's very center.

Flora looks in spots to run her close: a fierce and loyal daughter and eventually a passionate wife, a character whose sense of her own independence is at times indistinguishable from desperation. Yet while *Chance* has its moments, nobody really think it one of Conrad's best books. Too often we are reading one person's report of what a second told him a third had said, and its flaws have prompted a debate about the shape of Conrad's *oeuvre*, a debate most readily seen in Thomas C. Moser's 1957 analysis of his "achievement and decline." Conrad's earlier work had sometimes misfired, though few writers can equal him in having produced four great novels in a row, from *Lord Jim* to *Under Western Eyes*. Nothing from *Chance* on can match them, with the exception of the much briefer *The Shadow-Line*. Why? What happened?

Moser suggests that what gained Conrad his new popularity is also what made him go off, arguing that his "creativity" always suffered from a "near paralysis . . . when dealing with a sexual subject." During the first half of his career he managed to sidle around the issue, but in his later work he often turned to such "uncongenial" questions, to a kind of material fundamentally at odds with his temperament. Conrad's attempt to expand his range amounts, in this account, to a betrayal of his own gifts; the novelist should instead have stayed within the narrow world of men without women that so marks his early fiction. Moser's link between the "uncongenial" and "decline" risks tautology, but the problem he defines isn't simply one of the writer's admittedly uncertain handling of "sexual subject[s]." It lies, rather, in what creates that uncertainty, in the fact that Conrad "sees man as lonely and morally isolated . . . his only hope benumbing labor or, in rare cases, a little self-knowledge." It is a view that Moser believes the novelist cannot "possibly reconcile . . . with the panacea of love, wife, home, and family." The whole bent of his imagination lies away from such an affirmation, and while E. M. Forster may plead with us to "Only connect!," on this reading Conrad at his best more than half believes, in the words of *Victory*,

that "He who forms a tie is lost."

Much more could be said about Conrad's picture of women. But that picture does seem to me a consistent one, from *Almayer's Folly* to the end, and we may accept Moser's estimation of Conrad's later work, its tired quality included, while disagreeing with his sense of the reason why. Going through *Chance* myself I certainly feel that the novelist has pushed his method past its breaking point—and yet I can't say it's the subject alone that has broken it. Conrad was fifty-two when he finished *Under Western Eyes*: the same age as the Dickens of *Our Mutual Friend*, his last completed novel, and older than the Woolf of *The Waves* or the Flaubert of *A Sentimental Education*. Few novelists of his era did much of their major work after sixty, the great exception being Theodor Fontane. He had been a sickly boy, his life at sea was physically demanding, and he came back from the Congo with malaria, from whose recurring fevers he suffered. Gout often left him bedridden and lame and at times settled like arthritis into the wrist of his writing hand. There was his family's health to worry about too, and money, and then the Great War, with his son Borys serving in France from 1916 on. There was, quite simply, the stress of being Conrad, something altogether different than the wildfire of being Dickens, but no less exhausting. His life had been in every sense a hard one, and I see no mystery in his failing powers.

I would tell a different story about Conrad's last years, one that emphasizes something that often goes unnoticed: his disciplined professionalism. Conrad enjoyed the prosperity that *Chance* and its successors brought him—enjoyed it so much, in fact, that he still sometimes found himself briefly overdrawn. But he never forgot the saving power of what his early stories had described as the need to "get on"; which by this point meant driving forward to the next page, and then to the one after that. *Victory* stands as a partial recovery from *Chance* insofar as its version of rescue ends operatically, with the heroine taking the bullet meant for her protector. The novel returns to the island settings of Conrad's first books, and it's often read as his final statement about commitment and isolation. There's little argument, however, that Conrad's most important late work is *The Shadow-Line*, a tale that he initially thought of calling "First Command": a story about a young man's unexpected appointment as master of a ship, a boat

haunted by the all-but-physical presence of its malevolent late captain. In writing Conrad drew on his own 1888 memories of taking charge of the *Otago* in Bangkok. Yet those memories are here "transposed into spiritual terms" and stretched a bit beyond the literal facts, with the voyage made more punishing than in fact it was, so as to underscore the symbolic charge of the story's title, of the line that separates innocence from experience, youth from maturity. It was, he later wrote, the only subject "I found it possible to attempt at the time," and he dedicated this last masterpiece to Borys "and all others who like himself have crossed in early youth the shadow-line of their generation."

As the war progressed, Conrad did a few propaganda pieces for the Admiralty and finished some stories, the sublime "Warrior's Soul" among them. But in April 1917 he wrote to Garnett that he felt "broken up—or broken in two—disconnected. Impossible to start myself going impossible to concentrate to any good purpose. Is it the war—perhaps? Or the end of Conrad simply?" When later that year he began *The Arrow of Gold*, he found its germ in "The Sisters," a fragment of the 1890s, working it up into a self-consciously romantic tale of his own time in Marseilles. As a document it is both maddening and invaluable for what it appears to say about Conrad's early manhood. But as a novel it seems as densely indirect as anything in his whole body of work, and much the same can be said of *The Rescue*, another return to an abandoned manuscript. Both books depend on a "sexual subject," and it may be true that Conrad always found such material difficult. Nevertheless I would agree with Zdzislaw Najder in seeing Conrad's turn to that material "rather as a *symptom* of his weariness than as the *cause* of his decline." Invention had failed, and all he could now do was go back to the work he had once put aside.

Still, that stands in itself a mark of his professionalism. Conrad tied the loose ends of his career. His backlist had become valuable, and he made sure that there was more of it. He began, moreover, to tend his own posterity, producing a series of brief author's notes for his collected edition: forewords at once modeled on James's prefaces to his own New York edition, and as unlike them as possible. Conrad says little about the technical difficulties he had to solve. He is instead anecdotal and concentrates above all on the originating germ of the narrative, the

event or memory or bit of reading that had first set him off. These gruff avuncular notes seem, even now, to give us an image of Conrad as fully equal to any storm, as though he were the *Narcissus* itself. They mask the sense of struggle and despair to which his letters speak, they veil the turmoil of the astonishing fifteen years that had taken him from the standing start of *Almayer's Folly* through "Heart of Darkness" and on to "The Secret Sharer" and *Under Western Eyes*. Wanting a large audience, he yet never hesitated to make his work difficult, disrupting the smooth linearity of his Victorian predecessors and demanding that we face out the gusts and squalls of confusion. He showed us worlds we had not seen before, and he made technical innovation respond to the pressures of history itself. No writer of his time did more to change the stories the novel in English can tell, or indeed the way it tells them.

For Conrad there was one last tale. He had spoken for years of writing a long book about the Mediterranean in the Napoleonic era, and at his death in 1924 he left a fragment that was published the next year as *Suspense*. But he had already finished a shorter novel on the same theme, a story about an old French sailor who has come home, with a treasure, to the coast where he grew up. Most of *The Rover* (1923) is set in 1804, with a British fleet cruising just offshore, and in its hero, Jean Peyrol, Conrad gives us a man who has found calm waters after a life of storms. Some of the book recalls *Nostromo*—the money, the small boat, the islands—but Conrad has used a real place, the Giens peninsula near Toulon, and his feel for his setting, for the interplay of sea and land, reminds me of Hardy at his best. *The Rover* was once popular and deserves to be better known today: a delicate book, and one with a surprisingly happy ending, in which an old man finds he still has the strength to perform one great and final task.