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*A Personal Record*

The facts gleaned from hearsay or experience were but opportunities offered to the writer. What he has done with them is matter for a verdict which must be left to the individual conscience of readers.

*Last Essays*, p. 145

## I

While an author is planning, writing, and revising a novel, the work may be said to be part of his life, in the sense that what he is doing is one of the many ongoing activities that make up his life. But once he has decided that his novel is finished – which means, in practice, that it is ready for publication – then it assumes a different status: it now stands outside his life and must make its way independently of him. Whether it survives or not is a question beyond his control – one ultimately to be determined not by himself but by his public. Having left the life of its author, the new novel depends for its fate on whether it enters the life of its readers.

When, therefore, we raise the question of the relationship of art and life, it would seem that we are asking how a work is related to its author and to its readers. Thus we could proceed in two directions: backwards, as it were, into the conception and genesis of the work, or forwards into its reception and survival. If we decided to move backwards, we could ask an increasingly complex series of questions. What biographical event (if any) occasioned the work? What research (if any) went into its creation? What psychological or social factors determined its meaning? So, taking *Lord Jim* as an example, we could find with Norman Sherry that the very existence of the novel depended on Conrad's having come across the story of the First Mate of the *Jeddah* while visiting Singapore in 1883 (or 1887); or we could learn with J. D. Gordan that Jim would not have been sent to Patusan had Conrad not become interested in the career of the imperialist adventurer, Sir James Brooke; or we could be taught by Gustav Morf to consider Conrad's obsession with the subject of betrayal as the expression of the unconscious

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guilt of a renegade Pole.<sup>1</sup> This sort of inquiry could, no doubt, be pursued almost indefinitely. Yet, however impressive its eventual results, the question with which it began – the nature of the relationship between art and life – would remain unresolved. We would have learnt a good deal about Conrad's biography; we would have acquired a number of facts about his work. But as to the relationship between the two, we would remain as ignorant as when we started.

On this matter Conrad himself is quite unambiguous. 'Your praise of my work', he writes to a young admirer, Richard Curle, who had sent him in 1922 an article entitled 'Joseph Conrad in the East', 'your praise of my work, allied to your analysis of its origins (which really are not its origins at all, as you know perfectly well), sounds exaggerated by the mere force of contrast.' And again a year later, *à propos* of another article:

I was in hopes that on a general survey it could also be made into an opportunity for me to get freed from that infernal tail of ships, and that obsession of my sea life which has about as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of the drawing rooms which Thackeray frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist.<sup>2</sup>

For Conrad, inquiry into the biographical origin of a work is not only misconceived and irrelevant but also (since he claims that the 'praise' it produces sounds 'exaggerated') reductive. There can be no mistaking the extent of his objection: he is not simply saying that his readers' infatuation with his sea-life diverts attention from that portion of his work not concerned with the sea; he is also saying that it is damaging to his work as a whole, the sea-stories included.

We cannot feel the full force of this attack on biographical criticism unless we make some attempt to understand the otherwise banal truth that a novel derives its life from its author and its readers. The majority of Conrad's critics have simply assumed that a quasi-mechanical process of cause and effect is involved: that is to say, that a work is, as it were, 'caused' by its author, and its

<sup>1</sup> See N. Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge, 1966) on *Lord Jim*, *Almayer's Folly*, *The Outcast of the Islands*, 'The End of the Tether', *The Shadow Line*, and 'The Secret Sharer'; J. D. Gordan, *Joseph Conrad: the Making of a Novelist* (Camb. Mass., 1940) on the sources of Conrad's early work; G. Morf, *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* (London, 1931). Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge, 1971) does for *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, 'Heart of Darkness' and various tales what its predecessor did for the eastern narratives.

<sup>2</sup> R. Curle (ed.), *Conrad to a Friend: 150 Selected Letters from Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle* (reissued New York, 1968), pp. 113 and 147.

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effects are 'registered' on its readers. However, the language of cause-and-effect is not intelligible in every context – least of all in relation to what it is to write or to read a novel like *Lord Jim*. Why this is so can perhaps best be brought out by reference to the well-known distinction between *causes* and *reasons*. According to this distinction, it is a logical error to treat reasons in terms of causes. For instance, if a reader decides that the Patusan episode as narrated in the novel *Lord Jim* (to keep to our example) is melodramatic, or irrelevant, or absurd, he cannot establish that it is so by invoking causes. It won't help him to study Conrad's biography in the hope of discovering, say, that he was suffering from malaria while composing the chapters in question. Such a fact, if it turned up, might explain *why* the episode was absurd; but it wouldn't show *that* it was absurd. This would have to be established first, and it could only be done by providing reasons. Similarly, the episode is not invalidated by an appeal to effects: the mere fact that it produced irritation or boredom in certain readers would not in itself constitute a demonstration or a refutation.

So, if we ask the question 'why did Conrad write *Lord Jim*?', the answer may come up in the form of 'causes' or it may come up in the form of 'reasons', depending upon the assumptions we make. In the former case we will reply: 'Because of the biographical, psychological and social conditions that determined his actions', and we will undertake a programme of research into his life and times. In the latter case we will answer: 'Because he saw, felt, understood, imagined something which he wished to explore and communicate', and we will address ourselves to the work in order to discover what it is. When, therefore, Conrad told Richard Curle that his article had failed to take 'an opportunity for [him] to get freed from that infernal tail of ships' he was claiming nothing more or less than the right to be understood as a writer.

There is little doubt that for Conrad himself the question of the relationship of art and life was a particularly urgent one. 'The nature of my writing', he noted in the same correspondence, 'runs the risk of being obscured by the nature of my material.'<sup>1</sup> He was intensely concerned that the life which provided the material should not be identified with the mind that made sense of it. This was not, of course, to claim that life and material had nothing to do with art and writing. The fact that, before settling down as a novelist, Conrad led an active, exposed, and adventurous existence, first as the orphaned son of a revolutionary Polish patriot,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.

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then as a naturalized British sailor and master-mariner, means that he had at his disposal a range of experience available only at second-hand to most other novelists. That this was a source of strength there can be no doubt; but it was also a source of weakness. Having had to acquire his craft late, as a man of mature experience, he found it easy to resist the appeal of the ivory-tower aestheticism to which so many of his younger contemporaries of the 1890s succumbed; but by the same token he remained till the end of his life unable to practise his craft without continuous strain: he came to his chosen craft and language too late ever to achieve the fluency of a James or a Bennett. Such factors are undeniable, and Conrad acknowledged them.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he remained unwavering in his conviction that it was not the experience as such that mattered, but the experience as understood by the mind and rendered significant by the art.

It is understandable that a life such as Conrad's should have arrested the attention, often at the cost of the novels themselves, of men belonging to an age still inspired by the imperial adventure. What is less clear is why later critics should have found the intentions of his work, and even its quality, so difficult to determine. During his life-time Conrad was considered alternatively a realist and a romantic. Since then, he has been cast in an almost absurd number of more or less incompatible roles: as an impressionist, as a *symboliste* of sorts, as an allegorist (Jungian or Freudian), and more recently as a political moralist of reactionary, conservative, organicist, existential, and even revolutionary tendencies.<sup>2</sup> Such arbitrariness in diversity cannot be attributed solely to a concern for the life at the expense of the work. There is something about the work itself – in part related to the fact that it was produced at two removes (at least) from its author's native environment – which makes it specially prone to irresponsible criticism. This means that any new attempt to comment on the novels finds itself faced at the outset with the problem of relevance. There would be little point in adding yet another item to the

<sup>1</sup> The best biography of Conrad is Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: a Critical Biography* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959). All references in this study are to the 1971 Penguin edition. The best work on Conrad's Polish life is Z. Najder (ed.), *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends* (Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Substantiation would require reference to virtually the entire critical canon. For contemporary reception of the novels, see N. Sherry, *Conrad: the Critical Heritage* (London, 1973); for convenient summaries, see *Modern Fiction Studies*, x (1964–5) and the preface to the 2nd ed. of D. Hewitt, *Conrad: a Reassessment* (London, 1969).

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growing list of studies analysing Conrad in relation to a seemingly arbitrary set of assumptions, or explaining his work in terms of ideas wholly unnatural or foreign to it. But what is the test of relevance in his case? One cannot take reliable bearings from the tradition within which he wrote, for it is precisely that tradition that is in question. What was his relationship to Victorian–Edwardian literature? How far was it affected by his veneration for the French novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century? To what extent was his adherence to the cultural norms of Western Europe undercut by the more fundamental influence of Polish culture? These are only some of the more intractable questions raised by the Conrad ‘phenomenon’ when one tries to understand it in terms of its cultural context. Given these difficulties, therefore, I see no alternative but to approach the work from, so to speak, the opposite direction, and to attempt to understand it, at least to begin with, *in terms of his own understanding of himself*. Normally, the question of how an author understands himself is as fraught with difficulties as the question of how he relates to his environment: often one is obliged to hypothesize on the basis of deduction from scanty or inadequate evidence. In Conrad’s case, however, one is on firmer ground, for he has left us a major work, produced at the height of his creative powers, devoted in its entirety to an effort of self-discovery. I refer to the autobiography, *A Personal Record*, written in 1908,<sup>1</sup> at the age of fifty-one.

## II

We have just seen that Conrad energetically repudiated all attempts to reduce his work to its biographical origins. Isn’t the writing of a personal record, therefore, an act of flagrant inconsistency? If the purpose of an autobiography is to assemble a sequence of chronological facts, then Conrad stands condemned. Some such assumption seems to have been made by the very few critics who have examined the book. Conrad’s biographer, Jocelyn Baines, is of the opinion that *A Personal Record* shows ‘no analysis, no probing below the surface’;<sup>2</sup> and one of his most favourable interpreters, Albert Guerard, although alone in calling it ‘a true work of art’, finds it ‘most evasive’.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are at least two

<sup>1</sup> Published serially, December 1908–June 1909; as a book, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> *Joseph Conrad*, p. 354.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Camb. Mass. and Oxford, 1958), p. 3. This is a vivid and elegant study, tending to psychological extravagance.

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reasons for believing that the assumptions that prompt these judgements are mistaken in the present case.

The first arises out of Conrad's own discussion, in the fifth chapter of *A Personal Record*, of the motives for which autobiographies are produced. Comparing his own memoirs with those of Rousseau, he writes: 'The matter in hand is to keep these reminiscences from turning into confessions, a form of literary activity discredited by Jean-Jacques Rousseau on account of the extreme thoroughness he brought to the work of justifying his own existence' (*A Personal Record*, p. 95). The purpose of this attack against Rousseau is to enable Conrad to distinguish clearly between 'reminiscences' and 'confessions': the former are prompted by the question, 'What do I remember?', the latter by 'What do others think of me?' On this basis, Conrad proceeds to differentiate between those who examine themselves from motives of vanity – the 'megalomaniacs who rest uneasy under the crown of their unbounded conceit' – and those who do so from motives of egoism – those 'ambitious minds always looking forward to some aim of aggrandisement'. What these two types share is a common incapacity for sparing a 'detached impersonal glance upon themselves' (pp. 91–2). To undertake to write about oneself, therefore, is a project fraught with risk, and redeemable only through the purifying virtue of disinterestedness.

The second reason arises out of a consideration of the structure of *A Personal Record*. As a conventional autobiography, the book is inadequate, not only because it makes no intimate or private disclosures, but also because it confines itself to a handful of episodes set out in complete disregard of chronological order. A glance at Conrad's disposition of his material will make this clear. Chapter 1 begins with Conrad on board his last ship at work on his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, then turns back to the previous autumn when he was making his final visit to his uncle and guardian in the Polish Ukraine (1893, 1892); Chapter 2 refers to events in his Polish past, especially to a great-uncle's participation in the Napoleonic retreat from Moscow (1812), then moves forward to Conrad's long struggle to go to sea (summer 1873); Chapter 3 describes Poland's distress under Russian occupation, largely through a dramatic account of the same great-uncle's life, and of Conrad's mother's last visit to her family before her death in exile (1863); Chapter 4 describes the very beginnings of Conrad's work on *Almayer's Folly* in London (autumn 1889), then recalls his first meeting with the original Almayer in Borneo a year before; Chap-

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ter 5 opens with some general remarks on life and literature, and ends with an account of the composition of *Nostramo* (summer 1904); Chapter 6 recalls the three examinations leading to his master's ticket (1880–6); and then evokes his first experience of the sea at Marseilles (autumn 1874); the final chapter provides a vivid account of his first glimpse of a British merchant-ship during a night-excursion with the Marseilles pilots.

Brief as this summary is, it is sufficient to show that the impression of confusion is only superficial. Once chronological expectations are relinquished, it becomes clear, as the preface to *A Personal Record* itself suggests, that 'these memories have [not] been thrown off without system or purpose' (p. xxi). The narrative is organized around the two major events of Conrad's life: his decision to go to sea, and his decision to become a writer. The first is set against the background of his Polish origins, the second in the context of his commitment to the Merchant Service. Furthermore, these two events do more than determine selection: they also determine structure. 'In the purposely mingled resonance of this double strain', says Conrad in his preface, 'a friend here and there will perhaps detect a subtle accord.' The making of the seaman and the making of the writer are treated in such a way that they become mutually illuminating. *A Personal Record* is not primarily a source of explanatory fact; it is an exploration of the relationship between Conrad's two professions. In that the book is concerned with events that actually took place and men and women who really lived, it is an historical work. But it is also the product of a man's prolonged meditation on the significance of his past. It is not merely a 'record' but a 'personal' one. It represents not simply a life, but a life understood. And in its concern to explore the parallels between Conrad the seaman and Conrad the writer, it gradually formulates a view of the relationship between life and art.

That Conrad did not envisage this relationship in causal terms is confirmed by a rather difficult passage towards the beginning of Chapter 5. Conrad begins by stating that conceited and ambitious minds 'together with the much larger band of the totally unimaginative, of those unfortunate beings in whose empty and unseeing gaze . . . the whole universe vanishes into a blank nothingness' may well miss 'the true task of us men whose day is short on this earth, the abode of conflicting opinions'. He goes on:

The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that

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the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view – and in this view alone – never for despair! Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves. The rest is our affair – the laughter, the tears, the tenderness, the indignation, the high tranquillity of a steeled heart, the detached curiosity of a subtle mind – that's our affair! And the unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness, may be our appointed task on this earth. A task in which fate has perhaps engaged nothing of us except our conscience, gifted with a voice in order to bear true testimony to the visible wonder . . . of the sublime spectacle.

*A Personal Record*, p. 92

This sombre utterance may become more intelligible if we remember its context: Conrad's return, after the vicissitudes of nineteen years' absence, to Poland, the place of his origins. Such an event would overwhelm most of us with a sense of the remorselessness of change. For Conrad, the sole survivor of a vanished past, the question whether there is *anything* permanent in the affairs of men must take on a special immediacy. His journeys over the face of the globe – 'the abode of conflicting opinions' – have taught him to reject the idea of 'an ethical universe': that is to say, a universe created to sustain and endorse the good. The virtuous and vicious alike suffer the ravages of time and chance; the very idea of the good is subject to the accidents of period and place. Can anything survive this universal wreckage? Despite his experience of loss, Conrad is not yet ready to give up. He stakes his hopes on a single hypothesis: that of 'a spectacular universe', that is to say, of a world that requires of man only one task – to make his experience of it real to himself. Of all the variety of men's duties, the command to see and to hear is the only one that is not self-appointed, the only one whose authority is not 'our affair'.

This philosophical position has been described, notably by Jocelyn Baines,<sup>1</sup> as 'impressionistic'. But this label seems to me to be seriously misleading. First of all it implies that the act of perception required of us is essentially passive and fragmentary. On the contrary, Conrad insists that the attention we have to direct to 'every phase of the living universe' must be 'unwearied' and 'self-forgetful'. Secondly, 'impressionism' is a morally neutral term, and therefore it disregards what is perhaps the most striking

<sup>1</sup> *Joseph Conrad*, p. 231: with respect to the 'Preface' to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad's most explicit – though incomplete – statement of the artist's aim. Baines adds that, *in practice*, Conrad was never an impressionist.



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turn in Conrad’s argument: that the rejection of the ‘ethical universe’ in favour of the ‘spectacular universe’ has *moral* consequences. To the spectacle which offers itself to our senses he permits every response except that of despair: ‘in this view there is room for every religion except for the inverted creed of impiety, the mask and cloak of arid despair’. The reason for this, of course, is that the law which bids us take an imaginative interest in the world in which we find ourselves presupposes that life is worth living. To ‘despair imaginatively’ would, for Conrad, constitute a contradiction in terms. If it were not so, he would not be able to claim that ‘those visions . . . are a moral end in themselves’. Far from producing impressionism, the rejection of the ‘ethical’ in favour of the ‘spectacular’ creates the basis of moral action, for moral action, as far as Conrad is concerned, is not justifiable in terms of abstract principle or revealed dogma, but in terms of imaginative understanding.

## III

This view of man’s task on earth forms the foundation of Conrad’s artistic creed. ‘Only in men’s imagination does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence’, he writes at the end of his first chapter. ‘Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life’ (p. 25). The distinction between imagination and invention enables Conrad to safeguard such activities as the writing and reading of fiction from the charge of escapism. For while invention may be, and often is, an irresponsible faculty, imagination is censored by the very reality it perceives, interprets, or recreates. A work produced by the imagination cannot, by definition, merely express the self-born fantasies of the mind; it has to do justice to the reality of a world that exists beyond the self.

Thus considered, a work of imaginative fiction is not something that merely happens, and so an object for research, but something achieved, and so an object of judgement. In one form or another, this idea runs right through the autobiography. Chapter 5, for example, refers to ‘the prose artist of fiction, which after all is but truth often dragged out of a well and clothed in the painted robes of imaged phrases’, and to ‘the novelist, whose first virtue is the exact understanding of the limits traced by the reality of his time to the play of his invention’ (p. 93). This ‘truth’ is quite plainly not the truth of fact, and therefore cannot be verified in the manner in which, for instance, legal or historical or biographical evidence is tested. But it is not – otherwise it would be difficult to see how the

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idea of truth could be invoked at all – a truth that has nothing to do with fact. The novelist’s invention is not a blank cheque: what he can write is limited by ‘the reality of his time’ – that is, the reality directly accessible to him. I have suggested that the autobiographer’s concern is not with the facts but the meaning of the facts: but this meaning, whatever it may be, depends at least on not getting the facts wrong. So, it is impossible to see a man who habitually misrepresents to himself every detail of his experience of others ever achieving the understanding required for even as imperfect a novel as *Almayer’s Folly*. Alternatively, it is impossible to imagine a novelist without a memory. Although the meaning of an author’s work cannot be reduced to the facts of his life, the work is strictly inconceivable without these facts. As Conrad said to Richard Curle: ‘Without mankind, my art, an infinitesimal thing, would not exist.’

The opponents of the ‘intentional fallacy’ have rightly stressed that professed intentions are not necessarily identical with realized intentions, and hence that the task of the biographer is not the same as that of the critic. However, they have opened such a gap between the work of art and ‘mankind’ that they have made it very difficult to see what a novel could have to do with truth. Unlike these critics, Conrad refuses to treat the novel as some sort of ‘self-sufficient’ object. He regards it instead as the intelligible product of the imagination of one man appealing to the imagination of his fellow-men. Yet by so doing he seems to me to be endorsing the insights of this critical school while avoiding the hazards it creates. He clearly recognizes that since, by definition, a work of fiction cannot exhibit the facts and events from which it derives its reality, it depends for its truth on the good faith of its author – on his ‘sincerity’ or ‘conscience’, as Conrad indifferently calls it. In his preface, Conrad writes: ‘I know that a novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself.’ The truth of a novel, then, would seem to be guaranteed solely by the subjective or private integrity of the novelist. ‘In that interior world’, Conrad goes on, ‘where his thoughts and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstances or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who then is going to say Nay to his temptations if not his conscience?’ (p. xiii). And *A Personal Record* does full justice to this phase of the creative process. Seldom has the solitary struggle of