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JOSEPH
CONRAD

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Hugh Walpole

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I—BIOGRAPHY

I

TO any reader of the books of Joseph Conrad it must be at once plain that his immediate experiences and impressions of life have gone very directly to the making of his art. It may happen often enough that an author's artistic life is of no importance to the critic and that his dealing with it is merely a personal impertinence and curiosity, but with the life of Joseph Conrad the critic has something to do, because, again and again, this writer deliberately evokes the power of personal reminiscence, charging it with the burden of his philosophy and the creation of his characters.

With the details of his life we cannot, in any way, be concerned, but with the three backgrounds against whose form and colour his art has been placed we have some compulsory connection.

Joseph Conrad (Teodor Josef Konrad Karzeriowski) was born on 6th December 1857, and his birthplace was the Ukraine in the

south of Poland. In 1862 his father, who had been concerned in the last Polish rebellion, was banished to Vologda. The boy lived with his mother and father there until his mother died, when he was sent back to the Ukraine. In 1870 his father died.

Conrad was then sent to school in Cracow and there he remained until 1874, when, following an absolutely compelling impulse, he went to sea. In the month of May, 1878, he first landed on English ground; he knew at that time no English but learnt rapidly, and in the autumn of 1878 joined the *Duke of Sutherland* as ordinary seaman. He became a Master in the English Merchant Service in 1884, in which year he was naturalised. In 1894 he left the sea, whose servant he had been for nearly twenty years: he sent the manuscript of a novel that he had been writing at various periods during his sea life to Mr Fisher Unwin. With that publisher's acceptance of *Almayer's Folly* the third period of his life began. Since then his history has been the history of his books.

Looking for an instant at the dramatic contrast and almost ironical relationship of these three backgrounds—Poland, the Sea, the inner security and tradition of an English country-side—one can realise what they may make of an artist. That early Polish atmosphere, viewed through all the deep light and high shade of a remembered childhood, may be enough to give life and vigour to any poet's temperament. The romantic melancholy born of early years in such an atmosphere might well plant deeply in any soul the ironic contemplation of an impossible freedom.

Growing into youth in a land whose farthest bounds were held by unlawful tyranny, Conrad may well have contemplated the sea as the one unlimited monarchy of freedom and, even although he were too young to realise what impulses those were that drove him, he may have felt that space and size and the force of a power stronger than man were the only conditions of possible liberty. He sought those conditions, found them and clung to them; he found, too, an ironic pity for men who could still live slaves and prisoners to other men when to them also such freedom was possible. That ironic pity he never afterwards lost, and the romance that was in him received a mighty impulse from that contrast that he was always now to contemplate. He discovered the Sea and paid to her at once his debt of gratitude and obedience. He thought it no hard thing to obey her when he might, at the same time, so honestly admire her and she has remained for him, as an artist, the only personality that he has been able wholeheartedly to admire. He found in her something stronger than man and he must have triumphed in the contemplation of the dominion that she could exercise, if she would, over the tyrannies that he had known in his childhood. He found, too, in her service, the type of man who, most strongly, appealed to him. He had known a world composed of threats, fugitive rebellions, wild outbursts of defiance, inefficient struggles against tyranny, he was in the company now of those who realised so completely the relationship of themselves and their duty to their master and their service that there was simply

nothing to be said about it. England had, perhaps, long ago called to him with her promise of freedom, and now on an English ship he realised the practice and performance of that freedom, indulged in, as it was, with the fewest possible words. Moreover, with his fund of romantic imagination, he must have been pleased by the contrast of his present company, men who, by sheer lack of imagination, ruled and served the most imaginative force in nature. The wonders of the sea, by day and by night, were unnoticed by his companions, and he admired their lack of vision. Too much vision had driven his country under the heel of Tyranny, had bred in himself a despair of any possible freedom for far-seeing men; now he was a citizen of a world where freedom reigned because men could not perceive how it could be otherwise; the two sides of the shield were revealed to him.

Then, towards the end of his twenty years' service of the sea, the creative impulse in him demanded an outlet. He wrote, at stray moments of opportunity during several years, a novel, wrote it for his pleasure and diversion, sent it finally to a publisher with all that lack of confidence in posts and publishers that every author, who cares for his creations, will feel to the end of his days. He has said that if *Almayer's Folly* had been refused he would never have written again, but we may well believe that, let the fate of that book be what it might, the energy and surprise of his discovery of the sea must have been declared to the world. *Almayer's Folly*, however, was not rejected; its publication

caused *The Spectator* to remark: "The name of Mr Conrad is new to us, but it appears to us as if he might become the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago." He had, therefore, encouragement of the most dignified kind from the beginning. He himself, however, may have possibly regarded that day in 1897 when Henley accepted *The Nigger of the Narcissus* for *The New Review* as a more important date in his new career. That date may serve for the commencement of the third period of his adventure.

The quiet atmosphere of the England that he had adopted made the final, almost inevitable contrast with the earlier periods. With such a country behind him it was possible for him to contemplate in peace the whole "case" of his earlier life. It was as a "case" that he saw it, a "case" that was to produce all those other "cases" that were his books. This has been their history.

II

His books, also, find naturally a division into three parts; the first period, beginning with *Almayer's Folly* in 1895, ended with *Lord Jim* in 1900. The second contains the two volumes of *Youth* and *Typhoon*, the novel *Romance* that he wrote in collaboration with Ford Madox Hueffer, and ends with *Nostramo*, published in 1903. The third period begins, after a long pause, in 1907 with *The Secret Agent*, and receives its climax with the remarkable popularity of *Chance* in 1914, and *Victory* (1915).

His first period was a period of struggle, struggle with a foreign language, struggle with a technique that was always, from the point of view of the "schools," to remain too strong for him, struggles with the very force and power of his reminiscences that were urging themselves upon him, now at the moment of their contemplated freedom, like wild beasts behind iron bars. *Almayer's Folly* and *The Outcast of the Islands* (the first of these is sequel to the second) were remarkable in the freshness of their discovery of a new world. It was not that their world had not been found before, but rather that Conrad, by the force of his own individual discovery, proclaimed his find with a new voice and a new vigour. In the character of Almayer, of Aissa, of Willems, of Bahalatchi and Abdulla there was a new psychology that gave promise of great things. Nevertheless these early stories were overcharged with atmosphere, were clumsy in their development

and conveyed in then style a sense of rhetoric and lack of ease. His vision of his background was pulled out beyond its natural intensity and his own desire to make it overwhelming was so obvious as to frighten the creature into a determination to be, simply out of malicious perversity, anything else.

These two novels were followed by a volume of short stories, *Tales of Unrest*, that reveal, quite nakedly, Conrad's difficulties. One study in this book, *The Return*, with its redundancies and overemphasis, is the crudest parody on its author and no single tale in the volume succeeds. It was, however, as though, with these efforts, Conrad flung himself free, for ever, from his apprenticeship; there appeared in 1898 what remains perhaps still his most perfect work, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. This was a story entirely of the sea, of the voyage of a ship from port to port and of the influence upon that ship and upon the human souls that she contained, of the approaching shadow of death, an influence ironical, melancholy, never quite horrible, and always tender and humorous. Conrad must himself have loved, beyond all other vessels, the *Narcissus*. Never again, except perhaps in *The Mirror of the Sea*, was he to be so happily at his ease with any of his subjects. The book is a gallery of remarkably distinct and authentic portraits, the atmosphere is held in perfect restraint, and the overhanging theme is never, for an instant, abandoned. It is, above all, a record of lovingly cherished reminiscence. Of cherished reminiscence also was the book that closed the first period of his work, *Lord Jim*. This was to remain, until

the publication of *Chance*, his most popular novel. It is the story of a young Englishman's loss of honour in a moment of panic and his victorious recovery. The first half of the book is a finely sustained development of a vividly remembered scene, the second half has the inevitability of a moral idea pursued to its romantic end rather than the inevitability of life. Here then in 1900 Conrad had worked himself free of the underground of the jungle and was able to choose his path. His choice was still dictated by the subjects that he remembered most vividly, but upon these rewards of observation his creative genius was working. James Wait, Donkin, Jim, Marlowe were men whom he had known, but men also to whom he had given a new birth.

There appeared now in *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Typhoon* three of the finest short stories in the English language, work of reminiscence, but glowing at its heart with all the lyrical exultation and flame of a passion that had been the ruling power of a life that was now to be abandoned. That salutation of farewell is in *Youth* and its evocation of the East, in *The Heart of Darkness* and its evocation of the forests that are beyond civilisation, in *Typhoon* and its evocation of the sea. He was never, after these tales, to write again of the sea as though he were still sailing on it. From this time he belonged, with regret, and with some ironic contempt, to the land.

This second period closed with the production of a work that was deliberately created rather than reminiscent, *Nostromo*. Conrad may have known Dr Monyngam, Decoud, Mrs Could,

old Viola; but; they became stronger than he and, in their completed personalities, owed no man anything for their creation. There is much to be said about *Nostramo*, in many ways the greatest of all Conrad's works, but, for the moment, one would only say that its appearance (it appeared first, of all ironical births, in a journal—*T.P.'s Weekly*—and astonished and bewildered its readers week by week, by its determination not to finish and yield place to something simpler) caused no comment whatever, that its critics did not understand it, and its author's own admirers were puzzled by its unlikeness to the earlier sea stories.

Nostramo was followed by a pause—one can easily imagine that its production did, for a moment, utterly exhaust its creator. When, however, in 1907 appeared *The Secret Agent*, a new attitude was most plainly visible. He was suddenly detached, writing now of "cases" that interested him as an investigator of human life, but called from his heart no burning participation of experience. He is tender towards Winnie Verloc and her old mother, the two women in *The Secret Agent*, but he studies them quite dispassionately. That love that clothed Jim so radiantly, that fierce contempt that in *An Outcast of the Islands* accompanied Willems to his degraded death, is gone. We have the finer artist, but we have lost something of that earlier compelling interest. *The Secret Agent* is a tale of secret service in London; it contains the wonderfully created figure of Verloc and it expresses, to the full, Conrad's hatred of those rows and rows of bricks and

mortar that are so completely accepted by unimaginative men. In 1911 *Under Western Eyes* spoke strongly of a Russian influence Turgéniev and Dostoievsky had too markedly their share in the creation of Razumov and the cosmopolitan circle in Geneva. Moreover, it is a book whose heart is cold.

A volume of short stories, *A Set of Six*, illustrating still more emphatically Conrad's new detachment, appeared in 1908 and is remarkable chiefly for an ironically humorous story of the Napoleonic wars—*The Duel*—a tale too long, perhaps, but admirable for its sustained note. In 1912 he seemed, in another volume, *Twixt Land and Sea*, to unite some of his earlier glow with all his later mastery of his method. *A Smile, of Fortune* and *The Secret Sharer* are amazing in the beauty of retrospect that they leave behind them in the soul of the reader. The sea is once more revealed to us, but it is revealed now as something that Conrad has conquered. His contact with the land has taken from him something of his earlier intimacy with his old mistress. Nevertheless *The Secret Sharer* is a most marvellous story, marvellous in its completeness of theme and treatment, marvellous in the contrast between the confined limitations of its stage and the vast implications of its moral idea. Finally in 1914 appeared *Chance*, by no means the finest of his books, but catching the attention and admiration of that wider audience who had remained indifferent to the force and beauty of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, of *Lord Jim*, of *Nostramo*. With the popular success of *Chance* the first period of his work is closed. On the

possible results of that popularity, their effect on the artist and on the whole world of men, one must offer, here at any rate, no prophecy.

III

To any reader who cares, seriously, to study the art of Joseph Conrad, no better advice could be offered than that he should begin with the reading of the two volumes that have been omitted from the preceding list. *Some Reminiscences* and *The Mirror of the Sea* demand consideration on the threshold of any survey of this author's work, because they reveal, from a personal, wilful and completely anarchistic angle, the individuality that can only be discovered, afterwards, objectively, in the process of creation.

In both these books Conrad is, quite simply, himself for anyone who cares to read. They are books dictated by no sense of precedent nor form nor fashion. They are books of their own kind, even more than are the novels. *Some Reminiscences* has only *Tristram Shandy* for its rival in the business of getting everything done without moving a step forward. *The Mirror of the Sea* has no rival at all.

We may suppose that the author did really intend to write his reminiscences when he began. He found a moment that would make, a good starting-point, a moment in the writing of his first book, *Almayer's Folly*, at the conclusion or, more truly, cessation of *Some Reminiscences*, that moment is still hanging in mid-air, the writing of *Almayer* has not proceeded two lines farther down the stage, the maid-servant, is still standing in the doorway, the hands of the clock have covered five minutes of

the dial. What has occurred is simply that the fascination of the subject has been too strong. It is of the very essence of Conrad's art that one thing so powerfully suggests to him another that to start him on anything at all is a tragedy, because life is so short. His reminiscences would be easy enough to command would they only not take on a life of their own and shout at their unfortunate author: "Ah! yes. I'm interesting, of course, but don't you remember...?"

The whole adventure of writing his first book is crowded with incident, not because he considers it a wonderful book or himself a marvellous figure, but simply because any incident in the world must, in his eyes, be crowded about with other incidents. There is the pen one wrote the book with, that pen that belonged to poor old Captain B— of the *Nonsuch* who... or there is the window just behind the writing-table that looked out into the river, that river that reminds one of the year '88 when...

In the course of his thrilling voyage of discovery we are, by a kind of most blessed miracle, told something of Mr Nicholas B. and of the author's own most fascinating uncle. We even, by an extension of the miracle, learn something of Conrad as ship's officer (this the merest glimpse) and as a visitor to his uncle's house in Poland.

So by chance are these miraculous facts and glimpses that we catch at them with eager, extended hands, praying, imploring them to stay; indeed those glimpses may seem to us the more wonderful in that they have been, by us, only partially realised.

Nevertheless, in spite of its eager incoherence, at the same time both breathless, and, by the virtue of its author's style, solemn, we do obtain, in addition to our glimpses of Poland and the sea, one or two revelations of Conrad himself. Our revelations come to us partly through our impression of his own zest for life, a zest always ironical, often sceptical, but always eager and driven by a throbbing impulse of vitality. Partly also through certain deliberate utterances. He tells us: "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, amongst others, on the idea of Fidelity. At a time when nothing which is not revolutionary in some way or other can expect to attract much attention I have not been revolutionary in my writings." (Page 20.)

Or again:

"All claim to special righteousness awakens in me that scorn and anger from which a philosophical mind should be free." (Page 21.)

Or again:

"Even before the most seductive reveries I have remained mindful of that sobriety of interior life, that asceticism of sentiment, in which alone the naked form of truth, such as one conceives it, such as one feels it, can be rendered without shame." (Page 194.)

This simplicity, this fidelity, this hatred of self-assertion and self-satisfaction, this sobriety—these qualities do give some

implication of the colour of the work that will arise from them; and when to these qualities we add that before-mentioned zest and vigour we must have some true conception of the nature of the work that he was to do.

It is for this that *Some Reminiscences* is valuable. To read it as a detached work, to expect from it the amiable facetiousness of a book of modern memories or the heavy authoritative coherence of the *My Autobiography* or *My Life* of some eminent scientist or theologian, is to be most grievously disappointed.

If the beginning is bewilderment the end is an impression of crowding, disordered life, of a tapestry richly dark, with figures woven into the very thread of it and yet starting to life with an individuality all their own. No book reveals more clearly the reasons both of Conrad's faults and of his merits. No book of his is more likely by reason of its honesty and simplicity to win him true friends. As a work of art there is almost everything to be said against it, except that it has that supreme gift that remains, at the end, almost all that we ask of any work of art, overwhelming vitality. But it is formless, ragged, incoherent, inconclusive, a fragment of eager, vivid, turbulent reminiscence poured into a friend's ear in a moment of sudden confidence. That may or may not be the best way to conduct reminiscences; the book remains a supremely intimate, engaging and enlightening introduction to its author.

With *The Mirror of the Sea* we are on very different ground. As I have already said, this is Conrad's happiest book—indeed,

with the possible exception of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, his only happy book. He is happy because he is able, for a moment, to forget his distrust, his dread, his inherent ironical pessimism. He is here permitting himself the whole range of his enthusiasm and admiration, and behind that enthusiasm there is a quiet, sure confidence that is strangely at variance with the distrust of his later novels.

The book seems at first sight to be a collection of almost haphazard papers, with such titles as *Landfalls and Departures*, *Overdue and Missing*, *Rulers of East and West*, *The Nursery of the Craft*. No reader however, can conclude it without having conveyed to him a strangely binding impression of Unity. He has been led, it will seem to him, into the very heart of the company of those who know the Sea as she really is, he has been made free of a great order.

The foundation of his intimacy springs from three sources—the majesty, power and cruelty of the Sea herself, the homely reality of the lives of the men who serve her, the vibrating, beautiful life of the ships that sail upon her. This is the Trilogy that holds in its hands the whole life and pageant of the sea; it is because Conrad holds all three elements in exact and perfect balance that this book has its unique value, its power both of realism, for this is the life of man, and of romance, which is the life of the sea.

Conrad's attitude to the Sea herself, in this book, is one of lyrical and passionate worship. He sees, with all the vivid

accuracy of his realism, her deceits, her cruelties, her inhuman disregard of the lives of men, but, finally, her glory is enough for him. He will write of her like this:

"The sea—this truth must be confessed—has no generosity. No display of manly qualities—courage, hardihood, endurance, faithfulness—has ever been known to touch its irresponsible consciousness of power. The ocean has the conscienceless temper of a savage autocrat spoiled by much adulation. He cannot brook the slightest appearance of defiance, and has remained the irreconcilable enemy of ships and men ever since ships and men had the unheard-of audacity to go afloat together in the face of his frown... the most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty."

Nevertheless she holds him her most willing slave and he is that because he believes that she alone in all the world is worthy to indulge this cruelty. She positively "brings it off," this assertion of her right, and once he is assured of that, he will yield absolute obedience. In this worship of the Sea and the winds that rouse her he allows himself a lyrical freedom that he was afterwards to check. He was never again, not even in *Typhoon* and *Youth*, to write with such free and spontaneous lyricism as in his famous passage about the "West Wind."

The Mirror of the Sea forms then the best possible introduction to Conrad's work, because it attests, more magnificently and more confidently than anything else that he has written, his faith and his devotion. It presents also, however, in its treatment

of the second element of his subject, the men on the ships, many early sketches of the characters whom he, both before and afterwards, developed so fully in his novels. About these same men there are certain characteristics to be noticed, characteristics that must be treated more fully in a later analysis of Conrad's creative power, but that nevertheless demand some mention here as witnesses of the emotions, the humours, the passions that he, most naturally, observes. It is, in the first place, to be marked that almost all the men upon the sea, from "poor Captain B—, who used to suffer from sick headaches, in his young days, every time he was approaching a coast," to the dramatic Dominic ("from the slow, imperturbable gravity of that broad-chested man you would think he had never smiled in his life"), are silent and thoughtful. Granted this silence, Conrad in his half-mournful, half-humorous survey, is instantly attracted by any possible contrast. Captain B— dying in his home, with two grave, elderly women sitting beside him in the quiet room, "his eyes resting fondly upon the faces in the room, upon the pictures on the wall, upon all the familiar objects of that home whose abiding and clear image must have flashed often on his memory in times of stress and anxiety at sea"—"poor P—," with "his cheery temper, his admiration for the jokes in *Punch*, his little oddities—like his strange passion for borrowing looking-glasses, for instance"—that captain who "did everything with an air which put your attention on the alert and raised your expectations, but the result somehow was always on stereotyped lines, unsuggestive, empty

of any lesson that one could lay to heart"—that other captain in whom "through a touch of self-seeking that modest artist of solid merit became untrue to his temperament"—here are little sketches for those portraits that afterwards we are to know so well, Marlowe, Captain M'Whirr, Captain Lingard, Captain Mitchell and many others. Here we may fancy that his eye lingers as though in the mere enumeration of little oddities and contrasted qualities he sees such themes, such subjects, such "cases" that it is hard, almost beyond discipline, to leave them. Nevertheless they have to be left. He has obtained his broader contrast by his juxtaposition of the curious muddled jumble of the human life against the broad, august power of the Sea—that is all that his present subject demands, that is his theme and his picture.

Not all his theme, however; there remains the third element in it, the soul of the ship. It is, perhaps, after all, with the life of the ship that *The Mirror of The Sea*, ultimately, has most to do. As other men write of the woman they have loved, so does Conrad write of his ships. He sees them, in this book that is so especially dedicated to their pride and beauty, coloured with a fine glow of romance, but nevertheless he realises them with all the accurate detail of a technician who describes his craft. You may learn of the raising and letting go of an anchor, and he will tell the journalists of their crime in speaking of "casting" an anchor when the true technicality is "brought up"—"to an anchor" understood. In the chapter on "Yachts" he provides as

much technical detail as any book of instruction need demand and then suddenly there come these sentences—"the art of handling slips is finer, perhaps, than the art of handling men."... "A ship is a creature which we have brought into the world, as it were on purpose to keep us up to mark."

Indeed it is the ship that gives that final impression of unity, of which I have already spoken, to the book. She grows, as it were, from her birth, in no ordered sequence of events, but admitting us ever more closely into her intimacy, telling us, at first shyly, afterwards more boldly, little things about herself, confiding to us her trials, appealing sometimes to our admiration, indulging sometimes our humour. Conrad is tender to her as he is to nothing human. He watches her shy, new, in the dock, "her reputation all to make yet in the talk of the seamen who were to share their life with her."... "She looked modest to me. I imagined her diffident, lying very quiet, with her side nestling shyly against the wharf to which she was made fast with very new lines, intimidated by the company of her tried and experienced bisters already familiar with all the violences of the ocean and the exacting love of men."

Her friend stands there on the quay and bids her be of good courage; he salutes her grace and spirit—he echoes, with all the implied irony of contrast, his companion's "Ships are all right..."

He explains the many kinds of ships that there are—the rogues, the wickedly malicious, the sly, the benevolent, the proud, the adventurous, the staid, the decorous. For even the

worst of these he has indulgences that he would never offer to the soul of man. He cannot be severe before such a world of fine spirits.

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