

FOR WHOM DID CONRAD WRITE?

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In *A Personal Record** Conrad tells the story about the first reader of his first work, *Almayer's Folly*. It happened in November or December 1892 on board the *Torrens*, during the passage from London to Adelaide, and three years after another episode recounted in Conrad's reminiscences, when, he says, "in the simplicity of my heart and the amazing ignorance of my mind" he started to write his first novel.¹ That fateful autumn day at Bessborough Gardens – how did Conrad imagine his future readers? To whom did he address his communiqué? This is one of those questions which are unanswerable but which ought to be asked.

Far more often another question is posed: why did Conrad write in his third language, and not the first or the second? This question has been uttered in various tones. Some Poles complained that Konrad Korzeniowski did not enrich his paternal literature. Jo Davidson, an American sculptor who lived most of his time in Paris, noting the contrast between Conrad's fluency in French and his glaringly foreign accent in English, inquired: why don't you write in the language you use with evidently more ease?² Also the English wondered and even grumbled. A well-known London critic Robert Lynd called Conrad in 1908 – and thus after *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent* had been published – "a writer without country and language" and claimed that his works would have been more valuable had they been written in the author's "proper" language.³

We may, however, put the question in a different way, transferring it from the theoretical plane of Conrad's choice of languages to a more concrete one of existing texts and their readers. And ask simply: for whom did Conrad write? To whom were

* References to Conrad's works are, unless otherwise noted, to Dent's Collected Edition (London 1946–1955).

¹ J. Conrad. *A Personal Record*. 16–18, 69.

² Jo Davidson. *Between Sittings*. New York: Dial Press, 1951, 119.

³ In *Daily News*. 10 Aug. 1908; reprinted in *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Norman Sherry, London 1973, 210–212.

his written communiqués addressed? Strangely enough, although it is well-known that to establish contact with readers was for Conrad a pre-eminent concern, although we all remember that several times he addressed his readers directly (as in the “Letter to my readers in America”, published in 1899 as a foreword to *The Nigger*) – the issue of Conrad’s readership audience has so far received little attention. True, Norman Sherry collected the most important reviews and discussed the critical reactions to Conrad’s books in his selection *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*. There are, too, many anthologies of Conrad criticism, both general and devoted to particular works. But Conrad’s impact on “ordinary” readers, who are neither critics nor scholars, has been discussed only with regard to his Polish audience. Moreover, there is ample evidence that Conrad is in no sense just a writers’ and scholars’ novelist. It would be worthwhile to look at the “profile” of his typical readers in various countries, beginning with the UK. In fact, I have a feeling that accepting Conrad’s multi-cultural background has been a something of a problem for the British public. Conrad was rather cagey about it, although in private, as we know, he complained to Garnett about being taken for a Slave, and not for a Pole;⁴ and in a letter to another close friend, Cunninghame Graham, he called himself a “bloody furrigner”.⁵ The eminent Shakespeare scholar Muriel Bradbrook published in 1946 a book entitled “*England Polish Genius*”, but that was rather an exception. Back in 1927 Edmund Gosse, an influential critic, very supportive of Conrad, dismissed as superfluous some twenty pages which Conrad’s first biographer, the Frenchman Jean-Aubry, devoted to the writer’s Polish background: “I admit that I could bear to be told less about all these Kaszewskis and Treminskis [!]. They do not, in their exotic obscurity, help me to much fresh light on the author of *Lord Jim*.”⁶ This sounds to me as a fairly typical reaction. Conrad’s non-English connections have been little explored by British scholars. Jocelyn Baines and John Batchelor did at least point to them clearly and positively.⁷ But almost all substantial research in this field has been carried by non-British authors: French, Swiss, American, and Polish. Recently, I read a critic praising Conrad’s biography by John Stape for “dragging Conrad out from a solemn Polish tomb” in which I had allegedly buried him.⁸ Is Conrad’s Polishness a tomb? This is an issue for my British colleagues to consider. Unable to be objective in this case, I shall limit myself to noticing that for non-British readers more typical seems the recent essay by professor Ulrich M. Schmid of Sankt Gallen, who sees in the aware-

⁴ J. Conrad to E. Garnett, Tuesday [8 Oct. 1908]. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. III. Ed. Frederick R. Karl & Laurence Davies. Cambridge 1988, 492–493. (Further as *CL*).

⁵ 14 Jan [18]98, *CL*:2, 15.

⁶ *The Sunday Times*. 30 Oct. 1927.

⁷ J. Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London 1960, 1–32, 400–403; J. Batchelor. *The Life of Joseph Conrad*. Oxford 1994, 1–18, 19–20, 236–241 etc.

⁸ Paul Bailey. *The Independent*. 17 Aug. 2007.

ness of Conrad's Polish heritage a component which enriches and broadens the understanding of his work.⁹

In any case, in this paper I am concerned with a different topic. I would like to consider two thematically related but methodologically quite distinct problems. First, how Conrad himself conceived his real readers? Second, who are the "implied" (in the terminology of Wolfgang Iser), or intended (in Erwin Wolff's terms), or more loftily "informed" or "ideal" (according to Stanley Fish) readers of particular works of Conrad?

I shall begin with a banality. Every piece of literature is a communiqué, directed to someone, usually to more than one person, and expressed in a given natural language. When the boy Konrad Korzeniowski, apparently at the age of eleven, concocted some juvenile "dramas",¹⁰ he knew perfectly well to whom they were addressed. But when, at the age of 32, he began his first novel – how did he imagine its readers? How much could he have known about the English, to whom he was addressing his communiqué?

It seems that very little indeed. Contemporary seamen did not read much. Singleton in *The Nigger*, laboriously plodding through Bulwer Lytton, is an exception. Anyway, the majority of crewmen in British merchant vessels were foreigners. Officers, also not always British, probably read more, but certainly did not form in this respect a coherent community. It is doubtful if Conrad, meeting his professional colleagues in the ports of Australia or the Far East, could converse with them about contemporary fiction. On the British Isles he did not know, prior to meeting Edward Garnett, anybody from the intellectual and artistic circles. G.W.F. Hope, his earliest English close acquaintance, mentions books as phenomena from another world. Conrad's Marlow is educated well above the average, and John Galsworthy, who knew what he was talking about, asserted immediately that Marlow "though English in name", is "not so in nature",¹¹ (and, a thing unusual in English fiction, we never learn from which part of the country he hails).

We know that Conrad was exceptionally well-read. He knew not only contemporary English "serious" but also popular fiction. (Although it seems that there were gaps: we find no trace of his having read Jane Austen or the Brontë sisters, or – more significantly – George Eliot). But that was the knowledge of texts of novels and tales, not an acquaintance with their readers. The readers he had to visualize himself. Now, it is natural for an author to imagine readers as resembling him- or herself. But here we encounter a paradox. Of one thing Conrad could be certain: he knew that he addressed men and women very different from himself. Different in their cultural background, biographies, linguistic associations, artistic custom. He was sending his works as if into a mist, not knowing, how they would be received. Writing in English,

⁹ "Conrad und Konrad." *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. 1 Sept. 2007.

¹⁰ See: Zdzisław Najder. *Joseph Conrad: A Life*. Rochester, NY, 2007, 33.

¹¹ John Galsworthy. *Castles in Spain and Other Screeds*. London 1927, 78.

couching his communiqué in English, he must have been aware that he simply did not know the average English reader. And his attitude was unlike the hermetic Joyce. Consciously and openly he strove to establish a psychological contact with his audience. He confessed as much both in the preface to his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, and – more fully and eloquently, with theoretical explanations and justifications – in the famous preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* There he wrote about solidarity, but having only a very general idea about those, to whom he addressed his message.

Uncertain of the acceptance of *Almayer's Folly* by publishers, he approached in August 1894 his close friend, a Belgian writer Marguerite Poradowska (widow of his Polish cousin) with a proposal to publish that novel in French, and even have it signed as a joint effort.¹² I believe that as a regular reader of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, well-known also in Poland and to which Poradowska herself contributed, he could visualize its readers better than his potential English public. It is also worth noting that especially in the early, uncertain years of his writing career he paid much attention to his reception in Poland. He boasted to Edward Garnett that Polish literary journals had noticed his work.¹³

In his early writing period Conrad experimented with the addressees of his work. Both his first books, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, are exotic novels with their action on the islands of Borneo and Java, in other words on the territory hitherto unexploited by British fiction (hence the facile and misleading classification of him by reviewers as “the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago”). His third novel, *The Sisters*, was supposed to be completely different, both thematically and artistically: the action was to take place in Europe, the protagonist was to be a Ruthenian painter, the narrative interweaving two separate plots, one artistic and intellectual, the other romantic. Its implied readers were being offered not an exotic background and the clash of Oriental and European civilizations, but anatomy of artistic and spiritual trends of contemporary Europe – continental Europe. The subject-matter had no connection with England (as indeed neither of the plots of both Malay novels had had). But Conrad quickly got stuck with his work and put *The Sisters* aside, for ever.

Five short stories written in the course of the following year and later published as *Tales of Unrest*, represent four diverging directions of experiment, of a search for subjects and audience. “Karain” and “The Lagoon” continue the Malay course. “The Idiots”, written in Brittany, both in its contents and its form is related to contemporary French naturalism; and one may add Conrad had problems with placing of the story. “An Outpost of Progress” raises an African theme, foreshadowing “Heart of Darkness”, and in his coldly ironic mood is close to Anatole France. The latest “The Return” is Conrad’s first and before 1914 the only excursion into contemporary English social and moral topics; an unsuccessful attempt, as no magazine wanted to

¹² Konrad Korzeniowski to Marguerite Poradowska, Saturday [18? Aug. 1894], *CL:1*, 169.

¹³ J. Conrad to E. Garnett, 16 Nov. [1896], *CL:1*, 316.

accept the story, which till the end of its author's life remained his least liked piece. It is obvious that Conrad knew very little both about people like the protagonists of "The Return" as well as about the story's potential readers. Only fifteen years later he would successfully aim his *Chance* at women, who constituted the majority of the readers of novels.

Writing these thematically and artistically varying stories, as I have said: experimenting in four diverse ways, Conrad worked at the same time on a novel which represented an attempt of a still different kind. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, a masterpiece of maritime fiction, was also Conrad's first thematically English work. True, the crew of the clipper is only partly British (in the real "Narcissus" it was mainly foreign) and the action starts in Bombay and takes place at sea, but the ship is on her way to England and the motifs of going "home" and of the link with the home country are repeatedly stressed. For the subject under the discussion no less important is the fact, immediately noted by reviewers, that it is difficult to decide what is the narrative point of view in the novel. It is impossible to say who tells us the whole story: an impersonal and omniscient narrator, or one of the seamen in the "Narcissus" crew, or else somebody representing the whole crew. We encounter alternately the third and first person singular and the first person plural. In the name of the author speak at least three different subjects; in other words, the author addresses his readers in three different ways. It all points to Conrad's uncertainty as to whom he wished to address? This is a question deserving a separate investigation.

Till the end of his life Conrad never ceased to raise themes new to himself and to search for novel ways of handling his subjects. *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes* are all three important political novels; each is quite different in the place of action, central topic and narrative technique. The same applies, e.g., to the volume *A Set of Six*, which was in fact criticized for being a bag of texts put together at random. However, after the publication in 1900, of his first mature novel, *Lord Jim*, Conrad's search for novelty loses the character of experiments with an uncertain result; instead he appears to embark on deliberate campaigns, usually victorious, with conscious varied aims and with varying equipment. And although also later his readers' reactions would surprise and disappoint Conrad – this was especially true in the cases of *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent* – the pivotal period in his reaching authorial self-confidence turned out to be the five-years' time of cooperation with the eminent Edinburgh monthly *Blackwood's Magazine* (1897–1902). There Conrad published *Lord Jim* and "The End of the Tether", and also the stories "Karain", "Youth", and "Heart of Darkness", and thus the five pieces among which two, *Lord Jim* and "Heart of Darkness", belong among his greatest achievements. The monthly had an impressive circulation: about 49 000 copies, several times more than the average size of book editions of the novels of Conrad and other "serious" contemporary

writers.¹⁴ Who were its readers? The subscribers were mostly male Britishers, dispersed all over the world; the majority of copies was distributed in the colonies and dominions. Certainly, Conrad saw copies of the *Maga* in the hotels of Singapore and officers' messes in Australia. One can describe those readers as the colonial intelligentsia. Or, using a socio-cultural term, as gentlemen. Hippolyte Taine writes about them that they are financially independent, have a decent education in the humanities and good manners, care about their honour, possess a knowledge of the world acquired while travelling, and adopt the attitude of responsibility for others; by the same token they regard themselves as natural members of the ruling class. This model description may of course be couched in different terms, but I think in Conrad's consciousness the subscribers of the *Maga* remained his ideal readers – and “ideal” does not mean that they would not have been startled by some things he would be saying, for instance in “Heart of Darkness”. As their representatives we may consider doctor Kennedy in “Amy Foster” and the Assistant Commissioner in *The Secret Agent*.

Intellectually, to the same group belongs certainly Charles Marlow, the best known and most characteristic of Conrad's narrators, who appears precisely in his works published in the *Maga*. Marlow is versed in Greek mythology, knows Latin proverbs and ancient history. Allusions to Shakespeare and Dickens come to him easily. Such continental languages as German and Italian are not alien to him, but above all he knows French well. To understand him, his listeners – as well as the readers of the stories he tells – have to possess similar knowledge and semantic capabilities. Marlow is presented as belonging to the same milieu, as the members of his audience, as “one of them.” Marlow-the-narrator may, therefore, be considered as a representative of the readers of his own – in other words, Conrad's – tales. Thus, Marlow the storyteller is at the same time a model image of the implicit recipient of the works of fiction in which he is a protagonist. I think that the main characteristics and the scope of semantic resources of that implied reader will not change till the end of Conrad's fictional career, although – of course – the ideal reader of *Chance* differs from the ideal reader of *Under Western Eyes*, and Conrad's late work, such as *The Rover* and the unfinished *Suspense*, with their action geographically and culturally far removed from the British Isles, would demand from the English reader something of an effort.

Ives Hervouet's impressively erudite – and in spite of that not covering the entire ground – book on “the French face” of Joseph Conrad lists an amazing number of Conrad's borrowings from French literature. From particular expressions and stylistic motifs to whole scenes, sometimes taken with hardly a change from their original and put within the English text and context. And this refers not only to such works as *Suspense*, whose action is based to a large extent on the memoirs of the Comtesse

¹⁴ David Finkelstein. *The House of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era*. University Park Penn., 2002.

Adèle d'Osmond de Boigne. Filiations abound throughout Conrad's work, also in texts which have nothing to do with France, as in *The Nigger*, where the description of Wait's death is a copy of a scene in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*, or in *Under Western Eyes*, where Natalia Haldin speaks with the words of Madame de Renal of Stendhal's *Rouge et Noire*. I won't concern myself with charges of plagiarism; they have been convincingly disproved. As Ian Watt said succinctly: "In a sense, Conrad is the least derivative of writers: he wrote very little that could be possibly mistaken for the work of anyone else".¹⁵

Still, the question has to be asked: does Conrad, when using French (or less often Polish) verbal, pictorial or thematic components, signal to the reader that his English text has beneath another semantic and cultural level? Are his borrowings seamlessly woven into his prose, or do they refer, point to other texts? Or, most generally, do we have, to understand his texts in full, to see through the veil of his English words other shades – French, or sometimes Polish?

I believe there are no simple answers to these questions. In most cases, the echoes of French (or less frequently Polish) idioms, images and motifs are recognizable only for specialists and, when deciphered, do not add much to the content; although a French (or Polish) reader can, while reading the text in English, instinctively feel that he is encountering something familiar and perhaps poignant. For example, I think that for a French reader, acquainted with the articles of Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Conrad's words in *Nostromo* about "material interest" would be more impressive and richer in content than for an English one, unfamiliar with this memorable concept.¹⁶ Similarly, in the final scene of "Youth" the elderly gentlemen, listening to Marlow, wonder what in their lives was most valuable; a Frenchman, who remembers the closing scene of *L'éducation sentimentale* where Frédéric Moreau and Charles Deslauriers ask themselves the same question, will probably associate these two summing-ups of life and, at least subconsciously, will understand Conrad's text as a wistful answer to Flaubert's cynicism. Still, the basic sense of Conrad's words will remain the same.

But associating the French statement "L'homme est né poltron" in *Lord Jim* with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "l'homme est né libre" in the first sentence of his *Contrat social* sends an important message: two contrasting concepts of human nature are being juxtaposed. And the whole following debate between Marlow and the French lieutenant appears in a fuller light, the light of a substantial confrontation between Rousseau's and Aristotle's vision of man. And another example: the second section of the sketch "The Cradle of the Craft" in *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad opens with the words: "Happy he who, like Ulysses, has made an adventurous voyage." We seem to be reading a joyful praise of wandering. But the quoted sentence is an obvious al-

¹⁵ Ian Watt. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley–Los Angeles 1979, 42.

¹⁶ Esp. "Le mammonisme et la démocratie." *Revue des Deux Mondes*. Vol. CXXII, 15 avril 1894, 721–742.

lusion to the first line of Joachim du Bellay's sonnet from the cycle *Les Regrets*: "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage", "Happy who, like Ulysses, has made a fine voyage." And only the person – for a French reader this will be easy – who associates Conrad's words with the text of the Renaissance poet, will understand the irony of the fragment. Du Bellay extols not his adventures, but his final return to his home country which – as he says further on – he prefers to the sea.

What, then, is the case? Did Conrad write in English for French readers? Or perhaps for the Polish, as some Polish scholars seem to suggest? That means, would his ideal reader be a Frenchman, equally well versed in the literature of his country as in the English language? I suspected something like that, talking sometimes to my late friend Sylvère Monod. Or did he write for the English reader, using a French code, recognized here and there by a cultured British reader? I do not see a final answer to these questions.

But while we look for it, we may note something else. Often, Conrad indicates quite clearly that his point of view, the position from which he describes the world of his tales, is peculiar, not evident, placed "outside": somewhere abroad (as in *The Secret Agent*), or in the mind of an exceptionally well-traveled person (as e.g. in "Amy Foster"), or a person accustomed to compare different cultures (as in *Under Western Eyes*); or else in the orbit of other, not British, experiences and problems (*Suspense*). This means that he signals the need to cast a wider-than-usual semiotic and cultural net, demanding of the reader a broader and complex set of associations. There is in it challenge and an opportunity.

I suppose that the French-American scholar Anne Luyat had an analogous intuition when she wrote years ago about *la nécessaire étrangeté*, the unavoidable foreignness,¹⁷ of Conrad's fictional voice. Inherently, he often seems to remain an outsider within the language he uses and the world he populates with his heroes – but he tries to break out of this condition reaching to his readers: as he wrote in his first ever letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham: "for one writes only half the book, the other half is with the reader".¹⁸

For whom did Conrad write? For his partners: the culturally agile and enterprising readers.

¹⁷ Anne Luyat-Moore. "L'exil dans l'espace et le temps anglais." *Europe*, 758–759 (1992), 118–120; see also Anne Luyat. "Voyage to the End of Strangeness in *Typhoon* (1901)." *L'Epoque Conradienne*, 1991.

¹⁸ J. Conrad to R.B. Cunninghame Graham. 5 Aug. 1897, *CL*:4, 370.

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