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The First World War

During the First World War, Conrad believed himself peripheral to a transitional historical moment. In November 1914, he wrote: ‘the thoughts of this war sit on one’s chest like a nightmare. I am painfully aware of being crippled, of being idle, of being useless with a sort of absurd anxiety’ (CL 5, 427). In August 1915, Conrad felt the ‘world of 15 years ago is gone to pieces; what will come in its place God knows, but I imagine doesn’t care’ (CL 5, 503). The political forces of nineteenth-century Europe that had fashioned Conrad’s literature, notably imperialism and nationalism, were undermined and unleashed anew by the violence of the Great War and the uncertain legacy of the conflict. Conrad closely observed Poland’s fate throughout the war in his relationship with Polish activist Józef Retinger, which inspired ‘A Note on the Polish Problem’ (1916) and ‘The Crime of Partition’ (1919). While 1918 saw the political rebirth of Poland, antagonisms provoked by the redrawing of Europe’s historical boundaries made Conrad uneasy. On Armistice Day, he wrote: ‘The great sacrifice is consummated – and what will come of it to the nations of the earth the future will show. I can not confess to an easy mind. Great and very blind forces are set free catastrophically all over the world’ (CL 6, 302).

H.G. Wells observed in *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* (1916) that ‘the world-wide clash of British and German interests, had been facts in the consciousness of Englishmen for more than a quarter of a century. A whole generation had been born and brought up in the threat of this German war’ (Wells, p.123). From Erskine Childers’s *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) to William le Queux’s *Invasion of 1910* (1906), the threat of Germany resonated throughout British society, and Michael Howard has written that if the youth of the rival countries howled for war in 1914, ‘it was because for a generation or more they had been taught to howl’ (Howard, p. 102). Awareness of pervasive anti-German writing appears in *The Secret Agent* (1907), as Winnie Verloc describes the pamphlets of the Future of the Proletariat, which related the story ‘of a German soldier officer tearing half-off the ear of a recruit, and nothing was done to him for it. The brute! [. . .] The story was enough, too, to make one’s blood boil. But what’s the use of printing things like that? We aren’t German slaves here, thank God’ (SA, 60). *Victory* (1915), completed before the war, reveals Conrad’s own engagement with anti-German sentiment prevalent in Britain. *Victory*’s ‘Note to the First Edition’ explained that animosity towards the Teutonic Schomberg was part of Conrad’s Polish cultural inheritance: ‘far from being the incarnation of recent animosities, he is the creature of my old, deep-seated and, as it were, impartial conviction’ (V, viii). While antipathy to Germany had not prevented Conrad’s sympathetic delineation of Stein in *Lord Jim*, it certainly informed ‘Autocracy and War,’ which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1905. Conrad wanted the piece to be a ‘sensation’ (CL 3, 272), and while he perceptively outlined recent trends in European history, he also orchestrated a crescendo of anti-Prussianism, concluding with ‘a warning that, so far as a future of liberty, concord, and justice is concerned: “*Le Prussianisme – voilà l’ennemi!*”’ (NLL, 114). In the *Review of Reviews* in July 1905, journalist W.T. Stead condemned Conrad, claiming he had the ‘logic of the alarmist’ (Stead, p. 51-52).

‘Autocracy and War’ positions Conrad as a representative of the Edwardian generation that engendered the language of rivalry before 1914. As Keith Carabine has noted, the ‘ostensible stance of “Autocracy and War” is that of Joseph Conrad, the eminent English novelist, known to be of Polish origins, taking advantage of his unique position to warn his Edwardian public’ of the threat posed by Germany (Carabine, p. 84). Conrad prepared for hostilities at a time when journals ‘exacerbated the existing tension’ and only ‘Germany had the capacity to upset the *status quo*; she alone, therefore, posed a

threat to the peace of Europe' (Nelson and Steiner, p. 179, p. 189). Conrad contributed in some degree to the discourse of antagonism in Europe, and he would later feel the accusation that such ideologies had encouraged war and sent youth off to fight and die.

Wyndham Lewis believed the 'curtain went down' on Conrad and Henry James in 1914 (Lewis, p. 222). Because he was in Poland between August and November 1914, Conrad was not summoned at the outbreak of the war by C.F.G. Masterman, head of the British War Propaganda Bureau, to a meeting of writers at Wellington House in London. Nevertheless, Conrad's wartime work responds to the consequences of this meeting. According to Samuel Hynes, Masterman, in recruiting ageing war propagandists such as Hardy, Kipling, and Wells, initiated the concept of 'the Old Men, as the makers of the war and enemies of the young' (Hynes, p. 26). This polarisation of home front and battlefield, the soldier and the home-front observer, saw Conrad accept the relative obsolescence of the writer during war: 'It seems almost criminal levity to talk at this time of books, stories, publication. This war attends my uneasy pillow like a nightmare. I feel oppressed even in my sleep and the moment of waking brings no relief' (*CL* 5, 439). Conrad's fatigue was revealed when 'Poland Revisited,' previously published in the *Daily News* and the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1915, was offered to Edith Wharton for *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a volume of propaganda whose proceeds aided Belgian refugees. 'Poland Revisited' recalled Conrad's 1914 journey to Poland in heightened Romantic language, featuring an elegiac, pastoral representation of pre-war Britain along with memories of Conrad's original arrival in a Dickensian London. Conrad recognised 'the futilities of an individual past,' the traditional material for his fiction, instead noting the emergence of modern European history in 'the faint boom of the big guns at work on the coast of Flanders – shaping the future' (*NLL*, 173). 'Poland Revisited' captures Conrad's sense of history in flux: his journey to Poland revisiting and symbolically entombing the world of the nineteenth century.

Once he engaged with the conflict, when his son Borys enlisted in the Army Service Corps, Conrad proposed to write an 'early personal experience thing' (*CL* 5, 441). This confirmed his position in 'Poland Revisited' that 'things acquire significance by the lapse of time' (*NLL*, 157). The renewed significance lay in Conrad's attempt to empathise with the experience of soldiers. Conrad insisted that there was 'no question here of any parallelism. That notion never entered my head. But there was a feeling of identity, though with an enormous difference of scale – as of one single drop measured against the bitter and stormy immensity of an ocean' (*SL*, vi-vii). Conrad's wartime fiction, *The Shadow-Line*, 'The Warrior's Soul,' and 'The Tale,' constitutes a dialogue with youth, one member of the older generation asking for understanding. Recalling the wartime composition of *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), Conrad wrote: 'If anything it is perhaps a little sympathy that the writer expects for his buried youth, as he lives it over again at the end of his insignificant course on this earth' (*AG*, 4-5). In this respect, the war influenced Conrad's posthumous reputation. In 1917, Conrad began producing 'Author's Notes,' stressing 'the authenticity of the stories as based on his personal experiences and observations; this was to become the dominant motif of his author's notes' (Najder, p. 426). Conrad alleviated his marginalisation by portraying his own youthful initiation into experience.

The Shadow-Line had 'a sort of spiritual meaning' (*CL* 5, 458). The story's dedication – 'To/ Borys and all others/ who like himself have crossed/ in early youth the shadow-line/ of their generation/ With Love' - addresses the living and stands as a memorial to those already lost in the war. Conrad resurrected his characteristic literary voice, now endowed with a new importance, as the remembered younger self articulated Conrad's identification with youth at the Front while the controlling narrative voice,

typically the ageing nostalgic, embodied Conrad's war-time position. *The Shadow-Line* aligns the experience of the soldier with the experience of the onlooker/artist. For the young captain facing the difficulties of his first command, the sense of stasis before the storm at sea corresponded to the anticipation of battle: 'In the tension of silence I was suffering from it seemed to me that the first crash must turn me into dust. And thunder was, most likely, what would happen next. Stiff all over and hardly breathing, I waited with a horribly strained expectation. Nothing happened. It was maddening' (*SL*, 113). *The Shadow-Line* saluted the youth of Europe (Conrad's dedication, notably, is not partisan) going through the fire of initiation to experience, while simultaneously portraying an ageing narrator sidelined by history. In 'The Warrior's Soul,' Conrad later wrote: 'And what more desolate prospect for a man with such a soul than to be imprisoned on the eve of war; to be cut off from his country in danger, from his family, from his duty, from honour, and – well – from glory, too' (*TH*, 16). *The Shadow-Line*, however, unites youth and age as Captain Giles collaborates with the young captain, and the denouement resolves the generational discord that began the work.

As *The Shadow-Line* ran in the *English Review* and Conrad received favourable reviews of *Victory* and *Within the Tides*, Siegfried Sassoon's poetry was appearing in the *Cambridge Magazine*. Conrad was familiar with Sassoon's anti-war stance. Anticipating a visit from Sassoon in 1918, Conrad wrote: 'I know his verse only in extracts and I want to see it all before I meet the man' (*CL* 6, 310). Conrad's response to being on the fringes of the war forms part of a wider trend in the psyche of Britain between 1914-18. In *The Tatler* in October 1916, Richard King wrote that 'War – as we presently understand it – is the sacrifice of the young and the innocent on the altar erected by the old and middle-aged' (Hynes, p. 247). In April 1916, the *Cambridge Magazine* had published 'The Betrayal of the Young,' which acknowledged that 'between the old and the young there is to-day a great gulf fixed.' A soldier noted that 'In the cavalry messes things are often said which wouldn't please Lord Northcliffe and the old men who made the war,' while a private about to return to France vehemently announced the soldier's alienation: 'You people at home are responsible for continuing this slaughter. Secretly you know it. Individually you mostly acknowledge it' (*Cambridge Magazine*, p. 407, p. 408).

'The Warrior's Soul,' a tale of the Napoleonic Wars, appeared in *Land and Water* in March 1917, registering Conrad's continued response to generational conflict in English society. The story opened with a possible address to soldiers, as the 'old officer with long white moustaches gave rein to his indignation,' asking: 'Is it possible that you youngsters should have no more sense than that! Some of you had better wipe the milk off your upper lip before you start to pass judgement on the few poor stragglers of a generation which has done and suffered not a little in its time' (*TH*, 1). The veteran reminds the reader that 'we had our losses too' (*TH*, 5). 'The Warrior's Soul,' however, accepts misgivings about the old guard: 'the innocent [. . .] found himself in distinguished company there, amongst men of considerable position. And you know what that means: thick waists, bald heads, teeth that are not – as some satirist puts it. Imagine amongst them a nice boy, fresh and simple, like an apple just off the tree' (*TH*, 9). Conrad echoes Sassoon's 'The Fathers,' where old men sit at home in decaying complacency while the young soldier experiences battle. 'The Warrior's Soul' also treats perceived public enthusiasm for the war: 'People without compassion are the civilians, government officials, merchants and such like. As to the ferocious talk one hears from a lot of decent people in war time – well, the tongue is an unruly member at best, and when there is some excitement going there is no curbing its furious activity' (*TH*, 17). Most poignantly though, Conrad evoked a landscape disturbed by innumerable dead. In the 'general mourning I seemed to hear the sighs of mankind falling to die in the midst of a nature

without life. [. . .] a pathetic multitude of small dark mounds stretching away under the moonlight in a clear, still, and pitiless atmosphere – a sort of horrible peace' (*TH*, 20).

Conrad's peripheral experience of the war was increased by his paternal anxiety about his son's safety (Borys Conrad survived the war), the loss of soldier friends such as Edward Thomas, but also because of his reputation as a writer of adventurous stories and his knowledge that soldiers read his work. Conrad's correspondence with press magnate Lord Northcliffe reinforced the public image of Conrad as a man who relished danger. Writing to Conrad after a visit to the Front, Northcliffe related: 'More than once have I found "Victory" being read by officers at the front. These men of action love your work' (*Portrait in Letters*, p. 108). In February 1915, Jean Schlumberger, serving in France, and later co-founder of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, wrote to Conrad of his delight in coming across a copy of 'The Secret Sharer.' Conrad expressed satisfaction that his work resonated with the experience of the soldier: 'Proud that my little tale can be read amidst the din of war' (*CL* 5, 443). Importantly, the outlets for Conrad's new fiction, *The English Review*, *Land and Water*, and *The Strand*, were all to be found at the Front. Conrad was therefore conscious that he had a contemporary audience amongst soldiers, as the 'reviews, especially *Blackwood's*, *The English Review*, and the *Cornhill* were much appreciated' by the military (Koch, p. 182-3). In these periodicals, soldiers could estimate the indifference of the home front to the fate of the soldier. According to Paul Fussell, the 'standard officers' dugout required [. . .] current copies of the *Bystander*, the *Tatler*, and *Punch*' (Fussell, p. 67). In Theodore Wesley Koch's estimation, Conrad was popular in the trenches, and 'periodicals played a great part . . . with the wounded soldier, *The Strand*, *The Windsor*, *The Red*, *Pearson's*, *The Wide World*, and *John Bull*' (Koch, p. 258). In 1917, Conrad maintained *The Shadow-Line* was written for soldiers, not the general market for fiction: 'I did not like the idea of it being associated with fiction in a vol of stories. And this is also the reason I've inscribed it to Borys – and the others' (*CL* 6, 37). The 'Effect of the War on Literature' in *The Scotsman* on 15 May 1916, announced that 'Joseph Conrad had come into his own' in popularity since August 1914 (*The Scotsman*, p. 7).

'The Tale,' characterised by 'infinite sadness,' captures a society mourning soldiers from whom 'no answering murmur came' (*TH*, 59), and Conrad's work resonates with later interpretations of the war, articulated in the outpouring of war memoirs in the 1920s. Securities and realities from the pre-war world are redundant. In 'The Tale' the writer has become irrelevant, and the woman in the story delivers judgement on those who held authority before the war: 'You used to tell – your – your simple and – and professional – tales very well at one time. [. . .] You had a – a sort of art – in the days – the days before the war' (*TH*, 60). The war has altered artistic representation. Previously, stories such as Conrad's could be written, but the war has shifted aesthetic and ideological presuppositions. According to Walter Benjamin, 'men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience' (Benjamin, p. 84), and Fussell notes that 'the presumed inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts about trench warfare is one of the motifs of all those who wrote about the war' (Fussell, p. 170). Language is scrutinised in 'The Tale' as an Officer and his acquaintance discuss the meaning of the word 'duty.' The officer claims the word 'contains infinities,' but he is interrupted, his authority harshly undermined: 'What is this jargon?' (*TH*, 61).

Published in *The Strand Magazine* in October 1917, 'The Tale' resulted from Conrad's engagement in propaganda work and from his correspondence with Ford Madox Ford, stationed in France in 1916, about the difficulties of artistically representing the war. At the Admiralty's request, Conrad toured naval bases, went on a minesweeping expedition in the *Brigadier* in the North Sea, and tracked German submarines in the Q-

ship *Ready* in autumn 1916. However, the importance of Conrad's propaganda activities should not be overstated. The short articles 'Flight' and 'The Unlighted Coast' 'contained no trace of propaganda and not even much optimism. This failure must have discouraged Conrad from further efforts, and, despite his own occasional mentions of projects, he did not write any more articles about the war' (Najder, p. 422). One reason for this can be found in Conrad's scepticism about official doctrines of war aims. Despite his cordial relations with Lord Northcliffe, for whose *Daily Mail* Conrad wrote the article 'Tradition' in 1918, in a letter to John Quinn, Conrad expressed dissatisfaction with newspaper reporting of the war: 'A miserable affair no matter how much newspapers may try to write it up' (CL 5, 446). Conrad remained sceptical during the Versailles Peace Conference, remarking that there 'is an awful sense of unreality in all this babble of League of Nations and Reconstruction. [. . .] I ask myself who on earth is being deceived by all these ceremonies' (CL 6, 349-51).

Ford Madox Ford described the Armistice as a 'crack across the table of history' (Ford, p. 13), indicating the war had ruptured Europe's historical continuity. Despite his post-war observation of international politics, Conrad's Proustian engagement with memory meant the emerging legend of the *belle époque* held an easy fascination. While many post-war writers, such as Ford, Joseph Roth, and Thomas Mann, returned to pre-war culture in their work, Conrad looked further back, returning to his youth in Marseilles in *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), concluding former artistic ideas in *The Rescue* (1920), and visiting the formative points of nineteenth century history in *The Rover* (1923) and *Suspense* (1925). By placing himself in the nineteenth century and by employing conventional methods of representation, Conrad, with his health declining, experienced the solace of memory and historical escapism, but, with the ascendancy of high-Modernist writers such as Joyce, Pound, Lewis, and Eliot, and later Faulkner and Céline, perhaps saw his worst wartime fears of artistic marginalisation ultimately realised.

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