The Heart of Conrad

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FEBRUARY 22, 2018 ISSUE

The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World
by Maya Jasanoff
Penguin, 375 pp., $30.00

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Joseph Conrad arriving in New York on the SS Tuscania*, 1923*

Joseph Conrad's heroes were often alone, and close to hostility and danger. Sometimes, when Conrad's imagination was at its most fertile and his command of English at its most precise, the danger came darkly from within the self. At other times, however, it came from what could not be named. Conrad sought then to evoke rather than delineate, using something close to the language of prayer. While his imagination was content at times with the tiny, vivid, perfectly observed detail, it was also nourished by the need to suggest and symbolize. Like a poet, he often left the space in between strangely, alluringly vacant.

His own vague terms—words like "ineffable," "infinite," "mysterious," "unknowable"—were as close as he could come to a sense of our fate in the world or the essence of the universe, a sense that reached beyond the time he described and beyond his characters' circumstances. This idea of "beyond" satisfied something in his imagination. He worked as though between the intricate systems of a ship and the vague horizon of a vast sea.

This irreconcilable distance between what was precise and what was shimmering made him much more than a novelist of adventure, a chronicler of the issues that haunted his time, or a writer who dramatized moral questions. This left him open to interpretation—and indeed attack. In the mid-1970s, two of the most prominent novelists of the age, V.S. Naipaul and Chinua Achebe, set their sights on Conrad, the first in an essay called "Conrad's Darkness and Mine" and the other in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*."

Naipaul's problems with Conrad are essentially stylistic and formal, arising from Conrad's "unwillingness to let the story speak for itself, this anxiety to draw all the mystery out of a straightforward situation." Naipaul sees no great virtue in *Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, or *Victory*: "A multiplicity of Conrads, and they all seemed to me to be flawed.… The Conrad novel was like a simple film with an elaborate commentary." As he contemplates some of Conrad's fiction, Naipaul writes witheringly, "I had read other stories of lonely white men going mad in hot countries." Thus, he continues, the story of Kurtz in

Heart of Darkness, "the upriver ivory agent, who is led to primitivism and lunacy by his unlimited power over primitive men, was lost on me."

In his essay, Naipaul invokes Conrad as "a writer who is missing a society…. Conrad's experience was too scattered; he knew many societies by their externals, but he knew none in depth." And then he laments:

> The great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked…. The novel as a form no longer carries conviction…. The novelist, like the painter, no longer recognizes his interpretative function; he seeks to go beyond it; and his audience diminishes. And so the world we inhabit, which is always new, goes by unexamined, made ordinary by the camera, unmeditated on.

However, Naipaul begins to connect moments in Conrad with aspects of his own experience and memory of childhood and his view that he, as someone born in Trinidad, has had no densely structured society to dramatize:

> It came to me that the great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society; I couldn't share the assumptions of the writers; I didn't see my world reflected in theirs. My colonial world was more mixed and secondhand, and more restricted.

He finds that his feelings about this were exactly caught by Conrad in a passage from a story that ended:

> It appeared to us a land without memories, regrets, and hopes; a land where nothing could survive the coming of the night, and where each sunrise, like a dazzling act of special creation, was disconnected from the eve and the morrow.

Since Naipaul cannot detach himself as a writer from "the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made," he finds "that Conrad—sixty years before, in a time of a great peace—had been everywhere before me." In rereading *The Secret Agent*, he discovers characters and phrases that strike him as "real" in a way they had not before. He notes a phrase—the "exasperated vanity of ignorance"—about one of the terrorists in the book who "took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance."

As Naipaul grows to appreciate that phrase he sees something essential in Conrad: nouns that seemed muted or throttled by their adjectives, as though the impulse were merely to make a fine-sounding phrase or add impressively to the mystery, can, in fact, if studied carefully or read in a certain light, stand apart, become precise. He observes that Conrad, despite all his concern with ineffability, often meant business. "Words which at one time we disregard," Naipaul wrote, "at another moment glitter." Even though his "reservations about Conrad as a novelist remain," still he cannot dismiss him: "Conrad's value to me is that he is someone who sixty to seventy years ago meditated on my world, a world I recognize today. I feel this about no other writer of the century."

Perhaps it is precisely the dilemma Naipaul outlines, the dilemma in which the novelist "no

longer recognizes his interpretative function," that makes Conrad so worthy now of close attention. For novelists who deal with isolation, solitude, hesitation, and the lone self, who are not comfortable trying to interpret the world with any confidence or assurance, Conrad's strategies are instructive and his technical sleights of hand fascinating. The homelessness of his characters becomes spiritual as much as geographical. He is the great example to those of us who want to offer our characters a fully imagined solitude. And in the way Conrad handles time and action and obsession in *Victory*, or in the hushed voice and doubled presence in "The Secret Sharer," or in formalizing the difficulty of handling story itself in *Lord Jim*, or in his characters' inhabiting elusive spaces where the shivering self will not find peace, he remains our contemporary.

Despite his eloquence and his eye for detail, the figure of Marlow, however, who appears in *Lord Jim* as the storyteller and who narrates the tale in *Heart of Darkness*, often pushes his luck. He is the long-winded man of the world, cynical, nonchalant about so many matters, salty, with an edge of brutality and overdeveloped masculinity in his tone. Also, he often sounds like a novelist who has read too much Walter Pater. He has been everywhere and is shocked by nothing, and, especially in *Heart of Darkness*, he has a way of seeming implicated in the very story that he seeks to distance himself from. As he weaves his narrative, trying to manage it and fathom its hidden meanings, his listeners, and indeed his readers, begin to know more than he, the most knowing of narrators, knows.

While Naipaul is ready to find precision and insight in Conrad's phrases, Chinua Achebe finds the heaping of abstract terms in Conrad's prose less than engaging:

> When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity.

As Achebe has it in his 1977 essay, Conrad could get away with this because "he chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths."

Although women are scarce on the ground in *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe compares images of two women, one in the Congo and the other in Brussels, both of whom have been associated with Kurtz in the novella. The first "was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent…. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with the air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." The other was European, refined:

> She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning…. She took both my hands in hers and murmured, "I had heard you were coming." …She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.

"The most significant difference," Achebe notes, "is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other."

Achebe is not buying the idea that Marlow is merely a narrator. If it was Conrad's intention to create distance between him and Marlow, "his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters." Later in the essay Achebe writes, "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist." And then, having seen off the arguments against this

view with some astute comments, Achebe adds, "There remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain." Having quoted a passage in which Conrad is deeply impressed by his first view of an Englishman and having placed this against his depiction of a black man, Achebe describes what is happening as "irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man."

Achebe, however, accepts that Conrad, at one level, was a writer who was repelled by what Europe was doing in Africa: "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth." He thus, Achebe argues, produced a text that was concerned to dramatize the evils of the colonial enterprise while displaying and failing to disguise aspects of the very ideology that allowed that enterprise to thrive.

Achebe concludes that *Heart of Darkness* is not therefore "a great work of art." Nonetheless, the novella remains, whether we like it or not, a valuable document, or even a defenseless piece of fiction, written by a confused and troubled artist on a matter on which he had resolved nothing, least of all his own unsavory views, releasing an energy, both ambiguous and revealing, that makes its way into the actual texture of the sentences themselves, including the ones with which Achebe has no patience.

In her book *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*, the historian Maya Jasanoff follows Conrad's footsteps by traveling to what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But most of her book is taken up with connecting some of what Conrad wrote—most notably *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*—not only with his own background and the time when the work was produced, but the time we live in now. "Conrad's pen," she writes, "was like a magic wand, conjuring the spirits of the future." She connects the themes of his novel to present-day preoccupations:

> After 9/11 and the rise of Islamist terrorism, I was startled to remember that the same author who'd condemned imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* had also written *The Secret Agent* (1907), which centers around a terrorist bomb plot in London. After the 2008 financial crisis, I found Conrad in *Nostromo* (1904) portraying multinational capitalism getting up to the same kinds of tricks that I read about in the daily newspaper. As the digital revolution gathered pace, I discovered Conrad writing movingly, in *Lord Jim* (1900) and many other works, about the consequences of technological disruption in the industry he knew best: shipping. As debates about immigration unsettled Europe and the United States, I marveled anew and afresh at how Conrad had produced *any* of these books in English—his third language, which he'd learned only as an adult.

Thus Conrad, for Jasanoff, is her contemporary, as someone interested in current affairs as much as he is for a generation of novelists who have been fascinated by the style and the form of his books and his ability to work intensely with a single consciousness.

Joseph Conrad, an only child, was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in the Ukraine in 1857. His father was a political activist and Polish nationalist who was at various times imprisoned and sent into exile. When Conrad was three years old his father was taken from the house in Warsaw by tsarist police and locked up in Warsaw's Citadel. His mother was also

briefly arrested. Conrad later wrote that "in the courtyard of this Citadel—characteristically for our nation—my childhood memories began."

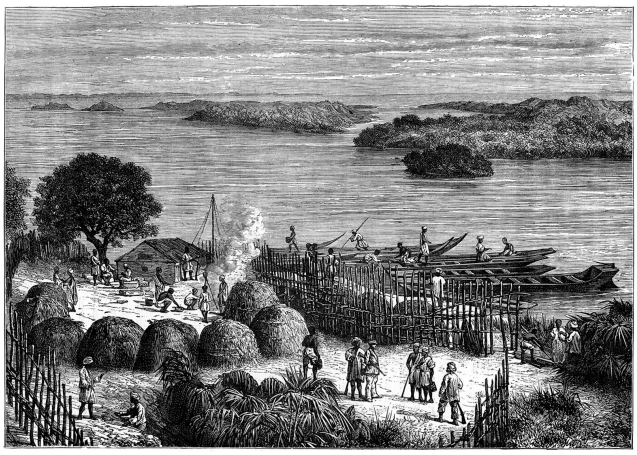
Conrad's mother died when he was eight from the hardships she endured in exile, and his father, having taken his son to live in Kraków, died when he was eleven, leaving him in the care of an uncle. Almost half a century after his father's death, Conrad remembered his funeral in Kraków:

> In the moonlight-flooded silence of the old town of glorious tombs and tragic memories, I could see again the small boy of that day following a hearse; a space kept clear in which I walked alone, conscious of an enormous following…. Half the population had turned out on that fine May afternoon…. They had come…to render homage to the ardent fidelity of the man whose life had been a fearless confession in word and deed of a creed which the simplest heart in that crowd could feel and understand.

As a result of his reading, Conrad decided that he wished to be a sailor, an unusual choice for someone in Kraków. At sixteen, he was sent to Marseilles, but later joined the British merchant marine. "By the time Conrad signed on to the *Duke of Sutherland* in 1878," Jasanoff writes, "British ship-owners controlled about 70 percent of world trade." The conditions were dangerous, the pay, compared to factory work, was not good, and as the lord of the admiralty admitted, "it would have been impossible to obtain men at such low wages, unless the imaginations of boys had been interested by the prospect of a distant travel." Conrad got his master's certificate in 1886, the same year that he became a British subject.

At sea, Conrad had difficulties with captains. "Whatever the provocations," Jasanoff writes, "the frequency of his disputes suggested an itchy, bristling soul, loath to settle into place." Because steam was replacing sail, the total number of ships sailing fell in Conrad's time at sea by 30 percent, thus making it harder to find work. Conrad captained a ship only once; the rest of the time he took work at whatever level he could find it.

When an early biographer found a captain who remembered Conrad from a journey in the East in 1887 and 1888, the captain recalled that "when he went down to the cabin to talk to his first mate, he usually found him writing." Jasanoff describes the connection between life at sea and the way in which a narrative like *Lord Jim* meanders and flows:



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An encampment on the Congo River, circa 1890

> A ship's logbook captures the peculiar quality of stasis in motion, recording each day in a sequence of digits: dates, degrees, bearings, depths…. This gives the sailor at sea a particular relationship to time…. With nothing new to talk about in the present, the past and the future become extraordinarily rich imaginative domains…. Counting up his months at sea, Conrad spent several years of his life on some of the longest routes that sailing ships regularly

> plied, with small crews, no passengers, and few port calls along the way…. *Lord Jim* represented the result: a narrative composed in sailor's time.

Early in 1890 when the captain of a boat on the Congo River became involved in a dispute and was killed, Conrad was offered the job as his replacement. The political background, and the set of events and images that Conrad transformed into *Heart of Darkness*, are dealt with in Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* (1971), Sven Lindqvist's *"Exterminate All the Brutes"* (1992), and, most usefully, Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998), as well as in Jasanoff's book.

Between 1885 and 1908, the Congo Free State was personally owned and exploited for his own benefit by King Leopold II of Belgium. At the beginning, when Conrad was there, the wealth came in the form of ivory; later, it came more abundantly and at even greater human cost in the form of rubber. Between 1890, when Conrad arrived, and 1896, the export of rubber would increase tenfold, making the Congo the largest producer in Africa. While Leopold claimed that his mission was humanitarian, it became clear that he was interested only in plunder.

And plunder in the most difficult terrain, as Hochschild makes clear: "Much of the Congo River basin," in Hochschild's description,

> lies on a plateau in the African interior. From the western rim of this plateau, nearly a thousand feet high, the river descends to sea level in a mere 220 miles. During this tumultuous descent, the river squeezes through narrow canyons, boils up in waves forty feet high, and tumbles over thirty-two separate cataracts.

The inland stretches of the river, however, are navigable, with water levels that tend not to vary. The Congo drains an area larger than India with seven thousand miles of interconnecting waterways. There were two hundred different ethnic groups with four hundred different languages and dialects at the time of Leopold's annexation. Many of these groups had been severely weakened by two centuries of the slave trade. Before the railway was completed in 1898, goods had to be carried on a treacherous path between the port of Matadi and the interior.

When Conrad arrived in Matadi in June 1890, one of the first Europeans he met was Roger Casement, who in 1904 would write a devastating report on atrocities committed by King Leopold in the Congo as he effectively enslaved the population and treated them with extraordinary savagery to get the rubber to the ocean port.* Conrad, like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, traveled on foot from the port to the interior. He set out with a caravan of thirty-one men, noting on July 4, 1890: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose." He stayed in the Congo for six months.

By the time he began the novella, in 1898, the rubber industry had replaced ivory hunting in the Congo and the atrocities had become more intense and vicious. Conrad, who had settled in England, had a deep-seated fear of the political activity that had ruined his childhood and caused his parents' early deaths. Despite the entreaties of Casement, he would not become involved in the movement to reform the Congo. "It is not in me," he wrote to a friend, "I am only a wretched novelist inventing wretched stories and not even up to that miserable game."

He wrote to Casement that his novella was "an awful fudge" and referred elsewhere to "the foggishness of H of D."

The year after his Congo journey, Conrad made two round-trip voyages to Australia as first mate on a ship called the *Torrens*. A passenger on one of these journeys was the novelist John Galsworthy, who wrote to his parents:

> The first mate is a Pole called Conrad and is a capital chap, though queer to look at. He is a man of travel and experience in many parts of the world, and has a fund of yarns on which I draw freely. He has been right up the Congo and all around Malacca and Borneo and other out of the way parts, to say nothing of a little smuggling in the days of his youth.

By 1894 Conrad's career at sea had ended. He published his first novel the following year and in 1896 married Jessie George, settling in Essex and then in Kent, and getting to know the literary figures of the age, including Henry James, Stephen Crane, H.G. Wells, and Ford Madox Ford, with whom he collaborated on two novels.

In his essay on Conrad, V.S. Naipaul complains about how settled Conrad's mind was by the time he gave up the sea. Unlike "most imaginative writers" who "discover themselves, and their world, through their work," Conrad was "a man whose character had been formed" before he began to write. But for each book he wrote Conrad found a new style, a new system of narration. For some books, he used the worlds he had known or seen or visited, the places that had intrigued him and stayed in his dreams, but for others, he had to imagine everything, including the implications of his own compositions. He told a friend who asked which was his best book:

> I don't know. They are all so different. I can never resist the temptation to experiment, and can never write in the same way twice. *Nostromo* is my biggest canvas, my most ambitious performance. Perhaps it is the best. I do not know.

With *Nostromo*, set in a fictional South American country, Conrad had not only to imagine the terrain but to attempt to see and make sense of what was happening in world affairs as the dominance of the United States in the world began to exert itself and the power of England waned. One of the most valuable and persuasive sections of Jasanoff's book is her connecting the writing of *Nostromo* with the creation of the Panama Canal. "In January 1903," she writes,

> just as Conrad started writing *Nostromo*, the US and Colombian secretaries of state signed a treaty granting the United States a one-hundred-year renewable lease on a six-mile strip flanking the canal…. While the papers murmured about revolution in Colombia, Conrad opened a fresh section of *Nostromo* with hints of dissent in Costaguana [his fictional locus].

Conrad did not know South America, thus making the connection between events that he followed in the newspapers as they unfolded in 1903 and his novel all the more interesting: "In Costaguana, Conrad plotted a revolution in the fictional Sulaco that mirrored the real-life secessionist movement brewing in Panama." When he finished the book on September 1,

1904, Jasanoff writes,

> he left Sulaco in the condition of Panama. As Panama had gotten its independence instantly recognized by the United States and its economy bolstered by American investment in the canal, so Sulaco had *its* independence instantly recognized by the United States, and its economy underwritten by investment in the [fictional] San Tomé mine.

Since she is concerned to place Conrad in what she calls in her subtitle "a global world," it is essential for Jasanoff that Conrad in *Nostromo* is not guessing or working in the dark, and that he is not only in tune with geopolitical undercurrents but ready to prophesy what the world will look like in the future. Thus she quotes from a long essay Conrad wrote in 1905 called "Autocracy and War" in which he insisted that the idea of Europe was finished:

> There is only an armed and trading continent, the home of slowly maturing economical contests for life and death, and of loudly proclaimed world-wide ambitions.

In his book, the power of the United States was the power that mattered. In the future, Conrad also wrote, "no war will be waged for an idea." And as Jasanoff writes, "money was everything."

Money, too, began to come Conrad's way. At the age of fifty-six, with the novel *Chance*, he had his first best seller. In 1919, *The Arrow of Gold* was the second-best-selling novel in the entire United States. Jasanoff quotes a newspaper report "that in 1920 the sales of the books of Joseph Conrad amounted to thirty-six times what they did in 1911."

When he died in 1924, Virginia Woolf emphasized Conrad's foreignness. She called him "our guest" and highlighted his "air of mystery" and his "strong foreign accent." Since he had set his novels in both East and West, in Malaya and in London and in South America and in Africa, it is easy to see him as a writer who was a guest of the world, who was fully global *avant la lettre*.

But there is a peculiar intensity in the way he deals with Russia in his essay "Autocracy and War." "The truth is that the Russia of our fathers," he writes,

> of our childhood…the testamentary Russia of Peter the Great…can do nothing. It can do nothing because it does not exist. It has vanished for ever at last, and as yet there is no new Russia to take the place of that ill-omened creation, which, being a fantasy of a madman's brain, could in reality be nothing else than a figure out of a nightmare seated upon a monument of fear and oppression…. Spectral it lived and spectral it disappears without leaving a memory of a single generous deed, of a single service rendered—even involuntarily—to the polity of nations. Other despotisms there have been, but none whose origin was so grimly fantastic in its baseness, and the beginning of whose end was so gruesomely ignoble.

These are merely two examples of many that make clear Conrad's deep hatred of Russia. In his analysis of *Nostromo* in *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*, Frederick R. Karl connects the politics of Sulaco to Poland rather than to Panama, with Russia in the background rather than the United States. "Conrad's ability to see," Karl writes, that

> a "close-meshed net of crime and corruption lay upon the whole country" was an insight that lay at the foundation of…*The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance*, and *Victory*. This, not some theory about democracy, its successes or failures, is Conrad's political base.

Jasanoff quotes Conrad writing at the time of his return to Poland in 1914: "In 1874 I got into a train in Cracow (Vienna express) on my way to the sea, as a man might get into a dream. And here is the dream going on still." It is as though in his dreaming of places such as the Congo and Borneo, London and South America, Conrad was also finding metaphors for the place he had left, the place about which, no matter how far he traveled, he never stopped dreaming: the Poland of his parents.

In this way, too, because he kept his doubleness intact, he remains our contemporary, and perhaps also in the way he made sure that, in a time of crisis as much as in a time of calm, it was the quality of his irony that saved him. When he was asked why he didn't write in Polish, the great English novelist replied:

> I value too much our beautiful Polish literature to introduce into it my worthless twaddle. But for Englishmen my capacities are just sufficient: they enable me to earn my living.

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* See my "The Tragedy of Roger Casement," *The New York Review*, May 27, 2004. ↩