



JOSEPH CONRAD'S ADVENTURE WITH ENGLISH

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This article discusses Conrad's Anglophone linguistic identity to show how writing became his "promised land" and fictional homeplace. This fictional retreat reflects his childhood experience, (connected with his Polish background), hopes, and fears, but it is likewise refracted through episodes of his later life. Conrad's own articulation of his complex relation to English, England, and his own nationality, reveals his outlook on literature and language: "When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain" (*Collected Letters* 1:12) and "Both at sea and on land, my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning" (Najder, *Conrad's Polish Background* 240).

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Joseph Conrad, born Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski in the Eastern Borderlands of Poland, annexed by Russia during the Partitions, was the only child of Ewa and Apollo Korzeniowski. He began learning English at the age of twenty-one¹ and became one of the most renowned English writers of the twentieth century.

Conrad's Anglophone linguistic identity developed during a long process inextricably linked to his family history, birthplace, and lifetime. His childhood spent in exile with his parents sentenced for their anti-Russian activities left a lasting imprint on his life. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, poet, playwright and translator, encouraged his son to read Polish literature which provided young Konrad (Konradek for family members) with strong models of literary Polish. The boy quickly mastered that version of the language and was able to read and write at the age of five. In *A Personal Record* (1912) Conrad remembers: "Since the age of five I have been a great reader, as is not perhaps wonderful in a child who was never aware of learning to read. At ten years of age, I had read much of Victor Hugo and other romantics. I had read in Polish and in French, history, voyages, novels" (11). Conrad recollects his "first introduction into English literature" as follows: "My first acquaintance was (or were) the 'Two Gentlemen of Verona' and that in very MS. of my father's translation. It was during our exile in Russia ..." (71). He read William Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray.

The second language Conrad learned as a child was French. Belonging to the Polish *szlachta*,² he was expected to know modern languages, and French, in particular. In Poland, during the Partitions,

¹ Conrad's father introduced him to English literature much earlier.

² Usually translated as "nobility," the term has no exact equivalent in English, as it designates all estate land-owning families from magnates to minor *szlachta*.

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great care was taken to ensure good education for the younger generation in *szlachta* families, and knowledge of languages was an indicator of young people's erudition. Despite the fact that Conrad accompanied his parents into exile, his education was not neglected; and because his father was a man of letters, who wrote and translated books, Conrad, as he himself points out, grew up in a home where literature was a staple element of family life. Being fluent in Polish and French was the natural outcome of his upbringing.

Conrad's love for literature helped him stay firm in a hostile environment. While in exile, faced with a hostile reality and while in Cracow, taking care of his dying father shortly after his release, the boy sought refuge in literature:

I don't know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy. My prep finished I would have had nothing to do but sit and watch the awful stillness of the sick room flow out through the closed door and coldly enfold my scared heart. I suppose that in a futile childish way I would have gone crazy. But I was a reading boy. There were many books about, lying on consoles, on tables, and even on the floor, for we had not had time to settle down. I read! What did I not read! Sometimes the elder nun, gliding up and casting a mistrustful look on the open pages, would lay her hand lightly on my head and suggest in a doubtful whisper, "Perhaps it is not very good for you to read these books." I would raise my eyes to her face mutely, and with a vague gesture of giving it up she would glide away." (*Poland Revisited* 168)³

It is thus no wonder that for Conrad writing was a natural activity and an obvious choice. It was also a talent that he inherited from his parents: his mother's letters also testify to her literary skills. Taking into account his childhood memories and legacy and the fact that that his father's literary endeavours were part of his everyday life, Zdzislaw Najder observes that he must have felt a pronounced need to write and create his own literary reality (*Conrad's Polish Background* 27). Conrad must have been somehow predestined to write, but the question about his choice of a working language is still subject to debates. His uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski wanted him to write for the Polish magazine *Wędrowiec* (The Wanderer). In a letter of 1881, he advised his twenty-three-year-old nephew to never forget his Polish heritage:

As, thank God, you do not forget your Polish... and your writing is not bad, I repeat what I have... written and said before—you would do well to write... for *Wędrowiec* [The Wanderer] in Warsaw. We have few travellers, and even fewer genuine correspondents: the words of an eyewitness would be of great interest and in time would bring you... money. It would be an exercise in your native tongue—that thread which binds you to your country and countrymen—and finally a tribute to the memory of your father who always wanted to and did serve his country by his pen. (Najder, *Conrad's Polish Background* 71–72)

Since Conrad knew French from his early childhood, it was a matter of wonder why he did not choose French as his working language.⁴ Conrad admits that he had never considered writing in French: "I would have been afraid to attempt expression in a language so perfectly 'crystallized'" (quoted in Najder, *A Life* 136). Najder claims that the choice of English language in Conrad's case was due to a combination of circumstances, that in fact writing in English was natural for him, having been immersed in the language for eleven years when he began writing his first book. It was a challenge to take that chance, a sort of a linguistic adventure.

³ The essay was published for the first time in the Daily News Leader on 29th and 31st March, and, subsequently, 6th and 9th April, 1915.

⁴ Zdzisław Najder, "For whom did Conrad write?", *Yearbook of Conrad Studies*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 7–14; Alicia Pousada, "Joseph Conrad's multilingualism: A case study of language planning in literature," *English Studies*, vol. 75, no. 4, July 1994, pp. 335–349.

Conrad spent four years in Marseilles, where he arrived at the age of seventeen in order to improve his health, learn a trade, and avoid conscription in the Russian army, which threatened him as the son of Polish exiles. When it turned out that, “as a foreigner and a Russian subject he had no right to serve on French vessels without permission from the Russian consul” and there “could be no question of the consul’s consent” (Najder, *A Life* 59), England became his place of refuge. When Conrad started his professional life on board a ship in the British Merchant Navy, he began to inhabit the English-speaking world. He says about that time:

My first English reading was the Standard newspaper and my first acquaintance by the ear with it was in the speech of fishermen, shipwrights and sailors of the East Coast. But in 1880 I had mastered the language sufficiently to pass the first examination for officer in the Merchant Service ... But “mastered” is not the right word; I should have said “acquired.” I’ve never opened an English grammar in my life. My pronunciation is rather defective to this day. Having unluckily no ear, my accentuation is uncertain, especially when in the course of conversation. I become self-conscious. In writing I wrestle painfully with that language which I feel I do not possess but which possesses me, alas! (*Collected Letters* 4: 409)

A good command of English was a *sine qua non* when considering a career in the Merchant Navy, which Conrad did. One very stringent requirement was for “foreigners” to “prove to the satisfaction of the Examiners that they can speak and write the English language sufficiently well to perform the duties required of them on board a British vessel” (quoted in Najder *A Life* 82). Conrad himself admits that he “learned English from newspapers and books by emblematic English writers: Shakespeare, Byron, and Dickens; he also read John Stuart Mill’s *Political Economy* (which he deemed “soporific”)” (Pousada 5).

Conrad endeavoured to present his life as coherent and ordered, where nothing was left to chance, and everything was imbued with meaning. In the autobiographical texts he considers his choices as consistent and relevant, and his writing in English, as predetermined. In the “Author’s Note” (1919) to *A Personal Record* Conrad wrote:

The truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. ... And as to adoption – well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, ... If I had not written in English I would not have written at all. (4–5)

And then, in *A Personal Record*: “I could have found a ship much nearer my native place, but I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman then I would be a British seaman, and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice” (106). To my mind, Najder’s comment on this book as “a splendid piece of personal mythology” (*Conrad in Perspective* 104) is (possibly) the best way to characterize Conrad’s statement. Making his literary debut with *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), Korzeniowski did not “choose” the language. For eleven years he had been in daily contact with English-speaking people, he spoke English, read English books, and accepted the English point of view on political matters. Najder adds, “This does not rule out the possibility that this language of everyday life and work was at the same time his great adventure, revelation, and object of love, all the more powerful because it began in his maturity” (*A Life* 136).

In January 1894, Conrad finally left the *Adowa*, the last steamer on which he served as second mate and ended his career as a sailor. He was thirty-six years old. 1894 was also the year when Conrad’s first novel was accepted for publication and he started work on the next one, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), thus embarking on a literary career. Najder claims that

[Conrad’s] efforts to obscure his motives reinforce the hypothesis that for him writing was basically an act of compensation, of correcting, perfecting, or at least complementing his own pre- and extra-literary life. But this compensation for – or, as some would say, escape from – the

worries and grey humdrum of daily existence into a world created by himself would bring him different but not lesser sufferings, difficulties, and perplexities. (*A Life* 199)

The first and most overwhelming difficulty that Conrad had to face as a writer was the accusation of being “a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English” (*Collected Letters* 3: 61). Conrad refers to it in his letter to Hugh Walpole:

When I wrote the first words of *Almayer's Folly*, I had been already for years and years *thinking* in English. I began to think in English long before I mastered... the mere uttered speech. Is it thinkable that anybody possessed of some effective inspiration should contemplate for a moment such a frantic thing as translating it into another tongue? (qtd.in Ray 87)

It is no wonder that Conrad was infuriated when he read Robert Lynd's review of *A Set of Six* (1908) where Lynd was, as Martin Ray correctly observes, “instrumental in propagating the popular view of Conrad as a writer ‘without country or language’ who ‘may be thought to have found a new patriotism for himself in the sea’” (94). In a letter to Galsworthy Conrad bursts out:

It is like abusing some poor tongue-tied wretch. For what can one say? The statement is gross and palpable and the answer that could be made would be incomprehensible to nine-tenths of the hearers, who would not have imagination enough to believe that a complex sentiment can be true. I wonder in what language *the Nigger*, *Youth*, or *the Mirror* could have been written. (*Life and Letters* 2: 70)

English was a challenge for Conrad, and he never ceased to struggle with the language throughout his literary career: “I had to work like a coal miner in his pit quarrying all my English sentences out of a black night” (quoted in Ray 91). Ray points to the fact that Conrad's views on English and the problems he encountered while writing in it, “are scattered throughout his letters, essays, and, especially, his novels” (94). He was so devoted to the analysis of style, to individual words and expressions, to the atmosphere emanated by the language, that he held it in sincere veneration. In his letter to Hugh Clifford, he explained his theory:

[W]ords, groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers. The things “as they are” exist in words; therefore, words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts, should become distorted – or blurred. (*Life and Letters* 1: 280)

Ray also notes in his article in *Conradiana* that Conrad did not separate world and language; “language is not simply a medium which permits access to the world, but rather it becomes the world and is inseparably identified with it” (99). In this manner, as Ray says, Conrad gave “a theoretical foundation both to his pursuit of *le mot juste* and to his wish expressed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, above all to ‘make you see’, in that both of these literary practices are based on the assumption that ... ‘words contain in some way the essential nature of the reality which they denote’” (99).

Conrad sought *le mot juste* relentlessly (Ray 102): “Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world” he writes in the “Preface” to *A Personal Record*. In a letter to his publisher Unwin discussing *Tales of Unrest* (1898) he also admits that “I write in doubt over every line. I ask myself – is it right? Is it true? Do I feel it so? Do I express my feelings? And I ask it at every sentence” (quoted in Ray 112).

Conrad's complex interaction with English and Englishness was not only a source of frustration and depression. Difficulties with writing accompanied him throughout his career, but he managed to overcome them in the elaborate fictional worlds that he created. What helped Conrad in this challenging

linguistic self-location was a compelling need to write, a love of literature (and English literature, in particular), and his long-lasting practical experience of Anglophone cultures. Moreover, his works are considered to be representative in their formulation of Englishness with characters such as Marlow, the protagonist and narrator of many of his stories, but also seen as Conrad's alter-ego; and thematically, as part of the maritime fiction that holds accounts of the British Navy. Because of his own professional experience Conrad valued the sailor's profession, respected its dignity, and insisted that ordinary sailors performing the heaviest duties on board should be treated with the respect and admiration usually allotted to the Merchant Navy. This attitude of respect, quite in the tradition of *noblesse oblige*, can (arguably) be traced back to Conrad's background as a representative of the Polish *szlachta*.

Allan Simmons has drawn attention to the intimate connection between Conrad's conception of Englishness and English "maritime mythology" (5). In his view, Conrad himself contributed "to the tradition of the sea as a defining national myth" (5). That English national myth was also part of "his own personal myth of self-definition" (5) as presented in *A Personal Record*. "I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice" (106).

Marlow, a protagonist and a narrator in a number of Conrad's works, can be seen as a character that represents English culture. But he can also be approached as the writer's fictional reincarnation exhibiting all those qualities that Conrad might have possessed had he been born in England. Najder suggests that Conrad's frame narrator Marlow is "a model English gentleman, ex-officer of the merchant marine, [and, possibly, an] embodiment of all that Conrad would wish to be if he were to become completely anglicized" (*A Life* 267). Belonging to English society and culture, Marlow likewise enables Conrad to enter the "circle of Englishness." Najder further claims that "Marlow the story-teller is at the same time a model image of the implicit recipient of the works of fiction in which he is a protagonist" (*A Life* 267). Analysing Marlow's figure in detail, Simmons states that "[w]hatever else Marlow contributes, he brings an Englishman's perspective to bear on Conrad's colonial fiction" (21).

During his sea career Conrad made a number of voyages to Malaysia, India, and the Belgian Congo, which became an inexhaustible source for him to draw inspiration for his future writings. Conrad's early experiences as a sailor and his exotic voyages enabled him to write about something he knew that was of interest to his readers. Most of his books are set outside the British Isles, as he knew little about "ordinary" life in Britain.

Marlow makes his first appearance in Conrad's short story "Youth" (1898), which was received warmly by the reading public. In an unsigned review in *Academy and Literature* Edward Garnett celebrated the text as "a modern English epic of the sea" (Sherry 131); other critics admired it for its "surprising humour" and "perfectly devised" details (Sherry 134). Marlow is also present in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *Lord Jim* (1900), and *Chance* (1913)). However, it is in "Youth" that Conrad explicitly links his "English perspective" to his own adventures on board *The Palestine*. This is what he says in his "Author's Note" (1917): "'Youth' is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience; but what experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and in its outward colouring, begins and ends in myself" (11). In the passage below, Conrad approaches Marlow from a decidedly ironical perspective:

[T]hat story marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow, with whom my relations have grown very intimate in the course of years. The origins of that gentleman (nobody as far as I know had ever hinted that he was anything but that) – his origins have been the subject of some literary speculation of, I am glad to say, a friendly nature.

One would think that I am the proper person to throw a light on the matter; but in truth I find that it isn't so easy. It is pleasant to remember that nobody had charged him with fraudulent purposes or looked down on him as a charlatan; but apart from that he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a "personator," a familiar spirit, a whispering "dæmon." I myself have been suspected of a meditated plan for his capture. This is not so. I made no plans. The man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. ... For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads to-

gether in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other. ... Of all my people he's the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit. A most discreet, understanding man. (9–10)

As already remarked, Marlow is usually a frame narrator although he may also be a first-person narrator within a framed narrative. He tells his story to his friends, who are not accidental listeners. They are men joined by “the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising, and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself” (“Youth” 3). In “Youth” Conrad manages to present both “the strong bond of the sea, and ... the fellowship of the craft” (3), the meaning of the code of conduct for seafarers and their community, where romanticism, nobility, and, at the same time, utmost effort, sacrifice, and anguish are invoked in the sailor's motto “Do or Die”: “This is the deuce of an adventure – something you read about; and it is my first voyage as a second mate – and I am only twenty – and here I am lasting it out as well as any of these men, and keeping my chaps up to the mark. I was pleased, I would not have given up the experience for worlds ... Do or die.” (“Youth” 9)

Even though Conrad sets his stories in exotic places, on board a ship, in regions generally unknown to English readers, they seem credible and appealing. Examples include the plots of *Lord Jim* (1899), *Nostromo* (1904), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Heart of Darkness*, the Malay trilogy,⁵ and many others.

The only novel which is set in a completely English environment, and which is considered a masterpiece is *The Secret Agent* (1907). Although the story takes place in London, a setting with which Anglophone readers must have been familiar, it projects a background action whose plot is very unusual; for it is “the first modern novel of counter-espionage” (Knowles and Moore 331). Here is Conrad's own judgement upon the novel's plot:

You see I wanted to give out the gospel of the beastly bourgeois – and wasn't clever enough to do it in a more natural way. Hence the logic which resembles the logic of a melodrama. The childishness of mind coming to the surface. All this I Feel. I don't see; because if I did see it I would also see the other way, the mature way – the way of art. I would work from conviction to conviction – through inevitable moments to the final situation. Instead of which I went on creating the moments for the illustration of the idea. ... It is built on the same falsehood as a melodrama. (Ingram 38)

Another story, “The Return,” elaborates the motif of conjugal infidelity. Conrad reveals the problem of mutual alienation, the misunderstanding of spouses, and the burden of existing social restraints in Victorian England, voiced by Sir William Blackstone's binding patriarchal maxim: “In marriage husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband” (quoted in Briggs 196). Conrad, instead, describes a couple living in a world of appearances:

They moved in their enlarged world amongst perfectly delightful men and women who feared emotion, enthusiasm, or failure, more than fire, war, or mortal disease; who tolerated only the commonest formulas of commonest thoughts, and recognised only profitable facts. It was an extremely charming sphere, the abode of all the virtues, where nothing is realized and where all joys and sorrows are cautiously toned down into pleasures and annoyances. In that serene region, then, where noble sentiments are cultivated in sufficient profusion to conceal the pitiless materialism of thoughts and aspirations. (“The Return” 113)

⁵ Conrad's Malay trilogy consists of three novels: *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and *The Rescue* (1920).

John Crompton rightly observes that “The Return” shows a lack of “familiarity with English social class codes and conventions” (conference paper). He adds that “this stems from treating Hervey’s attitudes and actions in purely psychological terms, without taking into account his upper-middle-class milieu” (conference paper). This explains why Conrad preferred to set his works in either geographically or historically remote places, as is illustrated by his novel *The Rover* (1923) and the novella *The Duel* (1908).

Conrad never forgot his origins: once he described himself as “a Polish nobleman cased in British tar” (*Collected Letters* 1: 52). When in 1924, shortly before his death, he was offered a knighthood, he declined. Najder rightly claims that a sufficient reason for this refusal was his consciousness of originating from an old Polish noble family. Conrad may have felt that accepting the new title would look like a renunciation of that ancient heritage. Nevertheless, he declared: “When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain” (*Collected Letters* 1: 12). However, his adopted identity could also be problematic. He wrote: “Both at sea and on land, my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning” (Najder, *Conrad’s Polish Background* 240). Conrad’s two statements testify to the complexity of the identity that he had forged for himself as an “exiled Pole-become-Briton” and “the great modernist writer of Africa, the East Indies, and Latin America” (Arac 202).

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