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The Noble Conrad

For the great novelist, art, entertainment, and moral purpose were one.

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In his *Portraits from Memory*, Bertrand Russell ends his brief memoir of Joseph Conrad:

Conrad, I suppose, is in process of being forgotten. But his intense and passionate nobility shines in my memory like a star seen from the bottom of a well. I wish I could make his light shine for others as it shone for me.

Russell was wrong about Conrad's literary reputation (the critic Richard Curle had already predicted in 1914, ten years before the writer's death, that "Conrad's day is at hand and once his sun has risen it will not set"); but he was right about Conrad's character. That "passionate nobility" shines from everything he wrote, without detracting in the least from its literary quality, as too directly or strongly expressed a moral viewpoint is apt to do.

Conrad's biographical trajectory was an extraordinary one, even for a writer. He was born in 1857 into the Polish landowning class in the Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire; his father, an aristocratic litterateur who translated Shakespeare into Polish, was exiled for his support of the Polish uprising in favor of independence, and the young Joseph, aged five, went with him. By the time Conrad was 11, both his parents were dead of tuberculosis; he was brought up by an uncle and schooled in Kraków.

In his adolescence, Conrad conceived of the extraordinary idea, for his time and place, of going to sea, for Poland was then landlocked and had no maritime tradition whatever. It was the naval novels of Captain Marryat, for which he always retained his admiration, and those of James Fenimore Cooper, that inspired him in his choice, from which his uncle did everything possible to dissuade him as being unsuitable for a Pole of his social standing. But Conrad insisted, and at age 17 traveled to Marseille, where, already speaking perfect French, he worked on French ships. His French career included an episode in which he was a partner in a failed gun-running voyage to the Carlist rebels in Spain, who sought to replace the reigning Spanish monarch with another.

He was 20 when he joined the British merchant marine, then the largest in the world, learning English in the years thereafter. In his books, Conrad says that sailors (at least of his era) were great readers, and he took Shakespeare and Dickens with him on his long journeys to the Far East. He passed his examinations to qualify as second and first mate, and then master (captain). For many years, he wrote, the red ensign, the flag of the British merchant marine, was his only home. For three years, though, he sailed on the Congo for the Belgians, an experience that a few years later would yield material for one of his most famous stories, "Heart of Darkness," which he said was only a little exaggerated.

After 1894, partly because of illness, Conrad never went to sea again, except once, near the end of his life, as an ordinary transatlantic passenger to America. He settled down in Kent, in the rural southeast of England, to lead an almost eventless life for the remainder of his days. He described himself as having become a writer almost by accident, without any firm ambition to do so, but this is scarcely credible for a man who would become not only one of the greatest prose stylists in English—his third language—but also one of the greatest novelists of all time.

An anyone who has struggled to express himself not only adequately but with elegance and beauty in a foreign language will be struck with admiration by Conrad's gift. I take at random (because there are hundreds of other passages I could have chosen by way of illustration) the opening paragraph of his 1902 long short story, "The End of the Tether":

For a long time after the course of the steamer *Sofala* had been altered for the land, the low swampy coast had retained its appearance of a mere smudge of darkness beyond a belt of glitter. The sunrays fell violently upon the calm sea—seemed to shatter themselves upon an adamant surface into sparkling dust, into a dazzling vapour of light that blinded the eye and wearied the brain with its unsteady brightness.

As someone who has spent a number of years in a place where "a dazzling vapour of light . . . blinded the eye and wearied the brain with unsteady brightness," I can testify that no better description exists, or probably will ever exist, of the phenomenon; but it is worth pausing to reflect upon what qualities went into the making of such a marvelous passage—a passage that is only incidental to the story but written by a man who never wanted anything to leave his hand less perfect than he could make it.

Of course, the writer must have a fine command of English, far beyond that of the vast majority of native speakers of the language. Ford Madox Ford, Conrad's friend and collaborator, makes an interesting, but not indubitably true, point in *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*, published immediately after Conrad's death in 1924. He says that Conrad to the end of his life was more comfortable speaking and writing French than English, and actually thought in that language. He therefore had to take special care when composing prose in English, which accounted for its superb quality. In other words, it was Conrad's lack of mastery that, overcome, gave him his mastery.

Still, linguistic mastery, however obtained, does not account for the magnificence of the passage. Both a cognitive and a moral quality are required to produce it—or rather, two moral qualities. The cognitive quality is the ability to attend closely to a phenomenon such as the sun shining on the sea and to fix the mind upon it—an ability that will, perhaps, be undermined or eliminated altogether by too great a use of electronic media of communication. And the first moral quality is the realization that one should not take such a phenomenon for granted. Not taking the world for granted is part of a philosophy of life (one cannot imagine Lenin, who died in the same year as Conrad, fixing his mind on the effect of sun rays on the sea, for example; he would doubtless have regarded it as inconsequential, almost a betrayal of his mission, to do so).

The second moral quality is a willingness to wrestle with words until they are the best that can be found, a process that Conrad found agonizing. In Conrad's case, this desire for perfection was not an egotistical wish to show himself superior to others or to secure superficial admiration, but a manifestation of his belief that, as he put it in the preface to *Typhoon*, it is a writer's duty "by the power of the written word" to make the reader "hear . . . feel . . . before all . . . see." Indeed, Conrad's attitude

toward prose was only a special case of his overarching philosophy, which was that of Ecclesiastes:

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Getting the words right was not, in Conrad's estimation, the whole task of the writer. He was no artist for art's own sake; his art was both to engage the reader's attention and to make him see in more than the mere perceptual sense—to make him see “that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.” Art, entertainment, and moral purpose were indivisible for Conrad.

In finding something for his hand to do, and doing it with all his might, Conrad always kept morality in view. For Conrad, probity was perhaps the highest good, the moral quality he admired most; for him, very distant goals diluted probity and finally dissolved it utterly. The good that resulted from doing something with all one's might had therefore to be tangible or immediate, and not so far removed that it entailed or permitted the doing of evil in the name of the eventual good that it would supposedly produce. The risks of distance are shown by the colonialists in “Heart of Darkness” and the revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* (and other antirevolutionary books and stories). Kurtz has grand plans for a *mission civilisatrice* in the depths of the primeval forest that end with decapitated heads impaled on poles; while the principal achievement of the revolutionaries surrounding Verloc in *The Secret Agent* is the death in an explosion of a half-witted boy, much loved by his sister, revolutionary rhetoric having driven him to a willingness to commit a bomb outrage.

The principal truths for which both the revolutionaries and the colonialists have forgotten to ask are about themselves and about the limits of human possibility. On this matter, Conrad is both clear and, many would say, bleak. In “A Smile of Fortune,” for example, a tale of the hopeless love of a passing ship's captain for a silent girl living in a remote eastern outpost—a story with a strongly autobiographical flavor—the narrator says:

I felt in my heart that the further one ventures the better one understands how everything in our lives is common, short and empty; that it is in seeking the unknown in our sensations that we discover how mediocre are our attempts and how soon defeated!

Conrad allowed no transcendent meaning, purpose, or design to the universe; there were therefore no ultimate consolations for our earthly travails, except such as we can find for ourselves, and that are inevitably modest. Attempts to transgress those dimensions are intellectually absurd and practically disastrous.

In *The Secret Agent*, published ten years before the Russian Revolution, revolutionary dreamers and agitators foregather in Verloc's living quarters behind a grubby shop of semi-pornographic wares in a down-at-the-heels area of London that serves as his front. (Verloc is described vividly as possessing “an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed.”) Michaelis, a middle-aged theorist of revolution who is supported by a rich patroness and is on parole from prison, gives a wonderfully concise précis of Marxist doctrine, a reminder that Conrad was extremely well-informed (his knowledge of history was immense) and had the capacity, instinct, and judgment to distinguish the humanly significant and important from the trivial and the fleeting. Michaelis says:

History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in

their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production—by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism. . . . The future is as certain as the past—slavery, feudalism, individualism, collectivism. This is the statement of a law, not an empty prophecy.

Michaelis's views are reworkings of Marx's dicta, which would have been little known in Conrad's day: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please"; "It is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness"; "This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production . . . as the basis of all history"; "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

While Conrad was knowledgeable about Marxist doctrine well before it obtruded itself onto world consciousness, he also had imaginative insight into the psychology of the revolutionaries of his time. None was of the lowest or poorest social stratum; they were educated and semi-educated people who "are enemies of [the] discipline and fatigue" necessary to achieve something in the normal way, who dislike "all kinds of recognized labour."

Conrad was fully aware of the corrosive effect of poverty and injustice and was therefore no dyed-in-the-wool reactionary without sympathy for the downtrodden. How could he be, when his first memory was of the political exile that worsened his mother's tuberculosis, accelerating her death from it? But he did not think that resentment, however understandable, was an emotion that should be inflamed or that could lead to anything but destruction. Karl Yundt, one of the revolutionaries in Verloc's parlor, "took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illusions of righteous anger, pity and revolt." Hatred is by far the strongest of political emotions, against which love or the desire for progress is a reed in a tornado. And this is as true of colonialists as it is of revolutionists. In his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, Kurtz had written: "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded." He ended his life proclaiming his desire to "Exterminate all the brutes!" Moral grandiosity is the sovereign path to moral dissolution.

Conrad was attracted to England precisely because he saw the English national character as lacking in moral grandiosity and metaphysical flamboyance. The English people did their duty without the apparent need, or desire, to found it on any philosophical first principles. Of all nations, the English were the most seamanlike, a term of his highest praise. ("This could have happened nowhere but in England," he begins the long short story "Youth," "where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak.") Especially admirable was the merchant marine, in which ordinary men performed extraordinarily heroic acts as a matter of course and displayed a magnificent but completely stoical endurance.

Even when ships are about to go down with all hands aboard, the discipline remains, the hierarchy holds, the captain is obeyed. In *Typhoon*, the unimaginative, dull, and stolid Captain MacWhirr steers his ship into a tropical storm of terrible violence, largely because of his refusal to believe that what he has not experienced after so many years at sea can exist. On board his ship are 200 Chinese passengers, for whom he has little personal sympathy and, indeed, feels casual racial disdain. But it is his indomitable will and his unquestioning, metaphysics-free devotion to duty, not any high-flown rhetoric or rodomontade, that saves the day and his passengers' lives. True, it is the defects of his

character that produced the crisis in the first place; but in a universe in which accidents happen and events are not parceled out according to desert, you are better off with a Captain MacWhirr than with, say, a Captain Byron.

The qualities that Conrad admired, on the one hand, and deprecated or despised, on the other, are clear in the contrasting characters of two sailors in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. In this novel, a ship returning to England from Bombay takes aboard a black sailor named James Wait, who is dying of tuberculosis and is eventually buried at sea. His presence haunts the ship throughout the voyage, which is again beset by a horrific storm. (It is, incidentally, evidence of Conrad's brilliance as a writer that one can read the lengthy descriptions of the two storms in the above works without any sense of repetition.)

The contrast between the two sailors, Singleton and Donkin, on the *Narcissus* is stark. Singleton is a strong, silent type; he has been at sea for nearly half a century. He speaks little and is self-contained, devoted to doing his duty. He is principled but not of obviously high intelligence. (There is a slight implausibility in Conrad's depiction of Singleton, for though he signs for his pay with a mark instead of a signature, he spends much of his off-duty time reading Bulwer Lytton: and it seems unlikely that someone who reads Bulwer Lytton for fun could not sign his name.) Singleton was one of those men

who knew toil, privation, violence, debauchery—but knew not fear, and had no desire of spite in their hearts. Men hard to manage, but easy to inspire; voiceless men—but men enough to scorn in their hearts the sentimental voices that bewailed the hardness of their fate. It was a fate unique and their own; the capacity to bear it appeared to them the privilege of the chosen! Their generation lived inarticulate and indispensable, without knowing the sweetness of affections or the refuge of a home—and died free from the dark menace of a narrow grave.

Conrad's admiration for men such as Singleton is evident. Donkin, by contrast, is voluble, a barrack-room lawyer, trouble stirrer, and stickler for what he calls "justice." The description of Donkin as he boards the *Narcissus* is memorable:

Another new hand—a man with shifty eyes and a yellow hatchet face, who had been listening open-mouthed in the shadow of the midship locker—observed in a squeaky voice: —“Well, it's a 'omeward trip, anyhow. Bad or good, I can do it on my 'ed—s'long as I get 'ome. And I can look after my rights! I will show 'em!” . . . He looked as if he had known all the degradations and all the furies. He looked as if he had been cuffed, kicked, rolled in the mud; he looked as if he had been scratched, spat upon, pelted with unmentionable filth . . . and he smiled with a sense of security at the faces around. His ears were bending down under the weight of his battered hard hat. The torn tails of his black coat flapped in fringes about the calves of his legs. He unbuttoned the only two buttons that remained and every one saw he had no shirt under it. It was his deserved misfortune that those rags which nobody could possibly be supposed to own looked on him as if they had been stolen. His neck was long and thin; his eyelids were red; rare hairs hung about his jaws; his shoulders were peaked and drooped like the broken wings of a bird; all his left side was caked with mud which showed that he had lately slept in a wet ditch. He had saved his inefficient carcass from violent destruction by running away from an American ship where, in a

moment of forgetful folly, he had dared to engage himself; and he had knocked about for a fortnight ashore in the native quarter, cadging for drinks, starving, sleeping on rubbish-heaps, wandering in sunshine: a startling visitor from a world of nightmares. He stood repulsive and smiling in the sudden silence. This clean white forecastle was his refuge; the place where he could be lazy; where he could wallow, and lie and eat—and curse the food he ate; where he could display his talents for shirking work, for cheating, for cadging; where he could find surely some one to wheedle and some one to bully—and where he would be paid for doing all this. They all knew him. Is there a spot on earth where such a man is unknown, an ominous survival testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence? . . . He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who curses the sea while others work. The man who is the last out and the first in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea.

It was Conrad's mistaken romantic belief that, in England at least, the Singletons would always prevail over the Donkins. History has proved him wrong: all that he admired has been defeated, and all that he detested has emerged victorious. The self-seeking landlubbers have won.

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