Jacques Darras

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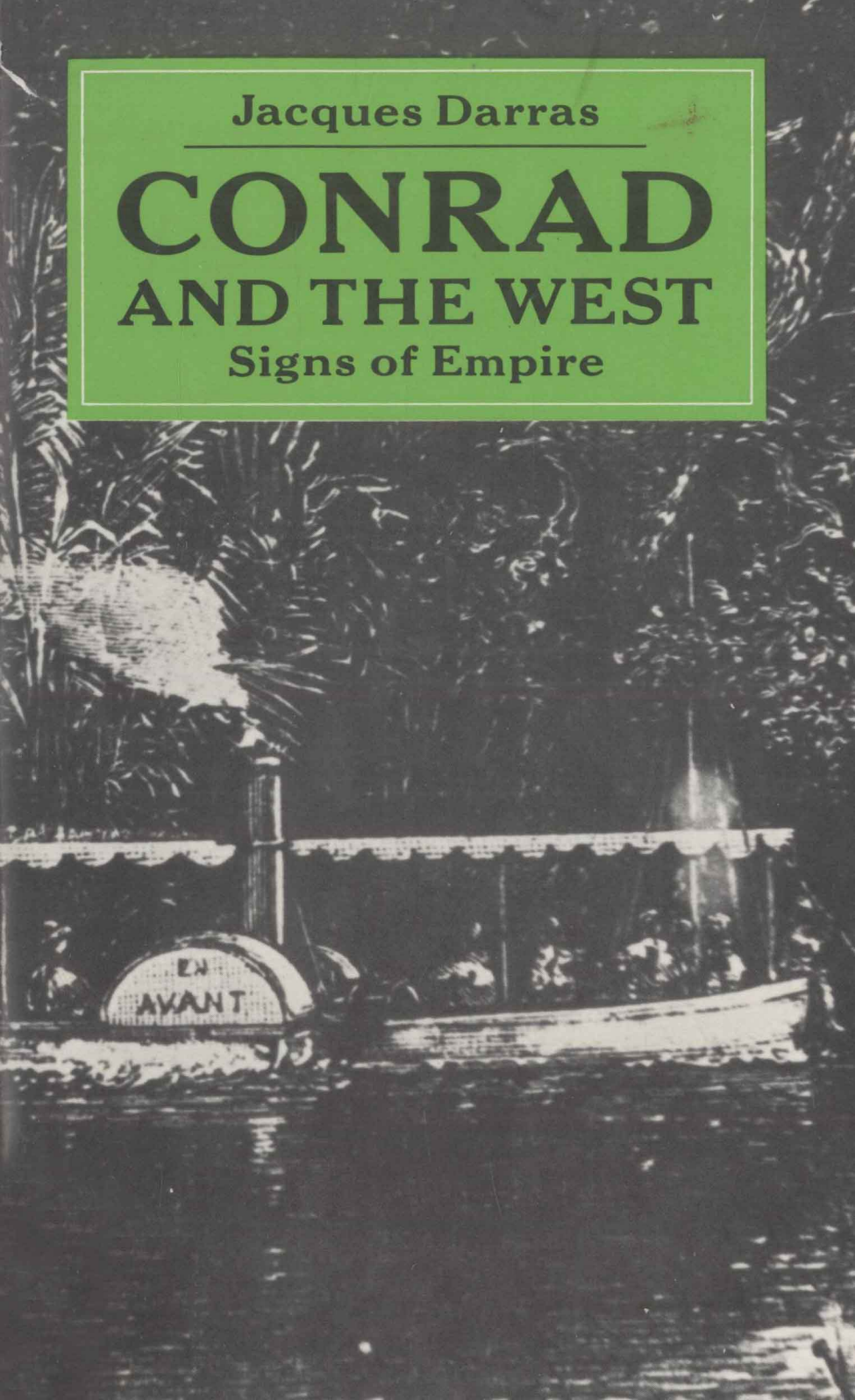
Signs of Empire



JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE WEST

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Jacques Darras

Translated from the French
by Anne Luyat and Jacques Darras

For Anne-Marie

First published 1982 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 28597 2

Printed in Hong Kong

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1 Introduction

In his preface to *The Tales of Unrest*[1], Joseph Conrad told the story of the pen he used to write his short story 'The Lagoon'. Wishing to put the instrument in a place of safekeeping, he entrusted it to a wooden salad bowl which also contained a variety of other domestic objects. One day, in the course of one of his regular inspections, he was surprised to discover not one but two pens! Not knowing which one should be the object of his solicitude, and rather than make a favourite of the one that meant nothing to him, he decided to dispose of both of them. Thrown from a window, their flight followed a rhetorical parabola of the most pertinent kind and let them fall to earth in a flower bed, the ideal poetic tomb. Although it would be most audacious to make critical assumptions on the strength of such a seemingly insignificant incident, it is possible to compare this modest fiction and Conrad's methods of composition. A pen which becomes two pens as soon as its purpose is fulfilled, a pen which meets a sister soul in the bottom of a salad bowl – an epic helmet (in a picaresque inn) which has been turned over to become a recipient for sealing wax and for the links of broken chains – could this not be an amusing parallel for the mysterious and romantic image which was an obsession with Conrad, that of the secret sharer? Too much ink has already been spilled on this subject for us not to be intrigued by the possibility of clarifying it at last. That the pen be thus promoted to the rank of actor, that it leave behind the secondary role to which it had been confined behind the scenes of the play to take its place on the stage is one way of indicating, without being too obvious about it, the importance he gives to the writing itself. The fact that the pen appears in the author's memory in the form of a sentimental whim should not make us forget the dual relation which makes of the writer – in the secret corners of his mind, in his efforts to escape from himself – his own reader, both double and hypocrite. A pen divided in two is, after all, the sign of an even more intimate duplicity, of a fission running through the stories like an imperceptible tremor. If we want the secret sharer to be the other

side of the personality to which we are chained in the passivity of the night, the visitor of the night come to disturb the sleep of the just man, we cannot affirm that its more active intervention does not intermingle with another one – that of the language itself, of the real 'Secret Agent'. If we look beyond the psychological chasm where waves of Victorian ink, the chaotic colour of midnight-blue, continue to cascade, shall we not encounter the source of a more essential duality which both brings together and separates the currents of the statement and its expression? A pen endowed with a double, beyond the ethical opposition to which the ambiguity of Conrad's writing has for far too long been confined, appears the couple of a more fundamental alienation which incessantly detaches the active word from the myth which it is supposed to reanimate. Impossible the confusion, eternal the repetition; each living flourish of the writing has as its double the minuscule 'colossus', a monument to dead words,[2] that the hand hastens in one gesture to write – and to obliterate.

What a fuss, you may say, for one or two pens which the author hastily disposed of in a flower bed – the ideal poetic depository for the vestiges of his past. We could reply, quite justly, that in his prefaces Conrad buries himself with a lightness of heart which is deceptive and that he sends himself 'posthumous' flowers whose real meaning we do not always fully appreciate. The quotation 'to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe' is culled regularly from the Preface of Prefaces (*The Nigger of the Narcissus*) to grace the headings of anthologies. And while we are on the subject of flowers, do not forget that under the narcissus hides a Negro, a slave to the rhetoric, a mad Negro polishing, without rhyme or reason, his one-penny gems. He has the blind task, in the obscure prison constituted by writing where the condemned worker is enchained, of making us hear, of making us feel and, above all, of making us see. His is a blind task carried out in the obscure confinement of darkest Africa, from which he extracts the raw materials of his art in order to deploy them under 'Western Eyes'. Is he a 'nigger', a slave labourer slavering over an exotic literary cuisine for the jaded palates of his masters, who continually demand more and more spices? And what if the master chef added, from time to time, just a dash of poison, one too small to be noticed but which would have its effect in the long run? Is it not characteristic of the servant to imitate the actions of his masters and to know how to hide the greatest divergence from the norm under the appearance of the

most absolute conformity? Conrad's fiction conforms to a traditional taste for spices. His first readers did not have the faintest idea that there was any trace of poison and did not feel at first the burning sensation produced by the explosive mixture of spices, by all the heavy Malay sweets. On the contrary, they were carried off by this acquired taste, to the furthest reaches of the Orient. The *Judeas* which exploded with cargoes of coal from Newcastle, the foyers where cooks and not the dinner were roasted, made a prodigious smokescreen behind which, urged on by their whetted appetites, the Victorians of the colonial era imagined some ultimate sweetmeat, some tempting apple on a breadfruit tree. And the final deception, far from leaving a bitter taste in the mouth, giving as it did only a conventional foretaste of the peace which surpasses our understanding (*shantih*!), appeared to be a wise provision of water for those dry, parched mouths.

A ghost-writer chasing after chimeras, you may say, a transfer of damnation carried out under a romantic banner! Is it not like looking for a diabolic quality in Conrad's work, like bringing together two traditions, that of the vampire stealing blood and that of the clever genie creating illusions? To which we could reply that a certain form of duplicity is attested to by the author himself and that this foreigner who acquired British nationality never really became a British subject, but chose the least constraining type of mask possible in order to remain perfectly free behind his respectable façade. It is certainly not by accident that Conrad declared that he was more English than his contemporaries but also less nationalistic. Speaking of another writer and contemporary, Rudyard Kipling, to whom he was so often linked under the yoke of the Empire, he defines very subtly the difference which separates their work, and by means of this definition puts himself outside all known national boundaries. According to Conrad, Kipling adapts all the more easily to foreign traditions because his principal interest is in the subject itself, in its content, which means that he loses nothing at all by changing his 'vehicle', small or large, as long as the direction taken stays the same – on a straight course for the Orient.[3] In contrast to Kipling's poverty in so far as language is concerned – his stories reel off their content in many different time-belts – language is part and parcel of Conrad's writing and contributes to create its unique quality. It is true that this foreigner converted to English late in life is not as sensitive to the mediating aspects of his instrument as to its final effects and that his language seems to be

destined not so much for translation as for duplicity.

Language is a two-sided coin for him, a currency that can no longer be exchanged in the markets of the world like the solid sterling pound had been until then. Taken out of circulation and no longer convertible, language devaluates the reality that it had been given the task of valorising and manipulates all the transactions for its own benefit. But this movement only represents one phase; it is not a question, either, of a desire to save money, to refine the language, 'to give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe', or to constitute a 'cash reserve' in the manner of the Third Republic in order to be prepared for all kinds of vulgar crises. In other words, Conrad is continually putting us off on a false track; he continues to give the colour of saffron to his stories and to intersperse his sentences with flakes of gold while showing us the 'Nigger' at work in the shop of the counterfeiter, stamping the image of the queen, the stamp of *Victory* on the reverse side of the Jubilee coins. And this practice is all the more difficult to analyse since it takes place under the cover of what it proposes to expose, and is a preliminary, so to speak, which avoids the outrageous as well as the imperceptible. In nautical terms, we could speak of coastal navigation, of staying as close as possible to the land, which must be avoided at all costs. That is why it would be useless to look for another origin for the author apart from his own writing, for he was less anxious about the points of anchorage than about the effect which the writing produces. That is why it is quite absurd to look for them, as some persist in doing, out of cultural nationalism, in the country called Poland. Inversely, because he chose English for writing, we must not conclude that Conrad became an Englishman. All of this is clearly indicated in a letter to a Polish reader who had just completed the first article ever written about him in a French revue: 'The "homo duplex" has, in my case, more than one meaning. You understand, of course. I need not go into the question.'[4]

It is not really certain however that this first reader, in spite of his merit, really was as much of an accomplice as Conrad made him out to be. Speaking from the pages of a French literary review about a writer whom the French language had fashioned long before the English impose had, this Pole expressed his surprise that in his books Conrad was more sympathetic to the British government's point of view than that of the other European powers, especially France.[5] The Pole also remarked that the emblems of colonial absurdity chosen by Conrad, such as the French warship in 'Heart of

Darkness', which sent its miserable salvoes into the nothingness of the African continent, revealed favouritism on his part. To which Conrad replied that any other nation could just as well have been implicated in the incident and that, as it turned out, the ship he had actually encountered in Africa was a French one engaged in the 'War of Dahomey'.[6] Is this not one more proof that Conrad depicted reality with a great degree of faithfulness? He even remembered the name of the ship, the *Seignelay*. This ultimate precision, this final touch which brings its guarantee of truth to the incertitudes of fiction, is a curious one, to say the least. Let us look at it from another angle. Is it not really the one last drop which makes the vase overflow – or the ship sink – the one last drop of water or even one last drop of blood in the process of some linguistic transubstantiation? *Seignelay*, '*saigne-les*', bleed them. Conrad is planting his anarchistic disorder where reality and fiction meet, confident that the confusion produced will protect him. Besides, such a tactic would not be incompatible with his official declarations concerning romanesque legitimacy which demanded for art the right to deform, at least to a certain degree, real experience and actual facts. It is not impossible that his apparent fidelity to reality is destined to disconcert his readers, that it is an ironic challenge behind the most solid appearances, behind the most solid figures. Of Marlow, the narrator of several of his stories, Conrad notes complaisantly that the critics have made him in turn a 'clever screen', 'a simple expedient', 'a figurehead', 'a familiar sprite', and 'a whispering demon'[7] – that is to say, a great many wide-ranging interpretations which are all the more radical in their well-meaning neutrality. Now the flippant remark of Conrad that no one, to his knowledge, 'had ever hinted that Marlow was anything but a gentleman'[8] raises by the very incongruity of its nature, certain doubts. His expression of satisfaction and surprise that no exegete had ever formulated the discourteous hypothesis of 'fraudulent' intentions of 'charlatanism' concerning Marlow makes one immediately suspicious and brings to the forefront of the mind a certain mistrust which, until that moment, had been dormant. It seems that a kind of secret jubilation, an almost imperceptible hairline fracture, is to be found at the heart of Conrad's sentences. We are constantly presented with the temptation of 'otherness' with which to complicate the simplicity of the apparent signification; the shadow or the double denies the evidence of the light. Is it ponderous of the author to declare that it is his responsibility, unless

it weighs on him or unless it be question of a lie 'it lies on me to confess'[9] that he was during the course of his double life – 'all my two lives' – adopted and spoiled by the Empire? Ponderous or not, we believe that Conrad diverges constantly from the norm and prefers discreet dissimulation to brazen eccentricity. Whether amalgam or integration, the process entails a major risk – that of confusion. In conforming to the customs of his adopted country, Conrad exposes himself to misunderstanding. A beloved spoiled child of the British Empire, certainly, but also a child spoiled by the founders of the colonial enterprise to whom, as an orphan, he had come, seeking his identity. Joseph Conrad chose an exile of ambiguous ingratitude, the spoiled child suffering from his spoilations.

Conrad's artistic duplicity is marked by a secret determination to surpass reality imperceptibly in his fiction, to carry his moderate opposition to the very heart of the language. It is translated in the narrative schema by a variety of dual relationships. As he takes care to point out, he does not write, like Kipling, about the English, but rather for the English.[10] That is to say, his exclusion, his exile in the midst of a society whose language he does not really speak (the testimony in letters and in fiction, from Conrad, on this point, could not be more eloquent), would lead us to suppose that he was formerly a member of good standing. What an uncomfortable position for someone who had come to 'convert' the British Isles, bringing with him the breviary of French novel-writing and meeting barbarians like H. G. Wells, a faithful practitioner of direct narration,[11] who were happy in their ignorance. He finds himself obliged to conform to existing literary criteria, all the while trying, by means of his art, to make subtle changes in those standards. That he was able to lead this double life is due in great part to the fact that he respects rigorously the limits of the novel form. In considering a subtle work of fiction like 'Heart of Darkness' we could regret that a more virulent attack, in the form of a pamphlet perhaps, something with a more immediate effect, had not been written in its place. There is a certain irony in the fact that 'Heart of Darkness' has been described as prophetic by several successive generations of ethnologists and historians, when really it was written at its appointed time in history.[12] In this story, the political aspect of the writing is masked by the apparent conformity of the text and by this means keeps its distance from history as such. What Conrad's pen obliterates is the closed circuit of adolescent literature from which the British Empire drew and furnished its models. What dies in *Lord Jim* is the

identifiable hero. A hero is born who does not fulfil the expectations of the works which try and annex him. What disappears with Kurtz is the noble hero and the hypothesis that the colonial quest was undertaken for the purest of reasons. Already, in these first works, the most romantic ones, the most openly exotic ones, there is a divorce between the White dream of progress and the Oriental mystique which the members of the White race, in the depths of their hearts, had promised themselves to conquer.

When all is said and done, isn't the myth of origins, of youth, simply a sinister comedy played around a table by teary-eyed old men reliving their souvenirs and warming palates which have been jaded by too many Oriental spices? For these loosened tongues Conrad fashions a fork – diabolic tongues running after their problematic unity. Like these starcrossed words, like these crossed-out words with which an invisible copyist flowers the discourse of the incorrigible gossip Marlow, who himself looks for the wavering image of old acquaintances in the dark reflections of the Bordeaux wine. Like this double voice – or double truth – which comes out of the 'Heart of Darkness', borrowing, in order to make itself understood to those men of London, the nonplussed voice of their colleague Marlow. However this sober speech which is audible in the romantic raptures of inebriety, does not constitute its legitimacy because of its negative virtues, but is inseparable from the myth which it criticises and which it shelters, in much the same way as the author Joseph Conrad is a prisoner of that England from which he excludes himself by his art. Never does the foreign writer judge himself to be superior to the instrument which permits him 'to live by the pen' not only materially, but also poetically, because that instrument is his only contact with the world. In his case, duplicity springs from a fundamental duality inherent in his practice of writing. Should we see in Joseph Conrad a kind of Razumov, prisoner of a fictional Switzerland, half way between the functionalism of English practicality satisfied with the factual truth of journalism and a Russia under the yoke of its tyrannical fictions?[13] Is Switzerland a land of exile, of speechlessness and of deafness? Is it a stage where historic gestures are imitated on the screen of writing? Is it the centre of Europe and of the world where the writer's universe is just a little off-centre?

Part I
Mythical East

2 An Intoxicating Tale

THE TARNISHED BLAZON

You might say that 'Youth' wears its symbols on its sleeve much as the *Judea* has its motto painted on its hull: 'There was below her name in big letters a lot of scrollwork with the gilt off and some sort of a coat of arms with the motto "Do or Die" underneath.' (p. 5.) The name and the motto are not mere flourishes or ornaments of the text but rather emblems waiting to be deciphered. Scrollwork, far from being an irrelevant word here, is pertinent and quite illuminating. It is easy to understand why Conrad changed the real name of the ship he had sailed on, the *Palestine*, to the *Judea*, for Judea not only conjures up visions of the Bible but also points to a favourite theme of romance, that of the Wandering Jew. Now, what Marlow exposes in his narration, without realising it, are the hazards of such an enterprise. Fascinated as he is by the blazing light of 'Youth', Marlow concentrates all his attention on recapturing the light he saw in the past. Attempting to rekindle the sparks of a long-forgotten past in his listeners, Marlow warms to his subject but does not seem to be aware of the shadows which gather behind his fiery narrative. And yet the shadows are as real as the ship's great age, which is perfectly visible in spite of a new coat of paint. Like the *Judea*, 'Youth' is old, as old as the hills and Herod; it is a leaky story which all the pilot's skill can barely keep afloat. Like the tarnished blazon on the hull of the *Judea*, its gilt has been rubbed off. The ship is not the only old thing found in the story, for the crew members also have something historic, and even Biblical, about them. Witness the symbolic quality of the mate's name: ' . . . and his name was Mahon but he insisted that it should be pronounced Mann'. Witness the skipper, Captain Beard, who has one of the classic attributes of a patriarch if only in name. Witness the steward who answers to the Biblical name of Abraham. This is not so much a ship then as an ark, and we can easily predict that Marlow's enterprise will be hampered more by the weight of tradition than by

anything else. Yet, we should also take into consideration that the weight is lessened in so far as not only the gilt but the guilt, too, has been rubbed off. In other words the story really has no definite connection with the *New Testament*, for, although the fire that returns the old carcass of a ship into nothingness will have the same purifying effect as any Biblical fire, we are closer here to an epic tradition from which sin and guilt are absent. What is the meaning of the conflagration if not to warn us that in order to reach the East and to step into the marvellous world of fables we must first set fire to the *Judea* and dissipate the shadow which it casts. The origin of the story lies beyond good and evil, beyond sin and guilt. Before setting out, we must throw overboard all the guilt/gilt which weighs down the Western ark and go to the very end of the road opened by the Romantics, far beyond the mythic country where the Jews continue to wander under the same old curse. Unknowingly, it is Marlow who acts as the fire-robber, as the diverter of symbols. Let us take the example of the pillar of fire which, in the time of Abraham, was sent down to devastate the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this story, it ascends instead of descending, propelling Marlow upwards towards the heavens in what can only be described as a parody of a celestial phenomenon: 'No doubt about it – I was in the air and my body was describing a sort of parabola.' We should not forget, either, that before being sent into the air Marlow happened to be standing within a few feet of the carpenter, which is an ironic coincidence indeed. When the coal in the hold explodes and tears the decks apart, it makes the foundations of the heavenly universe tremble. The carpenter in charge of maintaining the floating nave is helpless and cannot do anything when he sees his bench turned upside-down by the explosion. It is not only his bench, of course, but one which represents all the benches where crosses have been fashioned or where sentences have been handed down by inquisitors. On that ship of fools – in the image of an inverted universe – Marlow first ascends into Heaven and then descends into Hell, where he immediately falls headlong on to a layer of burning cinders, for the hell which had been contained until then in the hold spreads suddenly and without warning. The crew, a gang of Liverpool thieves, whose past had not been treated by Conrad until that moment, undergo, successfully, a kind of baptism by fire. Then the reader is a witness to a series of startling metamorphoses that could have come out of a medieval bestiary. The helmsman who fell overboard catches up with the ship, after swimming in the water