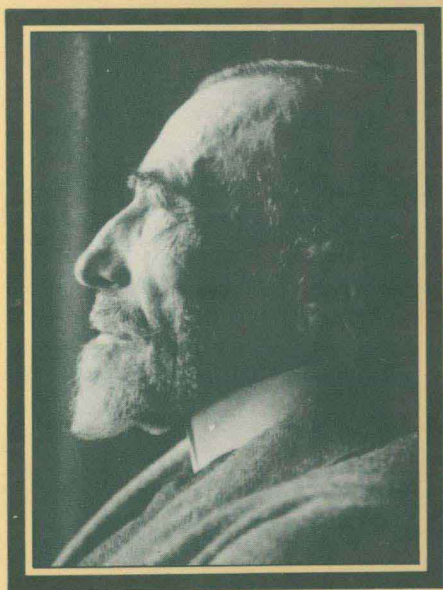


DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

CONRAD

THE LATER FICTION



Joseph Conrad.

CONRAD: THE LATER FICTION

Daniel R. Schwarz

*Professor of English
Cornell University*



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For my sons, David and Jeffrey

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My greatest debt, as always, is to my wife Marcia.

Cornell University
Ithaca, New York
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DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

Abbreviations and a Note on the Text

I have used the following abbreviations for editions of the letters:

Garnett—Edward Garnett, *Letters from Joseph Conrad 1895–1924* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928).

LL, i or ii—G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, 2 vols (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1927).

NLL—Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1926).

Mme Poradowska—John A. Gee and Paul J. Sturm, *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890–1920* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1940).

I have used the Kent edition of Conrad's works (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1926). For the shorter fiction, page numbers in parentheses refer to the collected edition in which the tale appears:

'*Twixt Land and Sea*: 'The Secret Sharer', 'A Smile of Fortune', 'Freya of the Seven Isles'.

Within the Tides: 'The Partner', 'The Inn of the Two Witches', 'The Planter of Malata', 'Because of the Dollars'.

Tales of Hearsay: 'The Black Mate', 'Prince Roman', 'The Warrior's Soul', 'The Tale'.

Occasionally Conrad did not publish his works in the order he wrote them. Within the text, dates in parentheses refer to the year the work was first published in periodical or book form. The appendix provides the date that each work of fiction was completed.

Introduction

I

Conrad: The Later Fiction continues the critical consideration of the entire canon of Conrad's fiction that I began in *Conrad: 'Almayer's Folly' to 'Under Western Eyes'*. Like my prior study, this book is concerned less with arguing a particular thesis than with examining each work according to its intellectual and aesthetic assumptions. Once again, I shall demonstrate that Conrad's characteristic themes and techniques derive in large part from his struggle to define his own character and values. In this work I take issue with a widely held assumption that, after 'The Secret Sharer' (1910) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), most of Conrad's work from 1910 until his death in 1924 is not worth serious critical attention. I also differ with the two most influential critics of Conrad's later work, Thomas Moser and John A. Palmer. By showing the continuity of Conrad's art, this book questions both Palmer's argument in his *Joseph Conrad's Fiction* (1968) that Conrad writes symbolic and allegorical works in his later years, and Moser's contention in *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (1957) that Conrad falters when he deals with the uncongenial subject of heterosexual love.

I believe that Conrad's later writing is best understood as an evolution and development of his prior methods, themes and values. He still demonstrates that each man's epistemology is peculiarly his own, the function of his psyche and experience, and he still regards man's moral behaviour as resulting from psychological needs that are often dimly understood or barely acknowledged. Conrad's letters provide evidence for the continuity of his work. For example, the following passage from a 1918 letter could have been written to Edward Garnett twenty years earlier:

That is the tragedy—the inner anguish—the bitterness of lost lives, of unsettled consciences and of spiritual perplexities. Courage, endurance, enthusiasm, the hardest idealism itself,

have their limits. And beyond those limits what is there? The eternal ignorance of mankind, the fateful darkness in which only vague forms can be seen which themselves may be no more than illusions.¹

In a 1913 letter to Francis Warrington Dawson, he echoes the language of the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) when describing the artist's lonely, agonising struggle to create: 'Suffering is an attribute almost a condition of greatness, of devotion, of an altogether self-forgetful sacrifice to that remorseless fidelity to the truth of his own sensations at whatever [*sic*] cost of pain or contumely which for me is the whole Credo of the artist.'² Conrad is still a sceptical humanist who believes that man's best hope rests in personal relationships. Conrad resented those who neglected his humanism and implicitly accused him of 'brutality' and 'lack of delicacy';³ he always insisted that, as he wrote to Arthur Symonds, 'I have always approached my task in the spirit of love for mankind' (Aug 1908, *LL*, ii, p. 73). Of course, despite the considerable continuity of his career, Conrad still sought the appropriate form and style for each subject and never ceased in his search for new subjects.

II

In 1910 Conrad was in his fifty-third year. He had lived and written in England for sixteen years, and was very conscious that he was ageing. While he had become recognised as an important novelist, he had not achieved financial success. He was regarded as an oddity even by his admirers, an outsider who wrote in English but whose temperament and values were not quite English. His self-image oscillated between, on the one hand, pride in his achievement and artistic integrity and, on the other hand, disgust with his difficulties in completing his work and despair about his severe financial problems. He suffered from lack of public recognition and was still plagued by personal and artistic self-doubt. As always, writing was extremely trying for Conrad. He feared that he would leave both *Chance* (1912) and *The Rescue* (1919) unfinished and that he would not reach the goal of twenty volumes that he set for himself.⁴ His relations with Ford Madox Ford and his agent James Pinker were strained, and he was beset by anxiety, hypochondria and gout. In this frame of mind he suffered a nervous breakdown.

Bernard Meyer has written that after the 1910 breakdown Conrad 'could no longer afford these introspective journeys into the self'.⁵ But this ignores the introspective journeys of *The Shadow-Line* (1916), *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) and *The Rover* (1923). One cannot agree with Meyer that 'the doubting, troubled men, like Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, and hapless souls Jim or Decoud, caught in a neurotic web of their own creation, gave way to simple innocent creatures who, as pawns of fate, struggle with indifferent success against external influence, external accidents, and external malevolence'.⁶ The later fiction, like the prior work, shows that man is ineffectual in his effort to shape permanently the larger rhythm of historical events, but is able to form personal ties and sometimes to act boldly in his own or others' interest. In 'The Secret Sharer', *The Shadow-Line* and *The Rover*, temporary personal victories give life meaning. And the act of telling in 'The Secret Sharer', *The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold* is a kind of affirmation; by using assertive, energetic first-person narrators to structure important aspects of his own past, Conrad becomes, as he had been in the 1898–1900 Marlow tales, an active presence within his works. In the later works, passionate love and deep feeling temporarily rescue life from meaninglessness, even if they only provide fragments to shore against one's ruins.

Indeed, in the years that followed the breakdown, Conrad began to achieve financial stability and some measure of personal security. Selling manuscripts to John Quinn helped alleviate his debts. On occasion, Conrad would compromise his artistic integrity by writing potboilers for *Metropolitan Magazine*. Finally, beginning with *Chance*, his books began to sell. Gradually he began to create a public mask. In particular, he was concerned not only with marketing his works, but also with how he should appear as a literary presence. He developed a public personality for interviews and dialogues with critics, and adopted surrogate sons such as Richard Curle, Jean-Aubry, Gide and Warrington Dawson, all of whom propagated his reputation in the world of letters and in the market-place. He became more of an urbane Englishman and cultivated a stance of moderation and worldliness. Although, in his last years, he was somewhat shunted aside by the surge of the next generation of literary modernism, represented by the works of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence and Woolf, he occupied a prominent place in the world of letters until his death in 1924.

III

Since I discussed *Under Western Eyes* in my prior study, *Conrad: The Later Fiction* begins with a consideration of the last two volumes of short fiction that were published in Conrad's lifetime. While 'The Secret Sharer' is one of Conrad's masterpieces, many of these short stories were artistic laboratories for the kind of fiction he wrote after *Under Western Eyes* (1911). After 'The Secret Sharer', Conrad was for the most part interested in his novels rather than his short stories. Although Conrad rarely used the romance element in the novels without including a component of realism, these stories, often written for the popular imagination, taught him to use the kind of simplified plot that provided the framework for the later novels.

We can divide Conrad's career after 1910 into three distinct phases. In the first, Conrad wanted to demonstrate that he was an English novelist, not a Slav writing in English, as some reviewers implied. The diffident, self-effacing narrator of *Under Western Eyes* owes something to this impulse. In a sense, *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance* and *Victory* (1915) are Conrad's English trilogy. Thus *Chance* and *Victory* focus explicitly on personal relationships and manners, and allude to contemporary issues in England. He had to prove to his audience and perhaps to himself that he had become an English writer. *Chance* and *Victory* represent Conrad's attempt to write English novels of manners and to explore the intricacies of personal relationships in the context of contemporary customs and values. He regarded *Victory* as a 'strictly proper' work 'meant for cultured people'⁷ and he thought that 'The Secret Sharer' was English 'in moral atmosphere, feeling and even in detail'.⁸

In *Chance* and *Victory*, Conrad's subject matter is less his own life than the external world. The form and narrative technique stress his detachment and withdrawal. Even when he revives Marlow in *Chance*, that figure is no longer a surrogate who echoes his own anxieties and doubts. Although we certainly see important resemblances between Conrad and his characters Heyst and Captain Anthony, he is not primarily writing about fictional versions of himself.

The second phase of Conrad's later career derives more from a personal impulse. After *Chance* and *Victory*, he returns from contemporary issues to his own memories. *The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold*, like 'The Secret Sharer' and 'A Smile of Fortune'

(1911), are expressive of Conrad's emotions and passions, but in these works, unlike the Marlow tales, Conrad recreates emotions of the past more than he objectifies his present inner turmoil. As Conrad aged, he sought subjects in his personal and literary past, and his fiction less frequently addresses his immediate personal problems or current public issues. *The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold* reached back into his personal past, while *The Rescue* was completed primarily to settle his long standing anxiety about a work that had been stalled for two decades. *The Rescue* returns to the romance world of Malay which provided the setting of his first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, as well as such early tales as 'Karain' and 'The Lagoon'. It is a nostalgic look at his personal and literary past and provides something of an escape from Conrad's present anxieties and harsher memories.

In the final phase, he looks back in *The Rover* and the incomplete *Suspense* to the Napoleonic period and creates large historical canvases that recall the great political novels. While we do not know what he would have done in *Suspense*, his real concern in *The Rover* is coming to terms with his own approaching death. In that novel, the Napoleonic era provides the occasion for a moving lyrical novel about the possibility of facing death heroically. The principal character, an ageing seaman and an outsider, is a fictional counterpart of Conrad.

NOTES

1. From a letter of 6 Feb 1918 to John Quinn, quoted in Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 807–8. I am indebted to Karl's account of Conrad's later years.
2. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 730, from a letter of 20 June 1913 to Warrington Dawson.
3. For example, see letter of 28 Aug 1908 to Garnett; quoted *ibid.*, p. 650n.
4. See *ibid.*, p. 639.
5. Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 243.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
7. From a letter of 7 Oct 1912 to Pinker; quoted in Karl, *Conrad: The Three Lives*, p. 717.
8. From a letter of 8 Dec 1912 to Edith Wharton; quoted and paraphrased *ibid.*, p. 725.

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I *'Twixt Land and Sea*

I

'Twixt Land and Sea (1912) contains three long stories written for magazines in the 1909–11 period. 'The Secret Sharer' is one of the great tales in the English language, but, although not major works, the others—'Freya of the Seven Isles' and 'A Smile of Fortune'—deserve to be read more than they are. All three tales explore a young captain under stress. Although in this period of renewed personal and financial turmoil Conrad's imagination turns nostalgically to life at sea, the sea is no longer the simplified world of 'Typhoon' or 'The End of the Tether', where moral distinctions are clear. In these 1909–11 tales, a young captain is faced with circumstances and emotional traumas for which neither the maritime code nor his experience has prepared him. Both 'Freya of the Seven Isles' and 'A Smile of Fortune' provide evidence that Conrad is interested in the heterosexual relationships of inexperienced young adults. In each case an ingenuous and imperceptive male figure ceases to function effectively in his career because of his passionate involvement with an immature young woman. 'A Smile of Fortune' is the most autobiographical and the most revealing; in fact, it may suffer from Conrad's inability to separate himself from the captain–narrator. But 'The Secret Sharer' is personal in the way great lyrical poetry is personal, drawing from experience that is at once individual (Conrad's assuming the captaincy of the *Otago* in 1888) and representative of the deepest strains of human experience: fear and self-doubt in the face of challenge.¹

II. 'THE SECRET SHARER' (1910)

The failure to concentrate on the narrator has been responsible for some rather bizarre interpretations of 'The Secret Sharer'. The captain–narrator recounts a tale of initiation in which he successfully

overcame debilitating emotional insecurity to command his ship. The significance of the events for the sensitive and intelligent captain is that he discovered within himself the *ability to act* decisively that he had lacked. As a younger man, the captain doubted himself, felt a 'stranger' to the community to which he belonged, and wondered if he should 'turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's personality every man sets up for himself secretly' (p. 94). His concern now is to present the issues in terms of what Leggatt meant to him. Although he certainly knows that harbouring an escaped murderer represents a threat to maritime civilisation and a violation of his own legal and moral commitment, his retelling ignores this.

The captain—narrator, separated by a 'distance of years' from the meeting with Leggatt, delivers a retrospective monologue. But, despite the past tense, the reader often forgets that the events have already occurred; as Albert J. Guerard has written, 'The nominal narrative past is, actually, a harrowing present which the reader too must explore and survive.'² Perhaps we can draw upon Louis L. Martz's conception of a meditative poem to clarify what is happening. The intense reflective process in which the speaker's past comes alive in his memory and offers a moment of illumination by which he can order his life, recalls Martz's definition of the meditative process: 'The mind grasps firmly a problem or situation deliberately evoked by the memory, brings it forward toward the full light of consciousness, and concludes with a moment of illumination, where the speaker's self has, for a time, found an answer to his conflicts.'³ A meditative poem, such as Herbert's 'The Collar', recollects a vital episode in which the speaker experiences spiritual growth by conquering the secular demands of his ego. In both 'The Collar' and 'The Secret Sharer', the recollection is informed by insight that was lacking when the original event took place. That the captain can give meaning and structure to an experience which includes neurotic immobilisation demonstrates his emotional and moral development and his present psychic health.

As I argued in *Conrad: 'Almayer's Folly' to 'Under Western Eyes'*, one of Conrad's recurring themes is that each man interprets events according to his moral and emotional needs. Because one's version of events reflects an interaction between, on the one hand, experience and perception, and, on the other, memories and psychic needs, interpretation always has a subjective element. The captain's interpretation of his experience dramatises the process of his coming to terms with what Leggatt symbolises. In reductive terms, Leggatt is a man of unrestrained id and underdeveloped superego. The captain,

an example of hyperconscious modern man who fastidiously thinks of the consequences of every action to the point where he cannot *do* anything, is his opposite. Self-doubt and anxiety create an illogical identification with Leggatt as his 'double'. He risks his future to hide the man he regards as his 'other self'. To avoid discovery, he begins to act desperately and instinctively without conscious examination of the consequences of each action. Leggatt's presence creates situations where the luxury of introspection is no longer possible. Symbolically, the captain completes himself. He finds within himself the potential to act instinctively and boldly that his 'double' exemplifies. It can be said that his adult ego is created by appeasing the contradictory demands of the id and superego. Listening to the narrator, we tentatively suspend our moral perspective and fail to condemn him for giving refuge to a suspected murderer. This is because, as his words engage us and as we become implicated as his confessor, we come partially to share his perspective.

I believe Conrad wishes us to perceive Leggatt and the captain as representatives of a split in modern man between his mind and his instinct. Leggatt's predecessors are Falk and Kurtz, while the captain recalls the narrators of 'Il Conde', 'The Informer' and 'An Anarchist', and anticipates the language-teacher of *Under Western Eyes*, to which Conrad returned after finishing 'The Secret Sharer'. The effect of Leggatt's presence is to disrupt the ship's community and to raise further doubts in the minds of the captain's officers about his own self-control and sanity. The captain becomes more neurotic because he has to consider whether his every sentence and every word might reveal his secret. He now has twin loyalties, mutually exclusive, to the man he is harbouring and with whom he identifies, and to his ship. Paradoxically, the desperation of his paranoia, of his belief that he is constantly being scrutinised by his subordinates, leads him to give his 'first particular order'. When threatened, he 'felt the need of asserting myself'. The pressure of circumstances makes it increasingly difficult for him to distinguish between himself and Leggatt:

all the time the dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity. I was constantly watching myself, my secret self, as dependent on my actions as my own personality, sleeping in that bed, behind the door which faced me as I sat at the head of the table. It was very much like being mad only it was worse because one was aware of it. (pp. 113-14)

His distinction between self and other threatens to collapse; he had the 'mental feeling of being in two places at once [which] affected me physically as if the mood of secrecy had penetrated my very soul' (p. 125). Like Prufrock and Gabriel Conroy, the integrity of the captain's personality is threatened by a disbelief in the authenticity of self. If R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* aptly describes a phenomenon of modern literature, it is because the terms in which existential psychology describes schizoid conditions are directly related to the crisis of identity which Eliot, Joyce and Conrad analyse:

If one experiences the other as a free agent, one is open to the possibility of experiencing oneself as an *object* of his experience and thereby of feeling one's own subjectivity drained away. One is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for oneself, without any being for oneself . . . One may find oneself enlivened and the sense of one's own being enhanced by the other, or one may experience the other as deadening and impoverishing.⁴

Retrospectively it is clear that the captain has been 'enlivened' by his experience of Leggatt, although at first Leggatt's appearance—like the presence of the threatening first mate, whose whiskers and manner intimidate him—has the effect of 'deadening' the captain.

The captain's creation of Leggatt is a major part of the original experience. Before Leggatt's appearance, the captain is immobilised by self-consciousness and self-doubt: 'My position was that of the only *stranger* on board. I mention this because it has some bearing on what is to follow. But what I felt most was my being a *stranger* to the ship; and if all the truth must be told, I was somewhat a *stranger* to myself' (p. 93, emphasis added). That 'stranger' carries the meaning of 'alien' and 'outside' from the French word *étranger* is an instance of how the richness of Conrad's language is occasionally increased by his appropriating French definitions for similarly spelt English words.

The character of Leggatt is a function of the captain's need for someone to share the burdens of loneliness and anxiety. When he hears of Leggatt's alternatives (to keep swimming until he drowns or is welcomed on board the captain's ship) he responds, 'I felt this was no mere formula of desperate speech, but a real alternative in the view of a strong soul. . . . A mysterious communication was established already between us two—in the face of that silent, darkened tropical

sea' (p. 99). The captain recalls that 'the voice was calm and resolute. A good voice. The self-possession of that man had somehow induced a corresponding state in myself' (ibid., emphasis added). But this contrasts with his original response of seconds before: 'He seemed to struggle with himself, for I heard something like the low, bitter murmur of doubt. "What's the good?" His next words come out with a hesitating effort' (p. 99). Jumping from one assertion to another without empirical data, the captain continues to convince himself of Leggatt's resemblance to him on such flimsy grounds as that they are both 'young'. Although he tells us that they looked identical, he later admits that Leggatt 'was not a bit like me, really' (p. 105). His original, flattering description of Leggatt is continually modified until it is almost contradicted. Before Leggatt even begins to explain how he killed a man, the captain has excused him: "'Fit of temper," I suggested, confidently' (p. 101). Insisting upon the value of his second self enables the captain to discover himself morally and psychologically. But the process of idealising his 'double', his 'other self', into a model of self-control, self-confidence and sanity is arbitrary and non-cognitive. Perhaps we better understand the extent of the narrator's surrender of self if we recall Laing's analysis of a man who suffered what he calls 'ontological insecurity': 'In contrast to his own belittlement of and uncertainty about himself, he was always on the brink of being overawed and crushed by the formidable reality that other people contained. In contrast to his own . . . uncertainty, and insubstantiality, *they* were solid, decisive, emphatic, and substantial.'⁵ Despite the evidence that Leggatt murdered another man in a fit of passion, he holds to a belief in Leggatt's control and sanity and insists that the killing was an act of duty. But the reader does not forget that Leggatt commits a horribly immoral act which *he does not regret*.

Conrad emphasises how the destructive relationship between the doubting crew and the insecure captain creates the captain's attitude to Leggatt. He never criticises Leggatt, despite his penchant for criticising everybody else, from the ratiocinative first mate to the 'impudent second mate' and 'unintelligent' Captain Archbold, because, believing himself a stranger and an alien on the ship, he desperately needs an ally against self-doubt and the hostility of the crew. He identifies with Leggatt not as a criminal, but as an outcast: 'I felt that it would take very little to make me a suspect person in the eyes of the ship's company' (p. 110). Because in *the captain's own mind* Leggatt is the picture of resolute self-confidence, he becomes in some