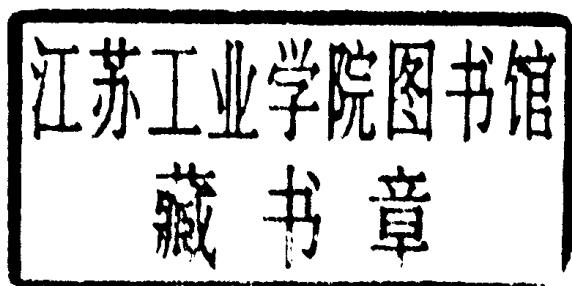


Mozina

JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE ART OF SACRIFICE
The Evolution of the Scapegoat Theme in Joseph Conrad's Fiction

STUDIES IN MAJOR
LITERARY AUTHORS
OUTSTANDING DISSERTATIONS

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This book is dedicated
to Lorri
and my parents.

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Preface

My starting point for this study was my first encounter with *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in a graduate seminar. I found the text's often-commented-upon "doubleness," its contradictions, its oxymoronic rhetoric, hard to decipher. It got to the point where I doubted whether I could actually "read" Conrad, in the way I felt I'd been able to read other writers. The death of James Wait seemed to be the central meaning-making moment in the text, but I couldn't quite figure out what Conrad was doing with it. My professor, and soon-to-be-dissertation director, Naomi Lebowitz, suggested that I read the novel through the lens of René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*. Meanwhile, I began to acquaint myself with Conrad's life and the rest of his work. Soon, reading from these two directions made it clear to me that sacrifice was a major theme in Conrad. In turn, the doubleness of the sacrificial scapegoat—for example, his or her status as both insider and outsider, guilty and innocent—suggested an interesting way to understand the general sense of doubleness in Conrad which I found so problematic.

Similar intuitions about the importance of sacrifice in the work of Henry James and Gertrude Stein followed this realization. James, Conrad, and Stein, moreover, all seemed very interested in the legacy of Flaubert, that poster child for authorial sacrifice. Everything was coming up sacrifice. I began work on what I thought would be a three-author dissertation, but I made the mistake, or had the good fortune, to begin with Conrad, still teased, I think, by my inability to "get" him. The result is this book, and James and Stein will have to wait.

In approaching Conrad, I wanted to do a study that granted agency to him as an author and yet put him in his literary, historical and political context (mainly Polish history and the politics Conrad adopted in reaction to it); I also wanted to do a study that rested on close, thematic readings but that also used relevant critical theory, such as Girard's anthropologi-

cal theories of sacrifice and Derrida's poststructuralist view of scapegoating. Arguably, I might have done more theoretical positioning here. After all, for example, we cannot pursue a form of biographical criticism, however augmented with various forms of social and critical contextualization, without thoroughly exploring Barthes', Foucault's, and their followers' theories of the author's death and imprisonment. Or can we?

Theoretically savvy Conrad scholars such as Beth Sharon Ash in her recent book on Conrad, *Writing in Between*, use thinkers like Hans Georg Gadamer to address the extent to which an author can meaningfully intend a work of literature and the extent to which an author's work is really written by larger social influences. She explains:

In giving a sophisticated account of the dialogical constitution of reflexivity and agency, . . . Gadamer encourages an awareness of psychological and social modes of explanation as mutually informing, interrelated narratives. Or again, within the epistemic context of 'the living circle,' one cannot rest content with a monocausal view of things. The psychic and social domains of life are interdependent: neither can be explained without the other.¹

I came across Ash's summary of Gadamer after this study of Conrad was more or less completed, but it struck me as a version of my own largely unexpressed assumption about these questions: we act on the world and the world acts on us. This "dialogical" idea, plain to anyone who has avoided graduate school, is enough, I think, to rescue the author's biography and non-fictional writings as legitimate building blocks in the construction of interpretations of a text, as evidence of an individual intentionally constructing a life (including literary work) out of his or her own personality and temperament, at the same time in which that individual is under pressure from the rest of the world. And I will claim this theory of self-in-the-world, despite not having fought my way to it through a sophisticated account of reflexivity, agency, narrative, epistemology, the psyche, and causality.

But practicing a form of biographical criticism was only the first critical risk I took with this study. With sacrifice as my theme, I also set myself up for an old-fashioned, and therefore presumably uninteresting, new-critical-style hunt for Christ imagery. But Girard came to my rescue. In showing how ritual sacrifice regulates communal violence, Girard makes the crucial point that it is not the act of sacrifice—or the presence of a possible Christ figure—that is important, but the *interpretation* of that act or figure. For Girard, the main message of Christianity is that scapegoat rituals, and the societies that thrive on the order these rituals create, rely on innocent victims. This interpretation contrasts with what I will call throughout this study, for lack of a better term, the "traditional" interpre-

tation of ritual sacrifice (Conrad himself uses the term “pagan” when making a contrast with Christianity), namely, that the people who have been killed *should* die because they are the true cause of the community’s problems.

An awareness of these dueling interpretations helped me make sense out of the contradictions animating *The Nigger of the “Narcissus.”* As I argue in Chapter One, much of the doubleness of this text can be traced to Conrad’s, and the crew’s, reluctance to decide whether Wait is victim or criminal, Christ or Oedipus. Is the Christian interpretation of his death ascendant at the end of the novel or does the traditional interpretation dominate? These alternatives, I argue, animate not only *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* but the rest of the texts I discuss in this book.

My third critical risk became apparent as I examined Conrad’s handling of these alternative interpretations throughout the so-called “major phase” of his career: I saw a progression; I saw a coherent story emerging, at least in the movement from *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* through *Chance*. Roughly speaking, Conrad moved away from the traditional interpretation of sacrifice and toward the Christian interpretation. Thus, in Chapter One, I claim that the crew finally reads Wait’s death according to a traditional interpretation of ritual sacrifice. In Chapter Two, I argue that Conrad succeeds in more fully suspending the alternatives, so that Jim’s innocence or guilt is seen differently by Marlow, the Patusanians, and the novel as a whole. Chapter Three shows the shattering consequences of Conrad’s effort to sustain this suspension, while the final chapter shows him seeking a temporary resting place in more Christian values.

I can’t defend myself against the charge that I have found a sort of progressive coherence—something that seems especially indefensible in Conrad’s case because he was by all accounts so beset by contradictions and ambiguities (and I agree he is)—except to fall back on my readings of the texts themselves. One positive way of looking at the narrative of Conrad’s career which I’ve created is that it provides a way to bridge what critics since Moser have found to be the two halves of Conrad’s work: the intense psychological investigations of morality and the narratives of male-female relationships (beginning with *Chance*). If nothing else, I hope I have rightfully turned attention to the problem of sacrifice in Conrad, an issue that he faced as a child of revolutionary parents, as a duty-bound sailor, as a disciple of Flaubert, and as a man struggling to support his family through his writing.

NOTES

1. Beth Sharon Ash, *Writing in Between: Modernity and Psychosocial Dilemma in the Novels of Joseph Conrad* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) 12.

Introduction

“My Name Is Korzeniowski”

Dear Sir,

I received your card today and I was very pleased to hear from a compatriot. Hence, I hurry with the reply. My name is Korzeniowski. My grandfather had a village in Podolia and also administered the estate of Mrs *Melania* (if I remember the name well) Sobańska. In 1856, my Father, Apollo, married Ewelina Bobrowska, the daughter of a squire in the Ukraine, and a sister of Stefan Bobrowski whose name you most probably know. I was born in the country but my parents went to Warsaw (at the end of the year 1860) where my Father intended to start a literary fortnightly. After the period of social unrest and demonstrations (caused by the recruitment) which occurred then, my Father was imprisoned in the Warsaw Citadel, and in the courtyard of this Citadel—characteristically for our nation—my childhood memories begin. In 1862 we were moved to Perm and later to Vologda. Then, as an act of mercy, we were allowed to settle down in Czernigów. My mother died there . . . My father died in Cracow in 1869.¹

Meet Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, Joseph Conrad, in the restrained phrases with which he introduces his existence to a Polish compatriot. In this autobiographical summary is the narrative to which, I would argue, most of Conrad's major fiction responds. As is the case with Stein in *Lord Jim*, Conrad's life began where his memories begin—"after the period of social unrest," with his father's imprisonment which led to the deaths of his parents—that is, in ritual sacrifice.² The son of martyred parents, the nephew of the militant Polish nationalist Stefan Bobrowski, living in a scapegoated nation, Conrad saw autocratic power crush lives in the name of order; he also saw his parents willingly give their lives in the name of a different, Christian order.

The same loss of life suggests two opposing interpretations: a just death that stabilizes a community threatened by revolution or violent disintegration (the traditional aim of the scapegoat ritual); an unjust death

which reveals the community's basis in violence and thus becomes an argument against the existing regime (the message of Christ's sacrifice³). How do we choose between these interpretations—or others? Conrad's experience implies that sacrifice has a crucial role to play in defining the social order, but what exactly does any given sacrifice mean to the person who commits (or suffers) it and to the community in which it takes place? These, I think, are some of the central animating questions of Conrad's fiction and of his stance as a writer in the Flaubertian tradition of artist as scapegoat.

Conrad of course could not give a single answer. Four main forces shaped his understanding of sacrifice: his familial and national history; his affinity for paradox and oxymoron, which, as we will see in the first chapter, also structure the act of scapegoating; his admiration for Flaubert's model of artistic martyrdom; and finally his status as an exile, an outcast from an outcast nation. His response involved the weighing of many competing considerations, including, on the one hand, his ambivalent feelings toward his parents' sacrifice and the Christian values which motivated them; on the other, his ambivalent feelings toward the need for order which had crushed them. This study argues that the major phase of Conrad's career (from *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* through *Chance*) represents a tortured oscillation between the traditional, or for Conrad "pagan," meaning of sacrifice (that violence heals) and the Christian meaning (that the acrimony which leads to violence is the real problem). By the end of this phase, in *Chance*, Conrad finds a provisional refuge (if not certainty) in an ideal of love that repudiates violence and is consummated by sexual union, the most profound form of solidarity. In this way, all sacrifice might end, and an orphan might be reunited with the family and the country he loved.

Throughout this phase, Conrad tests different moral bases for the social order—including solidarity, the fixed standard of conduct, material interests, revolutionary idealism—in an effort to find one that could be affirmed through a doubt-tempered will to believe. Conrad sees the problem of social unrest through characters who are either guilty of adding to the unrest, often by betraying their community, or who try to heal the unrest, either from a position of relative innocence (a position generally reserved for female characters such as Emilia Gould in *Nostromo*, Natalia Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*, and Flora de Barral in *Chance*), or by atoning for their betrayal through sacrifice.

Implicit in Conrad's investigation of scapegoat characters is the sense that Conrad himself, as an artist, is a sort of scapegoat. While Marlow is a figure for the artist as storyteller, and while he is more or less a protagonist in the works he appears in, Conrad is not inclined to use artist figures as protagonists in the way Henry James might. But he does use characters who subtly refer back to himself as an artist. Sometimes he achieves this reference through a biographical connection, such as the way Jim's

career as first mate shadows Conrad's own, and sometimes through an encounter with the scene of writing itself (this is especially true with the narrator and Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*). But most often the reference is at the general level of the character's trajectory through the book. Writing for Conrad was a sacrifice which answered the charge that he had betrayed sacrifice itself by abandoning the Polish revolutionary cause of his parents. Thus, in his characters who begin by appearing to betray sacrificial values only to end by making a sacrifice, we can see a version of the artist.

In a certain sense, the way Conrad's center of gravity shifts from a traditional view of sacrifice to a Christian view anticipates Girard's distinction between a persecution text, which insists on the scapegoat's responsibility for the community's problems, and a victim text, which exposes the selection of the scapegoat as somewhat arbitrary and unjustified. But this shift does not proceed with neat linearity. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* itself oscillates between a persecution text unconsciously authored by Singleton, who correctly prophesizes that only Wait's death will bring the ship safely to port, and a victim text authored by the sentimental crew which feels tender toward Jimmy and wants to save him. Ultimately, the novel seems to recognize that the traditional scapegoat mechanism will no longer appear to be an innocent arbiter of social order which only punishes the guilty if an excessive consciousness about the plight of the victim, a suspicion or a desire that the victim might be innocent on some level, rushes in.

This sympathy for the victim is a major part of the Christian view of scapegoating, but one sign that this novel is not focusing on this perspective in the way the later novels do, is that, as his portrayal of Donkin suggests, Conrad seems especially resistant in this book to the notion of sympathy for victims, at least compared to his readiness to offer such sympathy to Natalia and Flora. He is suspicious both of the claim for sympathy on the part of Wait and Donkin and of the crew's willingness to give it. Most importantly, while the grace the crew receives at the end of the book has Christian overtones, the dominant mechanism for bringing peace to the ship, a mechanism to which the crew must reconcile itself, is a scapegoat sacrifice. To achieve peace through the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism, albeit a mechanism which is in many ways revealed as a vestige of its former self, means the community is still working within the traditional model, though now in crisis.

Christianity, on the other hand, hopes to bring peace by undoing the scapegoat mechanism itself, through exposing its workings. Lord Jim, in his showdown with Gentleman Brown, and Captain Anthony, in his showdown with the financier de Barral, both turn away from reciprocal violence, suggesting the possibility of a Christian interpretation of their deaths. In *Lord Jim*, this Christian view coexists in a sort of undecidable suspension with the traditional model, as practiced by the Patusanians,

with each subject to Marlow's sympathetic interest as well as his skepticism. *Under Western Eyes*, by examining Conrad's relation to his martyred predecessors (both literary and political), thoroughly exposes the workings of the traditional scapegoat mechanism and suggests a Christian alternative, albeit one out of Razumov's reach. In *Chance*, the Christian perspective is most clearly ascendant, though de Barral carries the torch for the sort of revenge that suits the traditional system.

As Conrad focuses more on the possible healing qualities of Christianity, figures such as Natalia and Flora replace the pagan Singleton as a touchstone of belief. These women articulate an ideal beyond reciprocal violence. Conrad's tendency to locate a Christ-like innocence in women shows him struggling with one possible answer to the problem of how his male characters can escape the world of social unrest, violence and betrayal. This is not to say that, like his admiring successor T. S. Eliot, Conrad "got religion," or became a practicing Christian, but that as he worked out his own experience of guilt in relation to the problem of reciprocal violence, he came to the notion that union with a person innocent of reciprocal violence, who in fact comes to represent the ideals opposed to it, was the way to a sort of redemption. Morally, this person tends to imitate Christ, but probably the most important characteristic of this person is that she is a woman. Union with a Christ-like woman, a person above the fray of reciprocal violence, seems a bid to heal one of Conrad's original psychic wounds: the loss of his mother to revolutionary violence.

Chance marks a sort of climax in Conrad's treatment of the scapegoat theme begun in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* because it explicitly alludes to and reverses certain outcomes in "*Narcissus*," *Lord Jim* and *Under Western Eyes*. In *Chance*, the financier de Barral seems to be playing James Wait's role by upsetting relations on the *Ferndale*, but, though he dies, he is pointedly not scapegoated as Wait is. With the help of Flora, the untried sailor Powell succeeds during the sort of crisis onboard ship which causes Jim's failure. Flora, a would-be scapegoat, saves herself. Captain Anthony and Flora are united, whereas Razumov must remain separated from Natalia. Captain Anthony goes down with his ship, whereas Jim can not.

As we would expect, the relatively optimistic resolution which *Chance* offers does not mean that Conrad has solved the problems with which he has been wrestling throughout his career. Looking beyond *Chance*, we can see Conrad returning to the problem of how to unite with a woman in *Victory*, *The Rescue* and *The Arrow of Gold*, showing the union itself as tragic in *Victory* and the mere attempt to achieve union as disastrous in *The Rescue* and *The Arrow of Gold*. *Chance* simply shows that while Conrad could imagine failure, he could also imagine success. This is consistent with his attraction to the scapegoat, an oxymoronic figure who has to fail in order to succeed, who is both guilty and innocent, who both betrays and unites the community.

* * * * *

Critical interest in Conrad and the scapegoat pattern has been intermittent. Critics like Fredric Jameson, Beth Sharon Ash, Paul Armstrong, R. D. Foulke, Bruce Henricksen, Aaron Fogel, and Gary Geddes raise the issue more or less in passing, in the course of making various arguments regarding various novels, including *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* *Lord Jim*, and *Chance*. Other critics, like Dorothy Van Ghent and Avrom Fleishman come very close to grappling with scapegoating in Conrad when they talk about whether Lord Jim or Nostromo, respectively, are tragic characters who take on the community's guilt, but neither one quite articulates the possible affinities between the tragic hero and the scapegoat. Likewise, the innumerable critics who refer to Conrad's characters as "outsiders" or "outcasts" or "victims" are alluding to the qualities that make them scapegoats, but such references only begin to investigate the sacrificial significance of these characters. Michiel Heyns and Leland Monk distinguish themselves from these critics by using their understanding of scapegoating as a basis for a comprehensive reading of a Conrad novel—*Lord Jim* and *Chance* respectively. Heyns' analysis takes off from Girard to focus on narrative structure, while Monk's approach is mainly linguistic, following Derrida.

While I share these theoretical references, my approach differs in that I focus on the thematic tension in Conrad between the traditional and the Christian views of scapegoating. My understanding of how these two views are warring in Conrad's fiction leads me to read the scapegoats in *Lord Jim* and *Chance* very differently. I tend to see Conrad's protagonists as the most important scapegoats in these novels, while Monk and Heyns see the stereotypical villain characters—Cornelius, Gentleman Brown, de Barral—as the only scapegoats. My approach also differs in that I treat the pattern in the context both of Conrad's familial inheritance and his literary inheritance. This context helps me to argue that the scapegoat pattern in Conrad deserves more than the scattered attention it has thus far received, that in fact it is the central and defining characteristic of his project as a writer. In his essay on Henry James, whom he finds a kindred spirit on this question, Conrad himself asserts, "That a sacrifice must be made, that something has to be given up, is the truth engraved in the innermost recesses of the fair temple built for our edification by the masters of fiction. There is no other secret behind the curtain."⁴

This study also undertakes to show that Conrad's exploration of sacrifice is not static, that it can not be grasped by analyzing a single novel or story, but that it evolves in subtle but significant ways throughout the major phase of his career. This sense for Conrad's evolution is of course an outgrowth of my readings of the novels but it also seems supported by

two general comments Conrad makes about his work. One is that he sees much of his work as being governed by a single "inner story." Conrad himself uses this phrase when discussing the impetus behind *A Personal Record*, which was to reveal the "inner story of most of my books, . . . the sources as well as . . . the aims," one of which was "to make Polish life enter English Literature" and another of which was to treat his sea life and his writing life along parallel lines.⁵ What I will try to show throughout this study is that, if we consider the biographical basis for his lifelong concern with sacrifice and scapegoating (the core experience of his life as a Pole) along with his habitual use of these themes in his works, we might reasonably propose that the primary plot of this "inner story" is an unfolding of the problem of scapegoating, with each novel marking an incremental shift in the narrative.

Second, Conrad himself sees his work as shifting its focus from novel to novel. Looking back on virtually his entire body of work and speaking of "the difficulty the critics felt in classifying it as romantic or realistic,"⁶ Conrad explains that "as a matter of fact, it is fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective. It is in those matters gradually, but never completely, mastered that the history of my books really consists."⁷ This penchant for oscillation, for the fluid movement between major poles such as realism and romanticism, can be seen *within* most of Conrad's works, but here Conrad is suggesting that it can also be highlighted as something that is happening *between* works and that comprises their collective history. Following Conrad's lead, I would suggest that if we isolate the major phase we can see a general shifting of groupings and perspectives regarding the problem of scapegoating, from a traditional orientation to a more Christian orientation, though within that shift, as within a complicated weather system, there are minor countervailing swirls, a persistence of smaller oscillations that mimic and yet reside within the larger movement.

But then, because the history for Conrad is never complete, in works after *Chance*, he re-opens problems provisionally resolved in that novel and handles them in different ways. The value of choosing the phase of work I am focusing on is that it does give us a good sense for the two perspectives governing Conrad's complex view of sacrifice and it also serves to link the often separated halves of his career—roughly, the "male" novels of betrayal and solidarity and the later "love" novels—under the rubric of his obsession with sacrifice. I have chosen to focus on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* *Lord Jim*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Chance*—with such major works as "Heart of Darkness," *Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent* in the background—because each seems to represent a significant inflection in the evolution of the scapegoat pattern within Conrad's fiction.

NOTES

1. Konrad Korzeniowski to Wincenty Lutoslawski, 11 June 1897, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 5 vols., ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983-96) 1: 357-358.

2. See Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, ed. Thomas C. Moser (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968) 131.

3. Here, and for much of my discussion of scapegoating, I am following René Girard. Girard discusses the effect of Christ's death on the scapegoat mechanism in *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (London: The Athlone Press, 1986) 100-212, and in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, trans. by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987) 180-262.

4. Conrad, "Henry James," *Notes on Life and Letters* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923) 15-16.

5. Conrad to J. B. Pinker, 7 October 1908, *Collected Letters*, 4: 139, 138. Conrad to Ford Madox Ford, 31 July 1909, *Collected Letters*, 4: 263.

6. Significantly, as we will see below in our discussion of *Lord Jim*, this opposition implicates the scapegoat mechanism.

7. Conrad to Richard Curle, June 25th 1923, *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Richard Curle (New York: Crosby Gaige, 1928) 120.

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