

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

# *Selected Short Stories*

JOSEPH CONRAD



SELECTED STORIES

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Joseph Conrad

*Introduction by*

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## **SELECTED SHORT STORIES**

## INTRODUCTION

The eleven short stories in this edition are taken from six of Conrad's seven collections of stories, tales, and nouvelles or long short stories.<sup>1</sup> Looseness of definitions here is deliberate because Conrad, like his publishers and such contemporaries as Henry James, used them unsystematically for any fiction where concision and rigorous selection were operative principles. Moreover, it is still evident today that subsequent attempts either to arrive at firm definitions of, or to distinguish between, 'tale', 'sketch' and 'short story', are impossible (Shaw, 20-1) and, I think, unrewarding. I prefer 'short story' because 'short' alerts us to the formal shaping, wroughtness and brevity treasured by Conrad and by such different practitioners as Poe, James and Kipling; and because 'story' retains a sense of the human teller and listener so characteristic of Conrad's framed narratives. I take 'short', following Poe, to refer to any story that can be read comfortably in 'from a half-hour to one or two hours . . . at one sitting', which is, perhaps, the most important and defining characteristic of this flexible and hybrid genre.<sup>2</sup> Thus the shortest I have chosen is 'The Lagoon' (5,700 words) and the longest is 'Karain' (16,000), and seven of the others are between 6,550 and 10,000 words.<sup>3</sup> Three other criteria governed my choice: these eleven are the best of the nineteen he wrote; they illustrate the range of his subjects and settings; and, more

1 For good formal descriptions of the various types of short story, see Abrams and Shaw (1-28). As Shaw notes 'the English language has no equivalent to "nouvelle" or "novella" other than "novelette", which has acquired a disparaging connotation' (20). Whenever possible, as here, I use only the author's name to identify a title. For full details turn to 'Works Cited' at the end of this Introduction. I thank Owen Knowles for his helpful critique of this Introduction.

2 Poe, 'Nathaniel Hawthorne', 572.

3 All the remaining ten tales gathered in Conrad's seven collections are long short stories or nouvelles; the shortest, 'Gaspar Ruiz', is nearly 19,000 words and the longest, 'The End of the Tether', is 47,000.

importantly, they demonstrate his radical and deliberate testing of the different 'ways of telling a tale' during the twenty years (1896-1916) that he devoted to the possibilities of the form.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, Conrad was from the beginning a restless experimenter whose great distinction lies in his ingenious and rigorous exploration of the undiscovered possibilities latent in one of the genre's most familiar forms, namely the framed short story in which a first-person narrator (who is sometimes the member of a group) introduces, comments on and encloses another's tale. This form proved most amenable to his vision of the artist's task, man's fate, and to his sense of his reader's role and functions. (Precisely because these stories are often teasing and enigmatic, I strongly advise readers who do not know them to read them first and then to return to this Introduction.)

## I

Conrad's first three short stories, 'The Idiots', 'An Outpost of Progress' and 'The Lagoon', were written successively in May, July and August 1896 in order to earn ready cash in the lucrative magazine market.<sup>5</sup> They represent his earliest experiments in the 'several ways of telling a tale'. 'The Idiots' is clearly modelled on Maupassant's example in that it has an anonymous first-person narrator who composes his story out of the 'listless answers to my questions' and 'indifferent words heard in wayside inns or on the very roads the idiots haunted' and who is used, initially, to guide our responses to 'a tale formidable and simple . . . endured by ignorant hearts'.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, however, the narrator sequentially unfurls the violent events of his lurid tale and, as in 'The Lagoon' which is told in the third person, there is no closing frame and, consequently, little interaction between the tellers, listeners and the reader.

4 Author's Note (1920) to *Within the Tides* (1916), p. ix.

5 For details of the burgeoning market for short stories see Keating, 34-5. On 3 June 1896, the *Cornhill* solicited short stories from Conrad stipulating 'a general rule' of '6000 or 8000 words' and offering a 'remuneration' of 'one guinea' for every page of 'about 450 words' (*A Portrait in Letters*, 24). He earned £50 for 'An Outpost' from *Cosmopolis*, £12 10s. for 'The Lagoon' from the *Cornhill*, and £40 for 'Karain' from *Blackwood's*. These are huge sums, given that the average wage per annum of an adult male in 1897 was £56 and Conrad received only £20 for *Almayer's Folly* (1895). Until the unlikely success of *Chance* in 1913, Conrad's debts rose inexorably; and it is, perhaps, no accident that he ceased writing short stories in the autumn of 1916.

6 *Tales of Unrest*, p. 58. All page references to the works of Conrad (other than the short stories in this edition) are to the Dent Collected Edition (1946-9).

In his Author's Note (1919) to *Tales of Unrest* (1898), Conrad referred to 'An Outpost' as 'the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa', the main portion being of course 'Heart of Darkness', begun over two years later (ix).<sup>7</sup> Conrad had worked in the Belgian Congo in 1890 and both stories are pervaded with 'All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw – all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy' (I, 294).<sup>8</sup> The greatness of 'An Outpost' is inseparable from its narrative method. Conrad achieves 'a scrupulous unity of tone' arising from (as Lothe and Hawthorn demonstrate) an ironic method (perfected by Flaubert), that he never used again in his short stories, but that characterises two of his finest novels, *Nostromo* (1904) and *The Secret Agent* (1907).<sup>9</sup> All three works combine an Olympian omniscience which works for detachment and thematic suggestiveness with a rich exploitation of the free indirect style which renders the characters' thoughts in their own idiom, initially evoking the reader's scorn but also arousing sympathy for their desperation and bewilderment – most noticeable in 'An Outpost' in the depiction of Kayerts' confusion after his accidental killing of Carlier. Like its great successors, 'An Outpost' is also remarkable for its 'merciless vividness of detail' (I, 303) and for the sheer intelligence and inclusiveness of its commentary which embraces not only the two insignificant 'pioneers of trade and progress', but all 'whose existence is only rendered possible through

7 Although Conrad was acutely aware that 'I must do something to live', and although he appreciated 'the general rule' governing the length of the short story, his 'effort at conciseness' in 'An Outpost of Progress' ran to 10,000 words (*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1, 297. There are now five volumes; hereafter the appropriate number and page will appear in parentheses after the quotation). *Cosmopolis*, therefore, insisted on 'cutting it in two'; and, as he rightly feared, 'the first half read by itself' does 'appear strangely pointless' because, following one criterion for the short story, he had ensured that 'all the sting . . . is in the tail' (I, 299).

8 Cedric Watts in his fine Introduction to *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, quotes from an article in the July 1897 number of *Cosmopolis* which praises British imperialism in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The sardonic radicalism of Conrad's tale depicting the 'civilising mission' as 'an avidity for commercial profit' contradicts the ethos of the magazine (viii–ix).

9 As he worked on *The Secret Agent*, Conrad chose 'An Outpost' in 1906 for *Grand Magazine's* 'My Best Story' series, highlighting both its 'unity of tone' and his 'inflexible and solemn resolve not to be led astray by my subject' (Lothe, 48–9). For Conrad's conscious homage to Flaubert see his letter to Garnett (I, 292), and Graver (11). Garnett's critique of 'An Outpost' probably (alas!) convinced Conrad to eschew omniscient narration in all his future short stories (I, 300).

the high organisation of civilised crowds' (89). And while we readily concur with Kayerts' shocked reaction to Henry Price's bartering of natives for ivory – 'Slavery is an awful thing' – we, also, are doomed to believe in 'words' because 'Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make': and, as we watch the appalling, drolly rendered disintegration of the hapless pair, we are asked to accept the terrible, quintessential Conradian belief that 'about feelings people really know nothing' (105).

'The Lagoon' was a deliberate attempt to accommodate the demands of the magazines and, as Conrad wryly informed Garnett, it 'is very much Malay indeed' (1, 296), containing 'the usual forests river – stars – wind sunrise . . . and lots of secondhand Conradese' (1, 301). Like 'Karain', it taps and stimulates the late-Victorian appetite for the exotic so expertly fostered by Stevenson and Kipling. The two violent, melodramatic tales of tribal conflict, passionate love, and betrayal, told by Malay warriors to white listeners, delighted Conrad's reviewers because they juxtaposed opposing racial cultures, instincts and beliefs and 'brought the East to our very doors' (Sherry, *The Critical Heritage*, 110).

Conrad thought of both stories as pot-boilers. He composed 'The Lagoon' quickly; but 'Karain', which he began in February 1897, thinking it would 'be easy', because it would fit the mould of 'seven to eight thousand words' (1, 358), proved 'a painful task' (1, 342). He discovered, however, like Henry James, that 'the rude prescription of brevity at any cost' was at odds with the complex narrative strategies of this experimental tale.<sup>10</sup> 'Karain' is in fact a key story in the history of Conrad's development as a writer, because he exploits more fully the teasing ending of 'The Lagoon' and builds upon its embryonic teller-listener structure, turning it into a fully-fledged tale within a tale. Thus his use of both a narrative audience and a characterised frame-narrator who introduces, comments on, and encloses another's tale anticipates the strategies of novels such as *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Chance* (1913), of long short stories such as 'Heart of Darkness' and 'Falk', and of all the remaining stories in this volume, except for 'The Secret Sharer'. As these elaborate structures show, once Conrad's imagination seizes a subject, 'a purely temperamental' imperative ensures that their evolution will manifest 'my unconventional grouping and . . . perspective wherein almost all my "art" consists' (Jean-Aubry, 2, 316). They confirm James's intuition that Conrad's 'wandering, circling, yearning, imaginative faculty' sponsors narratives that usually enact 'a prolonged



hovering flight of the subjective over the outstretched ground of the case exposed'.<sup>11</sup>

Conrad's indirect narrative strategies show that – in marked contrast to most practitioners of the genre – he did not aim at 'pure story telling'. Rather, as he told Blackwood, 'I am *modern*', because his work is based not on action and facts alone, but on 'action observed, felt and interpreted' (2, 418): felt in 'the light of a sincere mood' (Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*), and construed through the consciousness of the listener-narrator who functions as 'a medium of illumination' for the reader (Levenson, 21). Inevitably, therefore, his hovering narrators lack the pace and robustness of (say) Kipling's first-person 'special correspondent' narrator in the tales of the common soldier in India gathered in *Life's Handicap* (1891); and, correspondingly, the careful often elaborate framings of Conrad's short stories ensure that the 'episode' cannot become (as James noted in 'Rudyard Kipling') a 'detachable, compressible "case"', making for an immediate and 'vivid picture' (1131).

The hovering flights of all Conrad's first-person narrators as they strive to interpret the strange and complex cases of (say) Karain, of Paul ('An Anarchist'), of the Count ('Il Conde'), and the Northman ('The Tale'), inevitably foreground an authorial self-consciousness, especially with regard to the motivation, justification, transmission and processes of the stories and to the inherent duplicity of language and of humankind's 'gift of expression' so marvellously captured in 'Heart of Darkness' (113). Correspondingly, almost all of Conrad's narratives are presented as transmitted orally, so that 'hearing and telling are the ground of the story . . . and the measure of its duration' (Said, 94). Thus, as we shall see, Conrad strives to make his readers 'collaborate with the author' (2, 394) because we function as overhearers of all the voices (whether tellers or listeners) and are obliged both to negotiate and weigh their competing, often partial interpretations.

'Karain: A Memory', is a typically mischievous title. It draws attention to three memories: to the 'subjective' musings of the reminiscing white, unnamed frame-narrator; to the 'case' of the titular character's memory of betrayal which attests also to the power of memory, fuelled by shame and guilt, to invoke 'noiseless phantoms' (55) that render even 'the ruler of a conquered land, a lover of war and danger . . . the slave of the dead' (59); and, as the framing coda (set seven years later in London) reveals, to Jackson's memory of Karain,

11 'The New Novel' (1914), 151, 149. James's remarks refer to Marlow's role and functions in *Chance*.

which is so vivid and disturbing that he finds the visible phenomena of metropolitan life to which the narrator appeals more phantasmal than either the native chief's dramatic spectacle of heroic life or his haunting tale of possession. Hence the last line of the story ('I think that, decidedly, he [Jackson] had been too long away from home') teases the reader, simultaneously confirming the frame-narrator's Western scepticism and raising the alarming possibility that 'the anger and the fear of a struggle against a thought, an idea', 'preys upon life', whether native or Western (31).

Conrad's narrative strategies, therefore, throw the burden of interpretation upon 'what the reader thinks' (74). Do we concur with the narrator's invocations of 'Greenwich Time' as 'a protection and a relief' (55-6) and of the activity of the metropolis as bulwarks against the unsettling re-definitions of the real raised by Karain's memory? Or do we agree with Jackson's sense that 'the noiseless phantoms' evoked by Karain are more real than the civility and order of Western life manifest in the image of 'a policeman, helmeted and dark, stretching out a rigid arm at the crossing of the streets' (78)? The very oppositions in this typical description ('helmeted and dark' and 'rigid') suggest the story's 'crossing' of unknowability and menace with the narrator's need to 'think . . . decidedly' (79) in order to control and ward off the darkness. Thus, in Wollaeger's fine formulation, the reader is persuaded to respond to ways in which 'The narrative holds in suspension a complex set of conflicting attitudes toward the question of what lies in the mysterious "elsewhere" beyond the empirical' (50). Our uncertain response is, therefore, fitting for several reasons: we enact Karain's swings between belief and unbelief in invisible forces and the white man's power to banish them; the narrative's between 'the fear of outer darkness' (52) - which embraces the native teller and Jackson the Western listener and rememberer - and our own submission to, and reliance on, the surface truth sustained by the ongoing, threatening activity of the busy metropolis; and, finally, we acknowledge the ambiguous stance of the sceptical author who, demonstrating his own haunting relation to the world, claims the power to haunt us with the ghosts of his own creation.

## II

Gratified by publication in *Blackwood's* of 'Karain' in its entirety, Conrad in June 1898 dispatched 'Youth' (13,000 words), which was published complete in September. 'Youth' is an important development for two interrelated reasons: as he records in his Author's Note

(1917), it is the first to draw upon his own personal 'experience' and 'marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow', Conrad's most important story-teller who would appear later in 'Heart of Darkness', *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Chance* (1913). Conrad employs Marlow as a *persona* in order to distance himself from the actions and facts of his life and to observe, shape and interpret the 'bit of life' (2, 67) surveyed:<sup>12</sup> and he enables Conrad to avail himself of a flexible conversational voice that combines the 'intimately felt' (2, 375) and the lyric intensity of poetry.

Garnett's description of the story – 'a modern English epic of the Sea' (Sherry, *Critical Heritage*, 131) – is apt for several interrelated reasons: 1. the frame narrator's opening words ('This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate') and Marlow's paean to the 'something inborn and subtle and everlasting' that characterises English as opposed to 'French or German merchant-man', sound the national and patriotic notes of the 'chronicle' (32);<sup>13</sup> 2. the devotion of the stalwart men and their protracted struggle to save the *Judea* – 'all rust, dust, grime' with her boy's own 'motto "Do or Die"' inscribed underneath 'some sort of a coat of arms' – enlarges our conception of heroism; 3. 'Youth' 'like the *Odyssey* is a long voyage fraught with a seemingly endless and insurmountable series of hazards or tests' (Renner, 302); 4. correspondingly, Marlow invites his hearers to see the voyage as one 'ordered for the illustration of life . . . a symbol of existence'. And generations of readers, including most recently and thrillingly, Gavin Young, have responded to Marlow's determination to discover 'how good a man I was' and to his celebration of youth's 'feeling that I could outlast the sea, the earth, and all men' (41).<sup>14</sup>

'Youth' is, however, 'modern' because it is also a mock-epic. The tonal interplay of these two perspectives is wonderfully managed; and the reader simultaneously responds to the young Marlow's almost infinite capacity for action and to the older self's amused and searing

12 The story closely follows Conrad's adventures as second mate of the *Palestine*, which left Newcastle for Bangkok on 29 November 1881, and after grotesque ill-luck arrived at the port of Muntok on Bangka Island off the coast of Java on 15 March 1882. For details see Najder, 73–7.

13 Graver, among others, suggests that Conrad 'may have been deliberately catering to the patriotic ultraconservative point of view for which *Blackwood's* was so famous' (76). Significantly, Conrad changed the *Palestine's* multinational crew to an all-British one in the story.

14 Young was inspired to go *In Search of Conrad* (1991) by his headmaster's reading of this sequence.

recognition of humankind's ephemeral struggle for significance and meaning while 'surrounded by an impenetrable night' (33).<sup>15</sup>

## III

In the autumn of 1900 Conrad ceased to play a direct role in the selling of his own fiction when he engaged J. B. Pinker, the literary agent, to manage his affairs. In search of advances and aware of Pinker's ability to place stories quickly, Conrad completed 'Typhoon', 'Falk' and 'Amy Foster' between September 1900 and June 1901. Pinker looked to popular magazines of high circulation and low quality such as *Pall Mall Magazine* and the *Illustrated London News* because they paid better than *Blackwood's*. Conrad promised Pinker that 'Amy Foster' would be 'really short this time' (2, 331); but it turned out to be 11,000 words long and (unlike 'Youth') was butchered into three weekly segments in December 1901 by the *Illustrated London News*.

After the story appeared in *Typhoon, and Other Stories* (1903), George Gissing acknowledged that it 'takes great hold upon me – as pathetic a thing as can be found in literature' (*A Portrait in Letters*, 41) and an anonymous reviewer boldly called it 'one of the most perfect short stories we have ever read'.<sup>16</sup> 'Amy Foster' is, I think, Conrad's best short story, not least because in it his vision of 'all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life' and constitute 'the only fundamental truth of fiction' finds its purest and most surprising expression (2, 348-49). Once again, Conrad reworks the strategies of his earlier stories, employing an unnamed frame-narrator, who introduces and comments on the main story, which is narrated by a Marlovian figure called Dr Kennedy, who gathers and shapes the local gossip. This time, however, Conrad locates 'the essential differences of the races' (2, 402) neither in the East nor Africa; rather, in a unique experiment, he records 'the simply tragic' fate of a shipwrecked Pole, Yanko Goorall, in Romney Marsh, Kent, thereby enabling him to present England itself as 'an undiscovered country'.<sup>17</sup>

I have written elsewhere about the interrelation between setting,

15 One anonymous early reviewer balked at 'the barren and not very pretty philosophy of "Youth"': and John Masefield, accustomed to the 'vigorous, direct, effective' narratives of Kipling, objected to the 'page after page of stately and brilliant prose' of 'Youth' (Sherry, *Critical Heritage*, 137, 142).

16 *Speaker*, 8, 6 June 1903; reprinted in Carabine, *Critical Assessments*, 1, 302.

17 Not surprisingly, therefore, many Conradians regard it as 'a work of spiritual autobiography, embodying his ever-present feelings of loneliness, foreignness, and isolation, and his sense of exile from Poland' (Herndon, 549).

narration and perspectives in the story. Suffice it to note here that Kennedy shares Marlow's 'confounded democratic quality of vision' (*Lord Jim*, 94) and articulates, with an intensity unmatched in English literature since Wordsworth, Conrad's awareness of 'people of obscure minds, of imperfect speech' who await 'the fertilising touch' of the story-teller to transmute their 'imperfect speech' into the language of art.<sup>18</sup> Yanko's broken speech and naïvety ensure that England becomes (as it had for the Romans in 'Heart of Darkness') 'one of the dark places of the earth' (48). And his dejected vision of English 'faces' as from 'the other world – dead people' (141) echoes the frame-narrator's commentary on the still, sad music of humanity and prepares us for his terrible death. Yanko's fate is more 'simply tragic' than any in Conrad's fiction because it is bounded by Amy's two basic actions. In an 'act of impulsive pity' she offers him 'such bread as the rich eat in my country' and then when he is delirious and pleading in Polish 'for water – only a little water', she is frightened and flees with their child in her arms; 'Lying face down and his body in a puddle' (154) Yanko reminds us of Kurtz in 'Heart of Darkness' who is buried 'in a muddy hole' (150). Both return to the 'powdered clods' from which all life once emerged and both, in Kennedy's closing words, 'perish' (for very different reasons) 'in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair' (156).

## IV

After finishing 'The End of the Tether' in November 1902, Conrad began what he imagined would be a short story called 'Nostromo' that soon manifested in extreme form the unforeseen principle of growth so characteristic of his creative habits. He eventually finished his longest and greatest novel in September 1904 and his letters throughout this period and beyond are a catalogue of personal and familial illnesses, of writing blocks, and ever-expanding debts. Lured by the promise of quick returns, Conrad proclaimed in May 1905 that 'Short stories – is the watchword now' (3, 243). Thus by November he finished the long short story 'Gaspar Ruiz' and then in less than two months he wrote 'An Anarchist', 'The Brute' and 'The Informer'.

Conrad loathed these pressures: 'What cuts me to the quick is the forced deterioration of my work produced hastily, carelessly in a temper of desperation' (3, 300). His need for commercial success and popularity led him to denigrate and to *misrepresent* these short stories, as his reply

18 I quote from the manuscript of 'The Husband' (Conrad's early name for the story), Carabine, 'Irreconcilable Differences', 192.

to his publisher's request for 'a general definition of the stories' that he could use to advertise the forthcoming *A Set of Six* reveals:

All the stories are stories of incident – action – not of analysis. All are dramatic in a measure but by no means of the gloomy sort. All, but two, draw their significance from the love interest – though of course they are not love stories in the conventional meaning. They are not studies – they touch no problem. They are just stories in which I've tried my best to be *simply entertaining*. [4, 29–30]

'Il Conde' centres on a single action and both 'An Anarchist' and 'The Informer' are packed full of incident, with the latter even having a 'love interest'. They are, however, neither '*simply entertaining*' nor can they be understood, as Graver maintains, as 'pot-boilers' (144). On the contrary they are unconventional precisely because they *are* stories of analysis; and the entertainment they offer is inseparable from their elaborate structures, baffled frame-narrators, curious tellers and riddling endings, which once again foreground problems of interpretation.

'The Informer', for example, is one of Conrad's most complicated narratives. It is told by an unnamed frame-narrator, a collector 'of Chinese bronzes and porcelain', who receives a visit from 'Mr X', another connoisseur, who is 'preceded by a letter of introduction from a good friend of mine in Paris' who 'collects acquaintances' (79).<sup>19</sup> Mr X is his prime specimen because 'He is the greatest rebel . . . of modern times' (80). The fastidious narrator admits that he doesn't 'understand anarchists', (81) but is curious about their underground activities. One evening over dinner Mr X casually remarks, 'There's no amendment to be got out of mankind except by terror and violence' (83), and then tells his shocked listener an elaborate, contemptuous tale of his successful staging of 'A conspiracy within a conspiracy' (94) designed to flush out 'the most systematic of informers' (100). That informer turns out to be Sevrin, who gives himself away because of his love for 'a charming, generous' upper-class girl whose involvement with anarchism, love for Sevrin, and subsequent 'retreat into a monastery' are cynically dismissed by Mr X as 'Gestures! Mere gestures of her class' (108). Mr X ends and frames his tale with the withering remark, 'That is why their kind is fated to perish' (109).

The narrative, however, ends with a brief coda in which the frame-narrator expresses his disgust both at X's cynicism and his Parisian

19 Sherry argues persuasively that 'The Informer' is based on Conrad's knowledge of the anarchist activities of Ford Madox Ford's juvenile relatives, Olive, Henry and Arthur Rossetti, *Conrad's Western World*, 205–18.

friend's enthusiastic pride in X. The friend agrees that X's cynicism is 'abominable':

'And then, you know, he likes to have his little joke sometimes,' he added in a confidential tone.

I fail to understand the connection of this last remark. I have been utterly unable to discover where in all this the joke comes in. [102]

Clearly, the 'entertainment' in this Chinese-box narrative resides in the reader's willingness to discover the joke that evades its uncomprehending teller. As we have seen, this is typical of framed narratives that presume and incorporate listeners. The ending, I think, prompts two main and opposing lines of enquiry: one that concentrates on Mr X's relationship to his bemused and outraged auditor and another that concentrates on the doubly framed narrative and its juxtaposed voices. If we pursue the first line, then several possibilities emerge. That X is a surrogate for the author who enjoys his teller's jokes at the expense of his bourgeois auditor, who finds (say) his presentation of the girl 'intolerable to my sentiment of womanhood' (96); and delights in X's playful choice of 'a *bombe glacée*' as he begins his tale of anarchists who hide explosives in tins of 'Stone's Dried Soup' (88). Such absurd details are as 'entertaining' as the 'sort of theatrical expedient' (93) X uses to unmask the informer. This line suggests, then, that X's cynicism is perhaps a pose, an act designed to offend his auditor and to express Conrad's contempt for the radical political chic of 'that class . . . used to the feeling of being specially protected' whose members include the socialist lawyer in 'An Anarchist'.

If we consider 'all this', however, the joke illuminates Conrad's preference for the title 'Gestures' as 'the proper one, as bearing not on the facts but on the moral satirical idea' (3, 305). Following this line, X inadvertently puns on the title and *informs* against himself; like the girl he detests, he too knows 'little of anything except of words' (92).<sup>20</sup> Thus, compared to 'the Professor', 'the true spirit of an extreme revolutionist', X's framing glosses on his own tale which advocate terror and prophesy the death of 'that class' are revealed as 'sham meaning'; and his life, like the connoisseurs of chaos he despises, is also 'all a matter of pose and gesture' (84). From this angle X, 'safe within

20 Conrad feared and suspected revolutionaries and anarchists because they could not see that 'words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in facts should become distorted – or blurred' (2, 200) – with disastrous consequences for action and, we might add, for interpretation.

his reputation of merely the greatest destructive publicist who ever lived' (80), is truly terrifying because his contempt is only matched by his complacency; his words inspire both 'the amateurs of emotion' he despises (84) and 'fanatics of social revolution' such as Horne (89); and he is admired by the Parisian 'collector of acquaintances'. Again, seen from this bleak perspective, the frame-narrator's judgement that X's 'cynicism was simply abominable' is fully justified (101). Moreover, such thoughts prompt the recognition that his 'cynicism' distorts his tale *and* is humanly disabling. All seems jaundiced to his jaundiced eye. He fails, therefore, to see 'the bitterest contradictions' in his own tale: that Sevrin informs 'from conviction' and then confesses to save the girl he truly loves and wishes to protect; and that the girl's 'gestures' may be misconceived but, none the less, she is heart-broken by her lover's betrayal and suicide. Thus buried in X's tale and the uncomprehending frame-narrator's narrative, is an alternative and untold story of thwarted love and genuine misery, revealing X's inability either to interpret or to love humankind whether viewed individually, or, as an anarchist, collectively. We still await a comprehensive appreciation of 'An Anarchist' and 'The Informer'. They are, *contra* Graver, distinctly 'modern' reworkings of 'the conventions of popular fiction' and radical experiments in handling 'time-honored formula[s]' of 'melodrama and murder' and of 'political intrigue of the cops-and-robbers sort' (125). Compared to *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* they do 'lack "quality" '; but Conrad's 'fear they are but superficial' is, surely, a harsh self-critique (3, 346).

Conrad finished 'Il Conde' in early December 1906. On 18 August 1908, shortly after *A Set of Six* was published, he wrote to Ada Galsworthy: 'I am so glad you had . . . several good words for the Conde. Truth is I am rather proud of that little trick. It took me ten days' (4, 106). He glossed the 'trick' twelve years later in his Author's Note to the volume:

. . . the last story in the volume, the one I call Pathetic, whose first title is Il Conde . . . is an almost verbatim transcript of the tale told me by a very charming old gentleman whom I met in Italy . . . Anyone can see that it is something more than a verbatim report, but where he left off and where I began must be left to the acute discrimination of the reader who may be interested in the problem . . . What I am certain of, however, is that it is not to be solved, for I am not at all clear about it myself by this time. All I can say is that the personality of the narrator was extremely suggestive quite apart from the story he was telling me. [vii]



Surprisingly, these teasing hints were ignored for over fifty years and as late as 1969 Graver praised the story because 'it exploits some of the most familiar conventions of magazine fiction: direct narrative, a suspenseful plot, a simple hero, and an undifferentiated villain' (144). A more egregious misreading is impossible to imagine. Why? Basically, Graver failed to see that the Count's tale is not a 'direct' 'verbatim report', but a carefully constructed collusion between the unnamed frame-narrator and the Count. In marked contrast to the tales of Paul ('An Anarchist') and X, therefore, the Count's account of 'the young man' who robs him is appropriated by the listener and told as reported speech and we are asked to accept that 'the poor Count' returns home to die because 'He was shocked at being the selected victim, not of robbery so much as of contempt' (305). In fact, every aspect of the short story subtly invites the discriminating reader to construct an alternative explanation against the grain of both the latter's telling and the former's empathetic commentary: the fastidious, moderate Count is unable to admit his homosexual inclinations and the gullible, sympathetic frame-narrator is unable to detect them.

I only have space to sketch the ways in which Conrad's 'trick' works. As several critics have noticed, every reference to the customs of the ancient Romans, to the places they inhabited, and to the statues they built, all of which are associated with the Count, are 'suggestive of decadence and immorality' (Hughes, 19). Thus, for example, the story opens with the narrator's fastidious encomium on 'that marvellous legacy of antique art whose delicate perfection has been preserved for us by the catastrophic fury of a volcano', and we learn that the 'perfectly unaffected' Count first addresses him 'over the celebrated Resting Hermes' (289). Neither, however, understands the powerful forces of fertility, phallus worship, lewdness, death, thievery and duplicity associated with this Roman god. Hence, from the outset, Conrad detaches himself from his tellers, and prefigures the destruction of the Count's 'delicate perfection' at the hands of the furious young thief.

Similarly, at every point in both the Count's tale and the narrator's summary of it, we note inconsistencies and contradictions. Thus, for example, the Count returns obsessively to 'the South Italian type of young man with . . . red lips . . . and liquid black eyes so wonderfully effective in leering or scowling' (298); and the narrator imagines the Count 'enjoying to the full, but with his usual tranquillity, the balminess of this southern night' (299), whereas the reader notes that he approaches the youth in the dark alley three times. The Count's story, then, is more 'deucedly queer' (more dubious and suspicious) than the narrator realises, for to be robbed is not 'dishonouring'; and aged