Conrad in the nineteenth century

Ian Watt.

Conrad

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

IAN WATT

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To George and Josephine

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Preface

This attempt to provide a comprehensive account of Conrad's literary career has three main aspects: biographical, historical, and interpretative.

The study is not a critical biography, but it presents in a relatively summary fashion the markedly different picture of Conrad's life which has begun to emerge from the works of many scholars in the last twenty years—notably those of Zdzisław Najder and Jocelyn Baines. There is an introductory chapter on the early years; after that, each chapter concentrates on one particular novel, but begins with a section about Conrad's life during the period of composition. The difficulties and dangers of biographical criticism are well known; the justification for its use in the present case is that although Conrad was not a directly autobiographical writer, his fictional world is an intensely personal one whose nature is illuminated by an understanding of the inordinate difficulty of his life, and of the close but complicated relationship in his works between their sources in personal experience and their fictional embodiment.

The biographical perspective is closely connected with the historical. Partly, perhaps, because the critics of the last few decades have not been very interested in literary and intellectual history, these aspects of Conrad's work have not received much attention. Conrad certainly raises especially difficult, and in part insoluble, problems for the literary historian; but the difficulties arise not because Conrad was anomalously immune to the historical process, but because his inheritances from the past were so rich and diverse. For this reason the early chapters place Conrad in his literary context at considerable length, taking up such matters as Conrad's relationship to his Polish past, to the romantic movement, to the popular and highbrow traditions in the novel, to the impressionist and symbolist traditions, and to the treatment of time in narrative. This placing of Conrad in his historical perspective also involves some account of how his works stand in relation both to the multifarious literary currents of the late nineteenth century, and to what we are still calling the "modern" movement in literature. These historical considerations help us to understand the nature and the originality of Conrad's narrative methods more clearly; and these methods, in turn, are directly related to Conrad's sensitiveness to the fundamental social and intellectual

conflicts of his period. The ideological sections of the chapters on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness* suggest that although Conrad was not exactly a philosophical novelist, his basic intellectual assumptions were very similar to those of the most original and influential thinkers of the last decades of the nineteenth century.

But the main emphasis of this study is, in a broad sense, exegetic. The complete diversity—or disarray—of contemporary opinion about what literature and its criticism is or should be, has meant that we are further than ever from anything like a consensus in our views of the basic character of Conrad's literary achievement; and this disagreement may justify an attempt to see whether a measure of critical consensus may not be promoted by a fairly detailed and literal interpretation of Conrad's main works. This attempt imposes a special kind of critical approach: there must be enough quotation to enable the reader to see the evidence in the text for the interpretation given; and the primary commitment must be to what may be called the literal imagination—the analytic commentary restricts itself to what the imagination can discover through a literal reading of the work.

These aims and methods largely account for the unexpected length of this study: it seemed better to be explicit, even at the risk of seeming obvious, than to leave unclear the relation of the argument to the text, or to omit reference to significant contrary evidence. One regrettable result of the length imposed by these objectives is that a good many of Conrad's works are relatively neglected. This neglect is certainly not meant to countenance the notion that Conrad does not have to be read entire—variety and magnitude are an essential part of his achievement; but to give a reasonably full account of Conrad's development as a novelist, and of a dozen or so of his major works, is already a very large enterprise.

The problem of scale is particularly evident in this first volume, which deals with Conrad's career up to 1900, and concentrates on only four works, *Almayer's Folly, The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Heart of Darkness,* and *Lord Jim.* The second volume, although of much the same length, will contain ten chapters, dealing with the short stories, the autobiographical writings, the last years, and seven of the novels: *Typhoon, Nostromo, The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes, Chance, Victory,* and *The Shadow-Line.*

Acknowledgments

My debts are too numerous, and stretch too far back, to acknowledge fully. When I began research in 1955, I received much generous help from people who had known Conrad, and especially from his sons John and Borys Conrad, and his friends Richard Curle, Joseph Retinger, David Garnett and Dame Rebecca West. Since then I have accumulated many further debts: to such notable Conrad scholars as Jocelyn Baines, Albert Guerard, Larry Graver, Thomas Moser, Zdzisław Najder, and Norman Sherry, who was long ago my guide along Captain Whalley's walk in Singapore; to many students at the universities of Hawaii, East Anglia, California at Berkeley, and Stanford, of whom at least three, Douglas Dey, Lowell Cohn and Hunt Hawkins, must be singled out; to those who read earlier versions of this book, Brian Barry, Andrzej Busza, Donald Davie, John Foster, Michael Levenson, Thomas Moser, Przemysław Mroczkowski, Zdzisław Najder, Ruth Watt, and Cedric Watts; and to those who kindly supplied me with copies of unpublished letters or other material on Conrad, including Edmund A. Bojarski, Mario Curreli, Bill Daleski, Eloise Knapp Hay, Frederick Karl, Ugo Mursia, Ray Stevens, Wit Tarnawski, David Thorburn, Tzvetan Todorov, Hans van Marle and Ivo Vidan. I am also deeply indebted to those who materially assisted the completion of this book; to my research assistants at different times and places, John Halverson, John W. Carr, Christine Peutsche, Suzanne Doyle, and especially to Bob Beitcher, Jack Prostko, and Ken Whiting whose devoted help in the later stages of copyediting, proofreading and indexing saved me from innumerable errors of fact or expression; to those with whom I have talked or corresponded about Conrad, who include, in addition to many of those above, Fred Crews, Leon Edel, Avrom Fleishman, Samuel Hynes, David R. Smith and Tony Tanner; to those who have helped me solve particular problems, notably Gabriele Davis, Joseph Harris, Georges Poulet, John Powers, and Edward Said; to Joan Warmbrunn, Kay Jenks and Josephine Guttadauro, who rose nobly to the occasion when time grew short; to Dorothy Brothers, for her two years of dedication and cryptographic skill; to Patricia Hodgart, Thomas Moser, John Gladstone and Mark Wollaeger who were more than up to proof; and lastly to Virginia Shrader, whose help with the final version and the index has been invaluable.

This study, to say nothing of my life, would have been impossible without the facilities of the British Museum, of the university libraries of Cambridge, Norwich, Berkeley, and Stanford. I am much indebted to them, to the London Library, which supplied me with books when I began the first draft of this volume in Spain in 1971, and to Margaret Amara and Christine Hoth, at the library of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, for their special efforts on my behalf. To the British Museum, the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Beinecke Library at Yale, the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library, the Morgan Library, the Academic Center Library at the University of Texas, the Philip H. and A. S. W. Rosenbach Foundation, and to Doubleday and Company Inc., and Withers (Richard Underwood), acting on behalf of the Trustees of the Joseph Conrad Estate, I gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint copyright materials.

I am indebted to the generosity of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for making possible a half-year of research in 1959, and a whole year in 1972–1973; to the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship in 1966–1967; to the authorities at Berkeley and Stanford for sabbatical leaves; to the Neophilological Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences for inviting me to Poland in September 1972, where I was memorably initiated into some of the Polish aspects of Conrad; to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a fellowship for independent study and research in 1976–1977; to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences for a fellowship in 1966–1967, and another in 1976–1977 during which the basic drafts of this volume were completed; and finally to my colleagues at Stanford, Bliss Carnochan, Dean of Graduate Studies, and Halsey Royden, Dean of Humanities and Sciences, whose provision of research and secretarial assistance did much to mitigate the rigours of the last stages of composition.

Portions of the present text have earlier appeared in various journals: "Conrad Criticism and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',*" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 12 (1958), 257–83; "Joseph Conrad: Alienation and Commitment," in *The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented to Basil Willey,* ed. H. S. Davies and George Watson (Cambridge, 1964); "Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus',*" in *Novel,* 7 (1974), 101–15; "*Almayer's Folly:* Memories and Models," in *Mosaic,* 8 (1974), 163–82; "Pink Toads and Yellow Curs: An Impressionist Narrative Device in *Lord Jim,*" in *Joseph Conrad Colloquy in Poland, 5–12 September 1972* (Warsaw, 1975); "Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness,*" in *The Southern Review,* 13 (1977), 96–113; "*Heart of Darkness* and Nineteenth-Century Thought," in *Partisan Review,* 45 (1978), 108–19; "From Joseph Conrad," in *The Missouri Review,* 1 (1978), 79–87; "Marlow, Henry James, and 'Heart of Darkness,' " in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 33 (1978), 159–74; and "The Ending of *Lord Jim,*" in *Conradiana,* 11 (1979), 3–21. To the editors and publishers of these, for permission to reprint, I render, as is customary, thanks.

Annotation and Abbreviations

I have tried to identify all but the briefest or most incidental quotations, to acknowledge my main sources of information and ideas, and occasionally to indicate further sources and contrary opinions. On the other hand, I have not attempted to substantiate information which is widely available in the main works on Conrad, or to provide a full conspectus of Conrad scholarship and criticism on the matters being discussed. Considerations of space have constrained me to some rather unaesthetic abbreviated forms of documentation. Thus nearly all page references for quotations from Conrad are given in the body of the text as a simple numeral (e.g., in a discussion of *Almayer's Folly* the parenthetic reference (13) gives the page number in the most complete available text, *Dent's Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad* [London: J. M. Dent, 1946–1955]). Where there are several successive quotations from Conrad which come from the same or immediately adjoining pages, a page reference is normally given only for the passage first quoted; if no page references are given for the succeeding quotations, they will be found either on the same page, or on the page immediately before or after. In the case of Conrad's shorter works—stories or essays—I have given the abbreviated form of the volume title, followed by the page number, as a parenthesis in the text; thus (*T U*, 93) is the reference to the page in "An Outpost of Progress," from the Dent volume entitled *Tales of Unrest.* The abbreviations used for Conrad's works and other much-quoted sources are listed below.

Unless otherwise indicated in the reference, the translations are my own.

Abbreviated Titles

A B Andrzej Busza, "Conrad's Polish Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on his Work," *Antemurale* 10 (Rome and London, 1966): 109–255.

B William Blackburn, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1958).

B C M Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

C *Conradiana: A Journal of Joseph Conrad,* 1968–. Now published by The Textual Studies Institute, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

C G C. T. Watts, ed., *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

E G Edward Garnett, ed., *Letters from Conrad, 1895 to 1924* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1928).

E K H Eloise Knapp Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

F M F Ford Madox Ford [Hueffer], *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924).

G Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

H D N *Heart of Darkness,* ed. Robert Kimbrough, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

J A Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday, 1965).

J B Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1960).

J C C Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and his Circle* (London: Jarrold's, 1935).

J D G John Dozier Gordan, *Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940).

L F G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Lettres françaises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1929).

L G Lawrence Graver, *Conrad's Short Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

L J N *Lord Jim,* ed. Thomas Moser, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

L L G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters,* 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1927).

M Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

N Zdzisław Najder, ed., *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends,* tr. Halina Carroll (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

N N D *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1914).

O E D *Oxford English Dictionary*

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

R C Richard Curle, ed., *Conrad to a Friend: 150 Selected Letters from Joseph Conrad to Richard Curle* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1928).

R R René Rapin, ed., *Lettres de Joseph Conrad à Marguerite Poradowska* (Geneva: Droz, 1966).

S C H Norman Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

S E W Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

S W W Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

T S *The Sisters: An Unfinished Story,* by Joseph Conrad, With an Introduction by Ford Madox Ford, ed. Ugo Mursia (1928; rpt. Milan: U. Mursia, 1968).

The main abbreviations used for Conrad's works (in the Dent Collected Edition) are:

L E *Last Essays*
M S *The Mirror of the Sea*
N L L *Notes on Life and Letters*
P R *A Personal Record*
T *Typhoon and Other Stories*
T H *Tales of Hearsay*
T U *Tales of Unrest*
W T T *Within the Tides*
Y *Youth—A Narrative; and Two Other Stories*

CHAPTER *I*

The Earlier Life: 1857–1894

i. 1857–1874: Poland

The exiled bard of Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* begins Poland's national epic with a patriotic apostrophe on the theme: No one can prize his health fully until he has lost it; and thus it is with one's native land. The burden of this and other losses weighed so deeply on Conrad all through his life that anyone beginning to write about it must wonder how far the triviality of his own deprivations may have disabled him for the task.

Poland can claim a much older continuous national tradition than England or France, not to mention its more recently consolidated neighbours Russia and Germany. It emerged as a nation within something like its present frontiers under the reign of Mieszko I towards the end of the tenth century; and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Poland was one of the largest, most powerful, and most civilized of the European powers. In the eighteenth century, however, foreign wars and internal political dissensions made Poland an easy prey to stronger neighbours, and it was eventually partitioned piecemeal by Austria, Prussia, and Russia in 1772, 1793, and finally in 1795. So it was in a great country, which for two generations already had ceased to exist as an independent state, that Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski was born, on 3 December 1857.

His father, Apollo Korzeniowski, came from a family whose ancestral lands had been confiscated in 1831 for their part in the last great national rising against Russian rule. Apollo was then attempting to farm a leased estate near Berdichev, a town in Podolia, one of the borderland provinces of Poland, and now part of the Soviet Ukraine. Both Apollo and Conrad's mother, Ewa (or Evelina) Bobrowska, came from the *szlachta,* or Polish nobility. Conrad himself later preferred to describe them as "land-tilling gentry," to disassociate his ancient but relatively unassuming stock from any suggestion of wealth or social exclusiveness: the Korzeniowskis and Bobrowskis certainly had little in common with the European aristocracy, or with such rich and powerful Polish magnates as the Radziwiłłs, Potockis and Czartoryskis. But although the *szlachta* were numerically a very large group, and often of modest means and occupations, they were nevertheless a nobility in the sense that they had the right to bear arms, and had

constituted the hereditary ruling class of Poland since feudal times. Conrad was always to retain much of their traditional chivalric code, and many of their general social attitudes and expectations. Though he never farmed, his dress and life style in England approximated, as far as means permitted, to that of the country gentleman—shotguns, dogs, horses, a groom; to his Polish friend J.H. Retinger, "he seemed," even as late as 1909, "a typical Polish landowner from the Ukraine."[1]

Poland's triple bondage after the partitions had driven many of her nobility into exile—among them Tadeusz Kościuszko; many more had left in the "Great Emigration" which followed the defeat of the 1830 insurrection. These "knights of liberty," as they were called, settled in their thousands throughout Western Europe, and there kept alive Polish hopes of independence both through their direct political activities and through their writings. One of the main forms taken by the patriotic feeling of the Poles was that expressed by their great Romantic poets, Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Krasiński; they developed a national Messianic myth, according to which the sufferings of Poland, which had arisen from its historic role of defending Europe against the barbarians and infidels of the East, were eventually destined, like those of Christ, to redeem the world. In practical political terms, however, and especially for the Poles who remained at home, the outlook seemed hopeless, and the long series of disastrous past failures led many to renounce any active resistance to Russia and to concentrate on internal economic and educational progress, combined with attempts to induce the Tzar to relax his tyranny. Still, to many Poles at home and abroad, anything seemed better than enslavement; there were several desperate local revolts; and in 1861, after two savagely repressed demonstrations in Warsaw, various groups began to prepare what was to prove the last and, at least in immediate terms, the most catastrophic, of Polish attempts to throw off the Russian yoke by force of arms.[2]

Conrad's father was prominently involved. After the failure of his

1. *Conrad and his Contemporaries* (London, 1941), pp. 54–55. According to Ford Madox Ford, Conrad was "frequently taken for a horse fancier," and liked it (*Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* [London, 1924], pp. 56–57; hereafter cited as *F M F*). The most authoritative account in English of Conrad's Polish aspect is that of Zdzisław Najder, whose *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends*, trans. Halina Carroll (London, 1964) was a major landmark in Conradian studies; hereafter cited as *N*.

2. On the political background see Aleksander Gieysztor et al., *History of Poland* (Warsaw, 1968), pp. 508–31; W.F. Reddaway et al., *The Cambridge History of Poland, 1697–1935* (Cambridge, 1941), pp. 374–88; Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795–1918* (Seattle, 1974); and Eloise Knapp Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 31–80, hereafter cited as *E K H*.

attempt at farming he had moved to nearby Żytomierz, and later to Warsaw, so that he could devote himself wholly to underground political organisation. In Warsaw he became the leader of a movement to unite various secret insurrectionary and progressive groups who were known as the "Reds," as opposed to the more gradualist "Whites." It was the Reds who formed the underground National Central Committee which was eventually to proclaim the insurrection, on 22 January 1863; but long before then Apollo Korzeniowski had been arrested and imprisoned by the Russian authorities.

Conrad's earliest surviving autograph recalls this period. Written on the back of his photograph, it is addressed "To my beloved Grandma who helped me send cakes to my poor Daddy in prison—grandson, Pole, Catholic, nobleman—6 July 1863—Konrad" (*N*, 8). The inscription was written in Conrad's first exile. After seven months in prison, Apollo, along with his wife, had been tried and sentenced to deportation to a remote Russian province. On 8 May 1862, they and their son, then four years old, had left Warsaw under police escort. At Vologda, a cold and marshy city to the northeast of Moscow, both mother and son soon became seriously ill, and the family was eventually allowed to go south to the warmer climate of Chernikov, not far from Kiev. On 11 April 1865, Ewa died of tuberculosis. Conrad was only seven years old, and he spent the next four years of his life mainly with his father, whose health gradually worsened until in 1867 he was allowed to return to Poland, where he died, also of tuberculosis, at Cracow on 23 May 1869. His eleven-year-old son walked alone behind the hearse at the head of the funeral procession, which had been converted into a great patriotic manifestation. The Poles, Conrad recalled in 1915,

> had not come to honour a great achievement, or even some splendid failure. The dead and they were victims alike of an unrelenting destiny which cut them off from every path of merit and glory. They had come only to render homage to the ardent fidelity of the man whose life had been a fearless confession in word and deed of a creed which the simplest heart in that crowd could feel and understand.[3]

Both Conrad's parents had exceptional qualities of mind and heart, and they had been intensely devoted to their only child. But even if they had not often been absent or ill they could hardly have compensated for a childhood spent on the move and under terrible duress. One of Conrad's earliest memories was of his mother "dressed in the

3. "Poland Revisited," 1915, in *Notes on Life and Letters* (London, 1949), p. 169; hereafter cited as *N L L*.

black of the national mourning worn in defiance of ferocious police regulations";[4] he came to fuller consciousness among the bitter insecurities of exile—prisoner number twenty-three in a small society of dispirited and disease-ridden victims of oppression;[5] then he watched his mother, and later his father, slowly die; and this last blow, he recalled, "stripped off me some of my simple trust in the government of the universe" (*N L L*, 168).

Not surprisingly Conrad's health as a child was very poor; there were long periods of bad migraines, and he was also subject to nervous fits, perhaps a form of epilepsy, which he later outgrew (*N*, 9–10). Conrad also moved about too much in his first eleven years to have friends of his own age, or any sense of belonging to a stable home: only the world of books offered a refuge from loneliness and despair. "I don't know what would have become of me," he later wrote, "if I had not been a reading boy" (*N L L*, 168). From the age of five Conrad had been a voracious reader—mainly of history, travels, and novels; he was especially fond of Fenimore Cooper, Captain Marryat, and Dickens, all of them read in Polish or French translation. Conrad's precocious literary interest had been stimulated by his father, himself a considerable poet and playwright, who did a great deal of translation from English, French and German, especially in his last years.[6] Conrad particularly recalled reading the manuscript of his father's translation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and the proofs of Victor Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (*P R*, 71–72).

Even while his parents were alive, Conrad spent a good deal of time with his mother's family; and on Apollo's death, Ewa's oldest surviving brother, Tadeusz Bobrowski, gradually assumed responsibility for Conrad. Both sides of the family, and especially, of course, the men, had suffered heavily in the insurrection and the pitiless reprisals which followed: three died, others were imprisoned or exiled, and Tadeusz's brother, Stefan, the head of the underground National Government, was killed in a duel which arose out of the intense political disagreements which dogged the revolt. So it fell to cautious Uncle Tadeusz, who had remained sceptically aloof, to pick up the pieces; and as he was soon to lose his wife and only child as well, there was room, even need, in his heart, for Conrad, the only, and now orphaned, child of his much loved sister.

4. *A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences*, 1912 (London, 1946), p. x; hereafter cited as *P R*.

5. Leo Gurko, *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile* (New York, 1962), p. 9.

6. The fullest account in English of the work of Apollo Korzeniowski is given by Andrzej Busza, "Conrad's Polish Literary Background and Some Illustrations of the Influence of Polish Literature on his Work," *Antemurale* 10 (Rome and London, 1966): 109–255; hereafter cited as *A B*.

No one, perhaps, could have done very much to heal the wounds of Conrad's first eleven years; but Bobrowski, though in many ways enlightened and humane, was very much the prudent, conservative and practical lawyer. His seventy-one surviving letters to Conrad, together with a few other letters and documents, and his own posthumously published memoirs, are by far the most important source of information about Conrad's early life.[7] Bobrowski's rather reserved, sarcastic, and occasionally supercilious character, and his complacent platitudinising about social and fiscal responsibility, may well have concealed from his young nephew the depth of his love, and done more to exacerbate than to control the exceptional waywardness of Conrad's adolescence.

Conrad could not live with Bobrowski because his estate was at Nowofastów, near Kiev, in Russian-occupied Poland. Conditions there were much more repressive than under Austrian rule, so for the next four years Conrad lived in Austrian-occupied Poland, and was brought up mainly by his maternal grandmother, Teofila Bobrowska, a figure of heroic devotion. Conrad's education continued to be irregular, partly under private tutors and partly in schools in Cracow and Lvov. There he briefly experienced the pleasures of schoolboy friendship, and later, apparently, the pangs of adolescent love. But Conrad, precocious in some ways and backward in others, was impatient with school and remained lonely, unhappy and restive.

By the age of fourteen he had formed the wish to go to sea. In his *A Personal Record*, which beautifully records "the feelings and sensations connected with the writing of my first book and with my first contact with the sea" (*P R*, xxi), Conrad speaks of "the mysteriousness of his impulses to himself" at this time: there was "no precedent" for "a boy of my nationality and antecedents taking a, so to speak, standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations" (*P R*, 121). Conrad's reading had certainly played a part in shaping his wish; but if youthful dreams of exploration and romantic adventure gave their particular shape to the impulse, its roots were surely in even more irresistible compulsions; in the need, above all, to bid a resounding farewell to everything he knew in a homeland which was heavy with memories of irreparable national and personal loss.

For some two years Bobrowski tried to dissuade him, but was eventually constrained to yield. It would have taken several years for Conrad to complete his studies at school, where his progress had been

7. Bobrowski's letters, and his "The Document for the Information of my Beloved Nephew Konrad Korzeniowski," which gives a meticulous financial and legal accounting of his unofficial wardship of Conrad down to 1890, are reprinted by Najder. There is an interesting and fairly full account of Bobrowski's memoirs in Busza (*A B*, 147–61).

slow and very uneven; in any case there was no likely career open to him anywhere in Poland. As a Russian subject and the son of a deported political convict, Conrad was liable to no less than twenty-five years' military service with the Russian army, to be served in the ranks. Conrad had to get out, and France was the obvious choice: it had a considerable merchant navy, its language was no problem for Conrad, since French was the second language of all educated Poles; and France was traditionally the country most favoured by Polish exiles. So on 15 October 1874,[8] well before his seventeenth birthday, Conrad left Cracow on his way to Marseilles.

Conrad was leaving a nightmare; as he put it in a letter to Galsworthy, he "got into a train . . . on my way to the sea, as a man might get into a dream" (*L L*, II, 157). The metaphor evokes something of the unreal, mysterious, and yet in retrospect imperative, nature of his act; nor do the implications of the metaphor stop there, for Conrad was entering an unknown world in which, as each occurrence filled out the dreamlike blankness of the future, it also disclosed the obstinate contours of the past.

Many of the dominant themes and attitudes that separate Conrad's novels from those of his English, French, or Russian contemporaries, for instance, are characteristic of the history, the society, and the literature, of his native country.

Doomed resistance and heroic defeat constitute the sadly recurrent burden of Poland's history. The last two hundred years have done little but enact betrayal by foreign allies or through internal divisions; and this habituation has engendered a corresponding admiration for individual loyalty and group cohesion. These themes dominate Conrad's fiction; fidelity is the supreme value in Conrad's ethic, but it is always menaced and often defeated or betrayed. Conrad once insisted to Edward Garnett that he must be understood not as a Slav, but as a Pole, and specifically as a member of a nation which, for the last hundred years, had "been used to go to battle without illusions."[9]

There is a literary reflection of this inheritance in his name. Jósef and Teodor were the given names of his paternal and maternal grandfathers respectively; but as a child he was called Konrad (or Konradek), and the associations of that name were wholly literary and patriotic. "For a Pole," Czesław Miłosz writes, "the name Konrad symbolizes the anti-Russian fighter and resister."[10] This is largely because of Adam Mickiewicz's long narrative poem, *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828). Its hero is a Lithuanian brought up by the Teutonic Knights; he eventually becomes the grand master of the order, and their commander in chief. One day, however, he hears an old Lithuanian minstrel whose lays bring back to him the long sufferings of his native country at the hands of the conquering foreign invaders; Konrad then deliberately leads the army of the Teutonic oppressors into a disastrous defeat, and kills himself to avoid being executed. The medieval setting of the poem, as Polish readers well knew, was a necessary historical disguise for portraying the current situation of Poland and Russia. In that context Konrad Wallenrod was an emblematic figure; the idea of suicidal treachery for patriotic reasons is a perfect expression of the deepest imaginative needs of a subjugated people; it is the most plausible form of heroism possible under an irresistible, ubiquitous and mindless tyranny.

Najder has stressed the equal importance of another symbolic Konrad in Mickiewicz—the protagonist of his visionary poetic drama *The Forefathers' Eve* (*N*, 4–5). Gustaw is a typical romantic hero—egocentric, moody, sentimental, imaginative; but in a Czarist prison he finally renounces his former self-indulgent life, takes on the name of Konrad, and identifies himself with the sufferings of humanity, and more specifically of the Polish nation.

In both *Konrad Wallenrod* and *The Forefathers' Eve*, Byronic individualism is corrected through an identification with national suffering; and this transformation from a narrow self-concern to a larger loyalty is a characteristic theme not only of Mickiewicz but of Słowacki, the other Polish romantic poet whom Conrad most admired.[11] Conrad's protagonists often undergo a similar conflict, and he himself remained deeply devoted to the idea of national sentiment; unlike the other great figures of modern literature, Conrad was not the critic but the nostalgic celebrant of the civilization of his homeland; and the steady insistence on the patriotic values of courage, tenacity, honour, responsibility and abnegation gives Conrad's fiction a heroic note very rare in twentieth-century literature.

In other respects Conrad's early heritage accustomed him to some of the main social and historical attitudes of modern literature. There

8. This is the date given in the standard biography, Jocelyn Baines's *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London, 1960), p. 30; hereafter cited as *J B*. G. Jean-Aubry, in the other main biographical source, his authorised *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (London, 1927), I, p. 27, hereafter cited as *L L*, gives a date one day earlier.

9. Edward Garnett, *Letters from Conrad, 1895–1924* (London, 1928), p. 216; hereafter cited as *E G*.

10. "Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes," *Atlantic Monthly* (1957), reprinted in *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium*, ed. R. W. Stallman (East Lansing, Mich., 1960), p. 36. The general Polish literary background is illuminatingly presented in Milosz's *The History of Polish Literature* (London, 1969).

11. *N*, 15–17, and *A B*, 205–8, contain good accounts of the influence of Polish literature on Conrad's writing.

for example, the scornful rejection of bourgeois values. The Polish *szlachta*, who had always stayed aloof from industry and commerce, were contemptuous of the concern for economic and material growth which dominated Polish life after the 1863 uprising; and so Conrad did not need the twentieth century to teach him to be sceptical about the much-touted civilising effects of economic progress. As to political progress, Conrad did not have to wait until 1914 for a brutal disillusionment. The Poles, he wrote in "The Crime of Partition" (1919), had long known "Oppression, not merely political, but affecting social relations, family life, the deepest affections of human nature, and the very fount of natural emotions" (*N L L*, 130). Conrad was in Poland when the news of the 1914 war arrived, and what he said of his country's position then was also true of his own situation fifty years before: "all the past was gone, and there was no future, whatever happened; no road which did not seem to lead to moral annihilation."[12]

This pessimistic perspective, both deeply historical and intimately personal, pervades Conrad's fictional world, which is mainly concerned with how to manoeuvre among intolerable and yet intractable realities. If we attend to it, we must surely see this inheritance to be of more enduring importance than any specific influence of his native literature. Here there are incontestable debts, especially to the Polish romantic poets, but they mainly concern style, mood, and descriptive methods.[13] Conrad's basic literary and intellectual outlook was European; his moral and social character remained largely Polish.

Still one need not assume that because Conrad retained so deep an imprint of his native country, and yet found his separation from it a source of irremediable pain, he must therefore have felt guilty as a deserter from Poland, and given hidden expression to this in his fiction, notably in *Lord Jim*.[14]

There is no doubt that, at least until the rebirth of Poland after 1918, Conrad tended to be very touchy and reticent about everything connected with Poland; but the cause need not have been guilt at leaving it. There had, after all, been the many earlier emigrations, and they were to become even more massive in scale during Conrad's lifetime.[15] Of course, in dealing with Poles who had stayed at home, Conrad must always have been aware that they might see his departure as a betrayal of his country, as some had apparently seen it in 1874. Writing in 1909, Conrad declared in *A Personal Record:* "I catch myself in hours of solitude and retrospect meeting arguments and charges made thirty-five years ago by voices now for ever still; finding things to say that an assailed boy could not have found" (*P R*, 121). The primary motive here seems not guilt but shame and anger at what other people think—the typical adolescent impatience at the impossibility of making anyone understand him on his own terms.

12. "First News," *N L L*, 178.

13. See especially *N*, 28–31, and *AB*, 203–38.

14. Gustav Morf was the first to give an allegorical interpretation, according to which Jim represents Conrad jumping off a doomed *Patna* (read *Polska*), in *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad* (London, 1930). Several Polish critics have given a similar but more general view of the pervading presence in Conrad's works of his guilt at leaving Poland, notably Józef Ujejski, Wit Tarnawski and Ludwik Krzyżanowski.

15. Two and a half million Poles emigrated to the New World between 1870 and 1914, and half a million to Western Europe (Gieysztor, *History of Poland*, pp. 584–86).

The complex resentments Conrad felt in 1874 were renewed and exacerbated in 1899, when his novels began to be translated and discussed in Poland. An acrimonious controversy about the "Emigration of the Talents" developed in which a well-known Polish novelist, Eliza Orzeszkowa, attacked Conrad as a "camp-follower or huckster" who had prostituted himself for richer gains abroad.[16] Conrad was deeply and permanently angered (*J B*, 353). But of course his anger would have been just as great if he had felt the charges to be wholly false, especially as defence or explanation were equally unacceptable to Conrad's pride.

This psychological deadlock took a different, but equally insoluble, form as far as Conrad's dealings with people in England were concerned; no one there could have the knowledge or the experience needed to understand the complexities of Conrad's Polish past. If the issue of his nationality was raised, the stock response would be inadvertent Podsnappery—as when his mother-in-law to be, confronting her first Pole, exclaimed: "Oh dear; one could never take him for an Englishman, and he doesn't look French, either."[17] As for those English who were more cosmopolitan in their sympathies, H. G. Wells and Edward Garnett for instance, they would tend to call his politeness Oriental, and his soul Slav, and thus in either case mortify Conrad by outraging the Western allegiance which is at the heart of the Polish sense of national identity. But for Conrad to explain this to the uninitiated meant traversing endless tracts of national, family, and personal history, all of them too painful to contemplate and too complicated to share. It was better to keep quiet.

There must always be pain, then, but guilt is not a necessary hypothesis to explain Conrad's later attitude to leaving his native land. We must also remember that Conrad's essential moral and psychological burdens would have been no lighter if he had remained at home. On this Najder quotes Conrad's moving tribute to Poland in "Prince Roman": "that country which demands to be loved as no other coun-

16. The fullest account in English seems to be *A B*, 189–99.

17. Jessie Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and his Circle* (London, 1935), p. 14; hereafter cited as *J C C*.

try has ever been loved, with the mournful affection one bears to the unforgotten dead and with the unextinguishable fire of a hopeless passion."[18] Najder then finely comments: "Hopeless fidelity was the essence of Conrad's feeling for Poland, but that made him not closer to but, on the contrary, more estranged from other Poles" (*N*, 26).

So, all things considered, and until a firmer basis for the psychological understanding and moral judgment of others becomes available, we should surely take Conrad at his own eloquent word in *A Personal Record:*

> No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. The appearances of this perishable life are deceptive like everything that falls under the judgment of our imperfect senses. The inner voice may remain true enough in its secret counsel. The fidelity to a special tradition may last through the events of an unrelated existence, following faithfully, too, the traced way of an inexplicable impulse.

It would take too long to explain the intimate alliance of contradictions in human nature which makes love itself wear at times the desperate shape of betrayal (*P R*, 35–36).

ii. 1874–1878: France

Conrad was to spend less than four years in France, but they were the crucial formative years between seventeen and twenty-one. He arrived fairly well prepared. For one thing, he was assured of a sufficient yearly allowance of 2000 francs, partly from his uncle's own pocket, but mainly from funds Bobrowski managed out of various small gifts and legacies given Conrad by many relatives and friends of the family; for another, Conrad bore two letters of introduction, and he also had some sort of contact with a small firm of shipowners, Delestang. It was on their sailing ship, the *Mont Blanc,* that Conrad began his sea career.[1] On it he made two long voyages to the West Indies, officially registered first as passenger and then as apprentice. Conrad next spent some six months ashore at Marseilles before making a third long voyage to the Caribbean on another Delestang sailing ship, the *Saint Antoine,* this time as a steward with a nominal salary. On his return early in 1877 Conrad was apparently prevented from making a further voyage by an anal abscess, and a longer period ashore ensued, which ended disastrously.

18. *Tales of Hearsay* (London, 1955), p. 51; hereafter cited as *T H.*

1. The fullest account of Conrad's sea career, in which much remains obscure, is that of Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (New York, 1965); hereafter cited as *J A.*

Marseilles was a very lively place, and Conrad had enough means to take some part, not only in the life of the port, but also in the social and cultural activities of the city—the theatre, the opera, the bohemian cafés, and the legitimist salon of the Delestangs. But he soon began to overspend his allowance; Bobrowski's letters harped constantly on his extravagance and general fecklessness, and finally Conrad was warned that no further advances would be forthcoming under any circumstances. Very soon, however, they had to be.

What happened must be pieced out mainly from what Bobrowski wrote on 24 March 1879 to Stefan Buszczyński, who had been Apollo's closest friend. In October 1877, Bobrowski explained, he had been prevailed on to send a large sum of money out of Conrad's capital to equip him for a very lengthy projected voyage round the world. Hearing no more, he was quite sure that Conrad was "somewhere in the Antipodes"; but early in March 1878 Bobrowski received a telegram from Marseilles reading: "Conrad blessé envoyez argent—arrivez" (*N*, 175–79). When Bobrowski arrived he found that Conrad had been unable to sail—official regulations, which had previously been evaded, forbade his serving on a French vessel without a permit from the country in which he was liable to military service—in Conrad's case Russia. In addition, Bobrowski wrote,

> another catastrophe—this time financial—befell him. While still in possession of the 3,000 francs sent to him for the voyage, he met his former Captain . . . who persuaded him to participate in some enterprise on the coasts of Spain—some kind of contraband! He invested 1,000 francs in it and made over 400 which pleased them greatly so that on the second occasion he put in all he had—and lost the lot.

The reference is probably to the gunrunning adventures on the *Tremolino,* of which Conrad gives colourful but somewhat different and eventually implausible accounts in *The Mirror of the Sea* and *The Arrow of Gold.* According to Bobrowski, however, what had actually happened was that the vessel's captain absconded to Buenos Aires, leaving Conrad penniless and heavily in debt . . .

> for while speculating he had lived on credit, had ordered the things necessary for his voyage, and so forth. Faced with this situation, he borrows 800 francs from his friend Mr. Fecht and sets off for Villa Franca where an American squadron was anchored, with the intention of joining the American service. He achieves nothing there and, wishing to improve his finances, tries his luck in Monte Carlo and loses the 800 fr. he had borrowed. Having managed his affairs so excellently he returns to Marseilles and one fine evening invites his

> friend the creditor to tea, and before his arrival attempts to take his life with a revolver. (Let this detail remain between us, as I have been telling everyone that he was wounded in a duel. From you I neither wish to nor should keep it a secret.) The bullet goes durch und durch near his heart without damaging any vital organ. Luckily, all his addresses were left on top of his things so that this worthy Mr. Fecht could instantly let me know . . .

There is no later record that Conrad ever mentioned an attempt at suicide to anyone. On the contrary, over the years, and apparently as early as 1893,[2] he gave his family and friends to understand that the visible scars to the left of his heart were the result of a duel. Towards the end of his life, Conrad's account got more circumstantial, notably in his novel *The Arrow of Gold*, of which he wrote that "all the persons are authentic and the facts are as stated" (*J B*, 50). The novel is narrated by a M[onsieur] Georges (a name by which Conrad was known in Marseilles); he fights a duel over a woman, Rita, with an American adventurer called Blunt, and is shot in the left breast.

Are we to believe Conrad's account of many decades later, or Bobrowski's version, written just over a year after the shooting had occurred towards the end of February 1878? Conrad must certainly be convicted of lying, either to Bobrowski at the time of his visit, or to many others later. Anyone who has honestly attended to his own behavior, however, may find it fairly easy to absolve Conrad of any very serious offence. Surely not many people, especially when young, have got into a spectacular mess and then told the whole truth about it to anyone; it is much easier to confess folly in the abstract than to spell it out in all its foolish details; and it would have been especially difficult with Bobrowski, who had long been loud in his warnings against the very weaknesses—imprudence, extravagance, self-delusion—which caused the catastrophe.

If in fact Conrad did fight a duel about a woman, he might originally have spread the suicide story mainly to shield her reputation and to keep the affair from his uncle; but whereas Conrad's own later accounts of the duel, as well as of the *Tremolino* and Rita, are mutually inconsistent,[3] Bobrowski's is not, and he twice referred to it elsewhere, notably in a letter to Conrad soon after his return from Marseilles—"You deliberately shot yourself" (8 July 1878; *N*, 54).[4] In any case,

2. According to Edwin Pugh, quoted in Witold Chwalewik, "Conrad in the Light of a New Record," *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 18 (1971): 51–55.

3. See, for instance, Baines (*J B*, 46–57), and Bernard C. Meyer's *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton, N.J., 1967); hereafter cited as *B C-M*.

4. The attempted suicide, which had already been briefly mentioned as early as

Bobrowski's account of the whole matter has the ring of authenticity. Conrad makes desperate efforts to break out of a hopeless tangle by a frenzied snatching at a succession of improbable stratagems that seem hatched from the clichés of popular novels: first, sailing off to America; next, staking everything on a dramatic recouping of his fortunes through trying his beginner's luck at the gambling table; and when this, too, fails, it seems easier to end it all with a revolver rather than have to face Fecht, and later Bobrowski, with all his humiliating confessions. But an unconscious voice imposes another devious strategy: Conrad leaves the address of the trusted guardian conveniently available for his expected visitor, and thus makes what is in effect an oblique but harrowing appeal to Bobrowski: "Now you see how bad things are with me. Please take over."

Bobrowski certainly believed the suicide version, and his reasons for giving out the duel story are very obvious: in Roman Catholic theology suicide is a mortal sin. This may have also been Conrad's motive; the autobiographical hero of his unfinished novel *The Sisters* regards it as "the unpardonable crime."[5] Duelling, on the other hand, was widely regarded as honorable both in Poland and France. Bobrowski's brother, Stefan, had died in a duel; one of Conrad's friends at Marseilles, Clovis Hugues, had very recently killed a political rival in a duel (*J B*, 35); and Conrad himself apparently approved of duelling (*F M F*, 79–80, *E G*, xv).

Much later, after Conrad had married and had children, going along with the duel story must have seemed much better than confessing the suicide attempt: to have tried to kill himself would be a troubling example to give his two sons; to have failed only added a note of ineptitude; and confessing the truth would also call for deeply humiliating explanations of the sufferings of a distant past which nobody else would ever really understand anyway. What remains very puzzling is that over the course of forty years Conrad seems to have come to believe in the invented version. But this would only be an extreme example of Conrad's general tendency in his later years to reconstruct his past in a flattering and romantic way; and in any case there is one essential psychological similarity between the two versions.[6] Suicide is like duelling in one respect; both are drastic impo-

1937 in a Polish paper (*Kurjer Warszawski*), first received widespread attention in September 1957, when Zdzisław Najder published Bobrowski's two letters in the Cracow journal *Literary Life* (*Zycie Literackie*) 40 (1957): 298.

5. *The Sisters: An Unfinished Story by Joseph Conrad*, with an Introduction by Ford Madox Ford, ed. Ugo Mursia (1928, rpt. Milan, 1968), p. 53; hereafter cited as *T S*.

6. It should be added that Conrad seemed to regard the facts of his own life as his own business and nobody else's. Jessie Conrad reports that once, during a discussion of

sitions of the individual's will over the conflicts and confusions of his existence, reckless and dramatic projections of the subjective picture of the self upon a public stage. That, surely, was the primary impulse behind Conrad's act at Marseilles. Very few sensitive and imaginative people can have struggled to adulthood without fantasies of ceasing to battle with the peremptory denials of reality; even fewer can have had more personal cause for this than Conrad; and fewer still can have grown up with their lives so totally and continuously at their own disposal.

We know much too little to be able to gauge the psychological significance of Conrad's attempted suicide for his later life; but the role of suicide in Conrad's fiction is certainly of exceptional importance—it occurs at least seventeen times (*B C M*, 274); and there are also a number of rather indeterminate willed cessations, such as that of Almayer. Conrad's treatment often suggests an unconscious wish to exculpate or justify suicide, though the issue is never faced very directly. It is, for instance, never presented from the inside, even in the case of characters who, like Decoud and Heyst, are very close to Conrad, and from whose point of view much of the earlier narrative has been told. On the other hand, Conrad often seems to suggest either that suicide is a positive moral act, or that it is the outcome of unbearable human loneliness. Thus suicide often has a strong element of heroic self-sacrifice for the good of others, as with Captain Whalley in *The End of the Tether* or Peyrol in *The Rover;* there is certainly a note of honourable expiation in the more ambiguous case of Lord Jim; and, most revealingly, Decoud and Winnie Verloc drown themselves, and Heyst is burned to death, because they can find no internal strength with which to resist the isolation caused by the breaking of their only significant human ties.

Bobrowski stayed a fortnight at Marseilles, and he was in the main relieved by what his investigative eye could discover. Conrad was "handsome" and "quite robust"; his manners were "very good, as if he had never left drawing-rooms"; socially he was "very popular with his captains and also with the sailors," although he had not picked up any of their typical "bad habits"; "in his ideas" he was "ardent and original"; above all he was "a man who knows his profession"—in the two weeks of Bobrowski's stay Conrad was "twice called for to bring vessels into the port." Of course Conrad was still "extremely sensitive, conceited, reserved, and in addition excitable"; nevertheless, Bobrowski's

whether "The Black Mate" or *Almayer's Folly* was his first work, Conrad "burst out: 'If I like to say 'The Black Mate' was my first work, I shall say so!' " (R. L. Mégroz, *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method*, [London, 1931], p. 88).

scrutiny had "not deprived [him] of the hope that a real man might still be made of him" (*N*, 177–78).

But where? Quite apart from the pressure to leave the scene of his humiliation, there were imperative practical reasons for Conrad to leave France. He could not get a berth there again until he was naturalised, and that would involve military service—either for six months to a year, or for five years, according to a lottery.[7] In any case—to Bobrowski's expressed gratification—Conrad did "not like [the French] at all" (*N*, 51, 178). Various other possibilities, some of which had already been mooted, were discussed, including the plan that Conrad go back to Austrian Poland, "get naturalised, and look for a career there"; but Conrad, Bobrowski wrote, steadily demurred, "maintaining that he loves his profession, does not want to and will not change it."

Conrad later wrote that even in Poland he had formulated "the determined resolve, that 'if a seaman, then an English seaman' " (*P R*, 122). But what evidence is available makes it virtually certain that Conrad was never decisively committed either to a sea career, or to England, and that in fact it was circumstance which eventually made the decision for him. Looking back on our lives it seems inconceivable that things could possibly have been otherwise, or that they should actually have been mainly determined by accident or momentary convenience; and yet such is often, perhaps usually, the case, as it was in 1878. Conrad had to get out of France; and his only training—intermittent and irresolute as it had been—was that of a sailor. Britain had no conscription; it had the largest merchant fleet in the world, with an extensive Mediterranean commerce; and, most important of all, virtually no official formalities were required for signing on alien seamen. Those factors alone might have been decisive; but Britain also had a long tradition of freedom for political exiles, and it had a literature which, in translation, had already been an important element in Conrad's life. The overwhelming odds were that when Conrad next signed on as a seaman, it would be under the red ensign. And so it was.

iii. 1878–1894: England

On 24 April 1878 a small British steamer, the *Mavis*, left Marseilles for Constantinople with a cargo of coal, and Conrad was aboard as an ordinary seaman; on its home voyage the *Mavis* docked at Lowestoft,

7. R. D. Challener, *The French Theory of the Nation in Arms: 1866–1939* (New York, 1955), p. 38.