

Becoming Joseph Conrad

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Abstract

Conrad's novels can be read as tales of betrayal, self-punishment and redemption, and as exploration of the consequences of betrayal which leads to endless wandering. The protagonists portrayed in Conrad's fictional world are often rootless foreigners or wounded wanderers, who find their desires hindered and their searches for identity brutally crushed in their encounters with reality. Baffled by what is thrown at them, Conrad's heroes are "wandering between two worlds, one dead/ the other is powerless to be born." Conrad's ideas of wandering are no doubt grounded in his background as the son of a famous Polish patriot. Therefore, one way to approach Conrad's treatment of subject is to recall his upbringing, especially his early years in Poland, for the tragic personal and family circumstances of this period were the most important and tortured of his life, and were to resonate throughout his career as a novelist. By drawing attention to Conrad's background, this paper hopes to shed light on the themes and subjects that seem to have inspired Conrad's writing and the way he approaches his topics.

Keywords: Conrad, Becoming, Journey, Wandering, Identity

Indisputably, amongst the turn-of-century British novelists, Joseph Conrad has been one of the most studied and debated. Conrad's novels can be read as tales of betrayal, self-punishment and redemption, and as exploration of the consequences of betrayal which leads to endless wandering. Conrad's ideas of wandering are no doubt grounded in his background as the son of a famous Polish patriot. Therefore, one way to approach Conrad's treatment of subject is to recall his upbringing. Although he spent only his first sixteen years in Poland, the tragic personal and family circumstances of this period were the most important and tortured of his life, and were to resonate throughout his career as a novelist. This early experience which, as Frederick Karl (1979) argues, "informed every aspect of his later years, was the component of his ideas, his attachments, his memories and even his nightmares".

Admittedly, Conrad's preoccupation with wandering stems from the harsh life of restless exile he experienced as a child. Born in the Ukraine in 1857, into a Polish nobility family, Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a renowned and unfailing patriot who engaged in the struggle to free Poland from Russian rule. Sadly, his patriotism was not justly rewarded; in 1861 he was arrested by the Russian authorities for underground political activities in support of Polish nationalism and a year later was sentenced to exile in Vologda in northern Russia.

Instead of going alone, he took his family into exile with him, unaware that his enthusiasm would be the very catalyst that plunged them into the abyss.

Vologda is notorious for its severe climate, and the health of Conrad's parents quickly deteriorated. In a letter to his cousins Gabriela and Jan Zagorski, Apollo describes Vologda as 'a huge quagmire stretching over three versts, cut up with parallel and intersecting lines of wooden foot-bridges, all rotten and shaky under one's feet. ... A year here has two seasons: white winter and green winter. The white winter lasts nine and a half months, the green winter two and a half (Najder, 1997). Nevertheless, Apollo did not regard exile as a punishment but a new way of serving his country. A vivid picture emerges of Apollo, not as a tormented and possessed Utopian dreamer in exile, but more precisely, as a pilgrim willingly crucified for his political idealism. Apollo considered exile to be a "new way" of serving his country and therefore sacrificed himself for the dream of Polish liberation. Unfortunately, the well-being of his family was also sacrificed, paying heavily for his commitment. His wife's health succumbed to the hardship first, and later his son was left an orphan. Regarded as a quixotic idealist by his brother-in-law, Tadeusz Bobrowski, Apollo offered up his family for an unrealistic dream.

On 18 April 1865, Conrad's mother, Ewa Bobrowska, died of tuberculosis. Unable to release himself from the grief of losing his beloved wife, Apollo seemed to lose his very reason for living. His health soon failed, and for the young Conrad, his mother's death marked the end of his childhood. When his father subsequently fell critically ill, it must have felt as if his world was collapsing around him. Conrad remembered clearly, in *Poland Revisited*, how he was allowed to "tip-toe into the sick room to say good-night to the figure prone on the bed", and he would go to his room and "often, not always, cry [himself] into a good sound sleep". An unspeakable dread over his uncertain future evidently terrified the little boy:

I looked forward to what was coming with an incredulous terror. I turned my eyes from it sometimes with success, and yet all the time I had an awful sensation of the inevitable. I had also moments of revolt which stripped off me some of my simple trust in the government of the universe. But when the inevitable entered the sick room and the white door was thrown wide open, I don't think I found a single tear to shed. I have a suspicion that the Canon's housekeeper looked on me as the most callous little wretch on earth (Conrad, 1949).

Here Conrad evokes his early all-pervasive consciousness of a world about to crumble, with the cherished order of things facing destruction, and of great loss. As Zdzislaw Najder (1997) observes, there is a "noticeable streak of morbidity expressed in terms sometimes despairing and nostalgic, sometimes caustic and bitter".

Dying on 23 May 1869, Apollo outlived his wife by only four years. Consequently, at the age of eleven, Joseph had lost both of his parents and come under the wardship of his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. More significantly, having lacked true direction in his childhood because of his parents' misfortune, Conrad finally found himself in the care of a stable parental figure. It could be said that, although Conrad inherited his interest in literature from his father, it was Tadeusz Bobrowski who acted as his practical mentor, and was more influential in shaping his mind. Bobrowski was a second father to Conrad, and his impact upon his nephew was remarkable; gradually, Conrad became a repository of everything Bobrowski believed. Conrad's attachment to Bobrowski is exhibited in a letter he writes to Kazimierz Waliszewski in 1903, in which he states that "I cannot write about Tadeusz Bobrowski, my uncle, guardian and benefactor, without emotion ... I saw him four times during the thirty years of my wanderings (1874-1893) but even so I attribute to his devotion, care, and influence, whatever good qualities I may possess" (Karl and Davies, 1988). However, Conrad's first two role models offered rather contradictory standards of values. As a man under the influence of two obviously contrasting father figures, Conrad was constantly "torn between his father's impractical idealism and his uncle's practical morality" (Hodges, 1967). This enduring gap is apparent throughout his work: his characters, such as Nina Almayer in *Almayer's Folly* and Jim in *Lord Jim*, are presented as ambivalent, as forever swinging between two value systems, trapped and betrayed by the social system in which they live. These graphic portrayals, as most critics agree, seem to reflect Conrad's own constant vacillation between the passionate idealism of his father and the practical and worldly values of the uncle.

After his lonely, miserable childhood, Conrad chose another kind of wandering, another isolation: his career at sea. He stated that it was always his childhood dream to go to sea. However, Conrad's decision to go to sea was not, as some critics have suggested, a simple affair. A career at sea did not merely satisfy the romantic whim of his childhood, but, because it represented a route to remote, open and untrodden parts of the earth, it signified freedom in its most unlimited form.

Conrad's biographer, Jocelyn Baines (1993), perhaps comes closest to answering the question of what the sea meant for Conrad. His view is that the sea provided an entry to the world when leaving land-locked Poland became an imperative for Conrad. For a boy who was always looking for romantic adventures, the image of the sea also evoked boundless imaginations. "Everything can be found at sea", says Conrad (1998), "according to the spirit of your quest – strife, peace, romance, naturalism of the most pronounced kind, ideals, boredom, disgust, inspiration – and every conceivable opportunity."

However, Conrad's desire to go to the sea was disapproved of by his family. It was interpreted not as a bid to escape the feelings of cultural suffocation and political impotence he must have experienced, but as an impractical impulse towards exotic adventures. The family finally relented, although there is no explanation for Bobrowski's reluctant agreement. It could be simply that Conrad was indifferent to education; or perhaps it was a way to resolve embarrassments in the wake of his flirtation with his cousin, Tekla Syroczyńska. The easiest route for Conrad to reach the sea was via France; consequently, he left Poland for Marseilles in 1874. Conrad's

French days consisted of intermittent adventures and romances. He was immature and prodigal: enjoying unbounded freedom, he savoured the bohemian café society of Marseilles. Apart from spending a great deal of his uncle's money, he soon engaged himself in the adventure and romance for which he yearned. He involved himself in smuggling arms to Spain for the supporters of Don Carlos and fell in love with Rita de Lastaola. In Marseilles, he tasted the sweetness of love and the excitement of adventure. More importantly, his stay in Marseilles loosened him from his Polish ties and released him from the past which had haunted him. Roaming in the streets of Marseilles, no longer being identified as the son of Apollo Korzeniowski, he was merely a young man ready to embrace the world. In short, Conrad's stay in France relieved his frustrations and provided an outlet for his energies. However, despite his unusual desire to become a seaman, the limitations of his alien status in Marseilles, his age and his liability for military service in his own country, meant that he could not secure the permission to serving as a seaman in French vessels (Baines, 44). Conrad's French days soon came to an end when he saw an opportunity to leave France. On 24 April 1878, Conrad embarked on an English freighter, the *Mavis*, as an apprentice and set foot on the English soil for the first time on 18 June 1878. Thus, Conrad ended his fruitless experiment of three years in Marseilles and left France for good.

After his lonely, bleak childhood, Conrad embraced another kind of wandering, another kind of isolation: emigration. Conrad's emigration was an attempt to escape the destiny of civil disqualification for being a rebel's son and to avoid conscription into the Russian army. In short, it was an evasion of tyranny. In 1886, at the age of twenty-eight, almost in the middle of his life, Josef Konrad Korzeniowski, better-known as Joseph Conrad, faced the most dramatic change of his life when he passed his Master's examination and became a naturalized English subject. Everything in his life was to be different thereafter: not only his occupation and marital status, but more importantly, for our interest here, his name and nationality. Beginning a fresh life with a new name in an unfamiliar country, surrounded by strangers speaking a different language, Josef Korzeniowski, in the middle of life, finally became separated from Poland, the nation to which his forebears had been so passionately and vainly attached. He re-invented himself and was ready to enjoy his new lease of life as Joseph Conrad.

The deep satisfaction that Conrad experienced in the transition from social obscurity to recognition manifests itself in an interview he gave to Marjan Dabrowski in 1914: "You are amazed that I, a Pole, became a sailor and a captain of a ship. A certain insignificant boy from an outlying part of the world, from a fallen country, from a certain Poland, became a captain in the English Merchant Marine through his own efforts. Do you follow me?" (Dabrowski, 1944). As a Pole, Conrad was "stateless", because at the time of his birth, Poland had not resumed its status as an independent country. Emigrating from Poland to England, the richest and most powerful country in the world at the time, not only offered him the social and political status he needed as a fully qualified citizen, but also provided him with the sense of belonging for which he yearned (Karl and Davies, 1983). More importantly, his status as an English subject filled the void of nationality stemming from his origin from a "nonexistent" country, by anchoring him in the world where he had been wandering for so long. Naturalization as a British subject thus conveyed a sense of importance. No longer stateless and disowned by the world, Conrad now had a country to call his own and a secure place in the world.

Although his adopted country provided him everything he needed, including a self-identity, a sense of belonging and of personal security, the guilt resulting from the desertion of his native country evidently induced ambivalent feelings, a love-hate relationship of the kind he later explored in his novels.

Despite his new identity as an Englishman, Conrad simultaneously and strongly felt that he was a displaced and socially humiliated foreigner looking for a livelihood among the English, and isolated from the rest of the world. He once complained that he knew “nothing, nothing. Except from the outside” (Garnet, 1928). That is to say, his new identity existed only in name. In reality, he was described and treated as one of “them” rather than one of “us”. Among the English, he was forever a rootless outsider. Depicted as a person who “with the help of his perfect manners, kept at a distance from those who tried to affix labels to him, from well-wishers who were eager to tell him what sort of oddity he really was”, he purposely kept himself apart from a society with which he had no connections (Prterkiewicz, 1957). He may have suffered long years of loneliness and boredom because he never felt included within a circle of companions. Conrad was an outsider looking eagerly into the English society, hoping to participate in life, but stopped by an invisible wall of exclusion. Alienation was no doubt aided by memory, the bitter-sweet recollection of his Polish upbringing.

Beginning with Conrad’s childhood as the son of a well-known revolutionary, it is easy to portray him as a victim of both political repression and of political idealism. He left behind his experience of being Polish and a Korzeniowski when he went away to become a merchant seaman. His enthusiasm for the sea signified a determined farewell to Poland, yet the resulting guilt at leaving the country, to which his forefathers had been so deeply attached and had so fiercely fight for, together with his alienated experience in England, the only country which he could call his own, engrained his work with scepticism. In his novels, we “hear the authorial voice – knowing, doubting, distant, slightly amused, wandering from the beginning to the end but expecting nothing of humankind and nothing of the world” (Hynes, 1991). If we perceive Conrad as a representative of the literature of exile, then his distanced approach to the characters can be said to encapsulate what Georg Lukács (1914) contends to be the essence of novel writing, its “transcendental homelessness”. Living in the age that preceded the melting-pot image of post modernity, Conrad’s characters have to carve out their positions, and to construct the meaning of their existence by constantly combating their inner flaws and circumstantial injustices. The profound inscription of moral code is as indelible as the mother tongue – an inscription that is often conjured in recollection, that is inadvertently lost but always found again.

Having begun his forced exile at the age of four and become an orphan at the age of eleven, Conrad seems to have drawn certain conclusions from his childhood experiences: that human institutions were repressive and cruel; that ideals consumed those who lived by them; and that the earth was an empty, orderless void. These conclusions underpin his fiction. Typically, his plots focus on the conflict that occurs between society and one or more of its members. Tension mounts as the disjunction between idealism and reality emerges. This tension is often expressed as an opposition between two sets of ideas or experiences. On the one hand, there is a desire for love, trust, and the need to make sense out of seemingly senseless chaos. On the other there is cruelty, selfishness, greed, deceit, injustice and hardship produced by social, psychological and natural factors. What distinguishes Conrad’s novels is that his characters are rootless foreigners or wounded wanderers, who exist as outsiders to the society, and who find their desires hindered and their searches for identity brutally crushed in their encounters with reality. Baffled by what is thrown at them, Conrad’s heroes are “wandering between two worlds, one dead/ the other powerless to be born”.

As most critics agree, the main themes of Conrad’s novels are betrayal and desertion, which may be interpreted as reflecting his sense of guilt for leaving Poland and eventually becoming naturalized as an English subject. Therefore, despite Conrad often paid attention to the problems generated by social and political transformation, he never glossed over the predicament of the individual in a changing world. The dark, hazardous journeys Conrad unfolds reveal to the readers how he takes the pulse of the new dawn. More importantly, in Conrad’s lenient treatment towards these individuals, we are able to observe the transformative odyssey of writing from which he was to become Joseph Conrad.

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