The Self, the Other and the World

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Epistemology and Ethics in Joseph Conrad's Oeuvre

By

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INTRODUCTION

In a letter to a friend, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), a Polish gentleman turned English writer, calls himself "homo duplex" (*CL* vol. 3, 89)–a double man. Indeed, complexity and paradox seem to have been major themes of both his spiritual life and literary work. Cedric Watts has aptly referred to him as a "janiform" writer, an author of texts which, due to their inherent paradox, face in two opposite directions, like the god Janus (1993, 7). Conrad seems to have been divided between a deep sense of fidelity to and fellowship with mankind, and a sceptical outlook, which caused him to feel direly alienated and misunderstood. The same paradox underlies his approach to writing and his texts: the desire to express and appeal to human communality and to communicate effectively with others may at times be undermined by the disconcerting premonition that language is fallible and men are too far apart to understand each other.

A child of his times, Conrad felt that man could no longer perceive himself as a privileged or blessed creature protected by a benevolent Absolute. Hence his sharpened sense of the hostility of the universe in which man may turn out to be redundant, and hence his epistemological scepticism. Since there seems to be no source of objective truth and only subjective senses may be relied on, how can objective knowledge about oneself and about the world be attained, or, for that matter, communicated to others? How can others be understood, and how can one make oneself comprehensible to them? How to deal with the sense of being entrapped within one's own consciousness, one's own self?

Despite the limitations that scepticism discerns in interpersonal communication, whether it is between two interlocutors, between a story-teller and his audience, or between a writer and his readers, Conrad continued to write, hoping for at least partial comprehension on the part of his readers. Plagued by severe health problems and long periods of psychological unrest, he pursued the career of a writer, which rests on the assumption of the possibility of successful communication and is generally oriented towards another person–the potential reader, with the hope of both empathetically capturing the fate of the fictional characters and of engaging the reader's attention and comprehension. Thus, arguably, in being a writer he attempted to bridge the painful and gaping chasms he felt separated people. He might have shared George Steiner's belief that

literature deals with man, and the shape and motive of human conduct (Steiner 1985, 22), which Conrad the writer attempted to depict so that his readers would "see" more (cf. Conrad's famous Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*).

In undertaking his task, Conrad must have been aware of the limitations of such a project. From his works transpires an image of a world marked by frustration caused either by conflict inherent in one's nature, or lack of self-knowledge, or by external circumstances, or being constantly misunderstood by other people. In his writings, human efforts are presented against the backdrop of a world which keeps frustrating people. If the basis of all knowledge, including self-cognition, is misty and uncertain, the aim of reaching any objective conclusions and sharing them with others becomes elusive. Yet, despite the sceptical dimension of Conrad's approach, his characters and their fates appear to demonstrate the necessity of holding on to the imperative of seeking (self-)knowledge and sharing it with others. In the face of Conrad's philosophical outlook, the writer's insistence on the importance of this quest could be perceived as belonging to the realm of heroic ethics. In Conrad's world, fidelity to mankind is interrelated with the responsibility of the task of writing to convey as much truth as is possible, insomuch as truth is attainable. Therefore, there exists an important link between epistemology and ethics in Conrad's *oeuvre*.

Among the epistemological limitations that seem to plague Conradian characters are: deficient self-knowledge, uncertain identity, self-delusion and labouring under misconceptions; egoism, flawed relationships with others, being deluded by ideas and a burning need for an other who would understand and authenticate the self; inadequacy of language and subjectiveness of impressions; the sense of alienation in a world which seems either coldly indifferent or outwardly hostile to man, and the sense of helplessness in the face of the forces of history, death and fate. All these themes create an image of man who is isolated in various ways. Firstly, Conradian characters often appear to be alienated from their own selves owing to their lack of self-knowledge and, paradoxically, their self-centredness which renders them myopic. Secondly, they are usually isolated from other people, either physically or psychologically, or their relations with others are flawed. Thirdly, they often feel at a loss when confronted with the forces that shape the reality they live in, be it the natural world, mortality, fate, or the forces of history. In other words, it seems that, according to Conrad, man may feel both isolated and surrounded by various kinds of otherness. Characteristically, Conradian characters are usually faced with a test–a forced confrontation with all the

above-mentioned types of alterity: the self, the other person and the external world may be labelled as three forms of otherness.

The aim of this book is to analyse how Conradian characters deal with man's estrangement in the world and what is the effect of both submitting oneself to the test and avoiding it, or avoiding commitment to other people. The fact that the protagonist is often a solitary figure without any footing or contacts (e.g. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Nostromo, Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, and the captain-narrators in "The Secret Sharer" and *The Shadow-Line*) only adds to the complexity of Conrad's message and to the complexity of Conrad's understanding of human identity. Among other complicating factors is the fact that the other, in all three meanings indicated above, often imposes challenges and demands of commitment and adherence which may be morally ambivalent. What transpires as a key to both Conrad's ethics and epistemology is the question of responsibility for, or commitment to the other. My intention is to analyse how accepting, or refusing to accept, responsibility for another person or persons is related to the problematic issues in the Conradian universe, that is self-knowledge, cognition, communication and an intersubjective ground for selfhood.

It could be argued that the Conradian ethics, with its emphasis on responsibility, may be analysed with reference to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas centred his thought around the moral imperative to take responsibility for the other[1], even though the other remains ultimately unknowable. The Levinasian other is usually understood as either God or the other person. However, Levinas also occasionally refers to the external world and to death as different types of otherness to be confronted. There appear to be a number of Conradian themes in the analysis of which Levinasian thought could prove to be illuminating, the most important being the consequences of avoiding an encounter with the other or avoiding responsibility for the other. Among those cosequences are suffering, isolation, self-deception, egoism, moral downfall, limiting one's cognitive possibilities and a confused sense of identity. Hence, where relevant, correspondences between Conrad's writings and Levinasian ideas will be pointed out.

[1] As regards the key concept of the other, Levinas distinguishes between *autre* and *autrui* in French and uses both the capitalized and non-capitalized versions of the words. There does not seem to be any regular pattern in his works, the other person is often capitalized, but elsewhere, in reference to other forms of otherness, the word is used without capitals. Cf. Critchley (2002, 16). Owing to this lack of consistency, and for the purpose of clarity, in this book all kinds of otherness will be spelled without capital letters.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction and sketches the background for the following chapters, also by drawing on Conrad's letters and his autobiographical writings. Firstly, it focuses on Conrad's own identity and his own, personal sense of otherness of himself, other people and the external world. Secondly, it demonstrates the relevance of Levinas's life and work for the analyses of Conradian texts. Chapter 2 focuses on the theme of self-knowledge and the ultimate unknowability of the self in Conradian characters. Chapter 3 deals with the confrontation with the alterity in another person that the characters encounter. Chapter 4 describes the challenges that the characters face from the external world, be it the world of nature, history, fate, or death. Chapter 5 concludes the analyses by synthesizing the links between Conradian ethics and epistemology.

The choice of Conrad's works discussed in this book is limited by two factors. Firstly, only what has been, by critical consensus, termed as Conrad's "major phase"[2] has been taken into account. The second factor is the type of narration: only texts which are narrated in the first person have been selected for discussion, as the idea of selfhood, personal relationships with other people, and a subjective view on the external world seem to be presented best in personal narration. Therefore, the following texts are analysed in the book: *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), "Amy Foster" (1901), "The Secret Sharer" (1910) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911)[3]. Analyses of relevant aspects of each of these works constitute the chapters on the self, the other person and the external world.

[2] Cf. Jacques Berthoud's seminal work *Joseph Conrad. The Major Phase* (1978). Also Cedric Watts argues for the existence of a major phase in Conrad's writing, and defines it, similarly to Berthoud, as the period between 1897-1911. This includes texts such as: *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, "Youth", *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, "Typhoon", *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, "The Secret Sharer", *Under Western Eyes* and "A Smile of Fortune" (1993, 31). Virginia Woolf and John Galsworthy were the first to ascribe greater value to Conrad's works written before 1912 than to those produced after this date; among other critics who share this view are Albert Guerard, Douglas Hewitt and Thomas Moser (see Najder 2007, 416).

[3] Among other texts by Conrad which feature first-person narration, *The Shadow-Line* (1917) especially lends itself to an analysis from perspectives similar to those presented in this book. It belongs, however, to a later period in Conrad's career and therefore remains beyond the scope of this work.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

I. Conrad's Works

AF	"Amy Foster"
HD	*Heart of Darkness*
LE	*Last Essays*
LJ	*Lord Jim*
MS	*The Mirror of the Sea*
NLL	*Notes on Life and Letters*
NN	*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*
PR	*A Personal Record*
SS	"The Secret Sharer"
UWE	*Under Western Eyes*

II. Conrad's Letters

CL	*The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 1-9. Ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies, Gene M. Moore, Owen Knowles and John Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983-2008.

CHAPTER ONE

CONRAD AND ALTERITY

Conrad the Foreigner

In a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, a Polish friend, Conrad wrote: "Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. *Homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning" (*CL* vol. 3, 89). A Polish gentleman born in Polish Eastern Borderlands (present-day Ukraine)[1] into a patriotic family penalized for patriotic conspiracy; the only son of Apollo Korzeniowski, who was an insurgent, writer and translator of Shakespeare, Dickens, Hugo, and various French poets; a sailor on French and British ships; and finally a British citizen and an Anglophone writer who declined a British knighthood since he already belonged to Polish nobility (the Nałęcz-Korzeniowski family held their own coat-of-arms), Conrad felt a "double man" owing to his complex background, as well as for a variety of other reasons.

As regards his national extraction, he would call himself a Pole and an English writer simultaneously. A photograph of himself aged five that he offered to his wife Jessie bore his dedication written in his hand at the time the picture was taken: "To my dear Granny who helped me send pastries to my poor Daddy in prison–grandson, Pole-Catholic, and szlachcic, Konrad" (Najder 2007, Dedication in verso of the photograph of Konrad Korzeniowski in 1863). In a letter to Karol Zagórski, he termed himself "[a] Polish nobleman, cased in British tar" (*CL* vol. 1, 52). On the other hand, towards the end of his life, he wrote to Ernst Bendz: "It is very obvious that I don't possess the English language in any exceptional way; but that is no reason to doubt my sincerity when I say that it has possessed and shaped even my thoughts. Idiomatically I am never at fault, and it is absolutely true that if I had not written in English I would not have written

[1] Joanna Skolik, among other Polish scholars following the seminal works of Zdzisław Najder, has highlighted the influence on Conrad of the Polish Borderlands as a "repository of the Polish tradition and cultural heritage" (Skolik 2018, 121).

at all" (Jean-Aubry 1927, 296). At the same time, he also emphasized the effort he expended in mastering English and using it in his art. To his literary editor Edward Garnett, he confessed, "I had to work like a coal miner in his pit quarrying all my English sentences out of a black night" (ibid., 82). In *Joseph Conrad: A Life* (2007) Zdzisław Najder quotes numerous letters and comments of Conrad's contemporaries who emphasize Conrad's foreign accent in his spoken English, his loss for words, and his general sense of alienness: "all that he did, all that he said [was] inexplicably alien to England. It was not that he was foreign; it was simply that he was not English" (2007, 477). The "foreignness" was sensed by Conrad himself. He wrote about it to John Galsworthy: "I suppose there is something in me that is unsympathetic to the general public […]. Foreignness, I suppose" (Jean-Aubry 1927, 65). When Conrad died, Virginia Woolf praised his linguistic talent and his style, but still called him "our guest" (1925).

In his Author's Note to *A Personal Record*, a book of reminiscences, Conrad writes about his feeling of otherness in the English circumstances: "I have always felt myself looked upon somewhat in the light of a phenomenon, a position which outside the circus world cannot be regarded as desirable" (*PR* iii). Commenting on the doubts of his critics concerning his choice of English, his third language after Polish and French, he writes: "my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born. I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself" (*PR* v). Elsewhere, he says of his sailing career: "no doubt I could have found a ship much nearer my native place, but I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman then I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice" (*PR* 119). This testifies to the complex nature of his sense of identity[2]. According to Najder, what transpires from the pages of *A Personal Record* is a "search for consistency" and a desperate need to "impress consistence" and meaning on his life that would match the moral demands he formulated in his novels and believed in: writing about himself "was for Conrad a way of dealing not only with his readers, but first with himself" (Najder 1988, xx-xxi). Conrad seems to be aware of this, as he writes in A Familiar Preface to the compilation: "I know that

[2] In fact, some critics underscore the fact of Conrad's apparent dispossession as regards his national extraction and locate the sea as the place where Conrad felt most at home. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, for example, claims that "the sea, with its clear hierarchy of command, its time-honored traditions, its intense fellowship of the craft, provided Conrad with a consoling metaphor for the sense of belonging associated with a true homeland" (2005, 18).

the novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself" (*PR* xiii). In "Rulers of East and West", an essay in *The Mirror of the Sea* volume, he declares that each writer "stands confessed in his works" (*MS* 95).

In his Introduction to *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record*, Najder argues that the two compilations of mostly autobiographical essays, when treated jointly, constitute Conrad's complementary vision of himself that he wanted his readers to receive and recognize (1988, vii). It is evident that Conrad's complex identity influenced his outlook on both life and writing and that the theme of uncovering, constructing and being faithful to one's identity became one of the cornerstones of his prose[3].

The duality, or even further fragmentation of Conrad's identity, has already been considered and discussed in various respects. In his *The Two Lives of Joseph Conrad* (1965), Leo Gurko distinguishes two faces of Joseph Conrad: that of the seaman and that of the writer. Frederic Karl has subtitled his biography of Conrad "The Three Lives" (1979), thus singling out Conrad's Polish patriotic background, his international seaman's experience and his career as a writer writing in English. Bernard Meyer writes about as many as five distinct lives in his *Joseph Conrad: a Psychoanalytic Biography* (1967): a young Polish nobleman, a sea-faring adventurer on French ships, a British seaman, a Congo river boatman and the English-speaking novelist. In John Stape's 2007 biography *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, the author of *Lord Jim* is presented as a man of multiple cultural identities who would consistently reinvent himself. In his study *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (1990), Yves Hervouet argues for the existence of not a double, but a triple identity of Joseph Conrad, by complementing his joint Polish-English national affinities with a French dimension. The evidence includes linguistic, literary and philosophical clues which demonstrate the wealth of Conrad's French inheritance, which derived from his education in Poland (including the influence of his father–a translator of many French writers) and the French period of his life, mainly in Marseilles and on board of French merchant ships. Barbara Kocówna notes that what is striking about young Conrad's

[3] Ian Watt makes a case for the existence of a link between Conrad's dual allegiances and his writing: "For Conrad, the question of how to live, in the simplest and most immediate occupational sense, was overwhelmingly important; at the same time, however, his consciousness of its demands sharpened his sense of individual separateness. Conrad's successive exposure to two national and two occupational allegiances had given a very special prominence of this contradiction between the public and the private" (1980, 336).

letters to his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski is that though they were written in Polish, all the glosses are in French (1976, 194), in which Conrad was fluent.

This blend of influences remains a crucial characteristic of Conrad's identity. Geoffrey Galt Harpham diagnoses the situation of Conrad as one of apparent "hybridity"–going beyond the dualism of the Same and the Other, an amalgam of sameness and otherness, "a thoroughly English gentleman who was also an oppressed Pole" (qtd. in Hampson 2000, 187-88). Robert Hampson, on the other hand, underlines the artificiality of Conrad's Englishness, which he diagnoses as mimicry (2000, 188). In his attempt to capture Conrad's identity as a foreigner, Hampson draws on three thinkers: Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva and Rosi Braidotti (characteristically, all three were migrants). He sees an apt model of Conrad's experience in Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), in which she claims that exiles never cease to sense their "strangeness" and are never completely true nor completely false in the new setting; in Levinas's recurring allusions to the figure of Abraham, who left what was known to him without any expectation of return in order to explore the unknown, or what Levinas would label "alterity"; and in Braidotti's famous concept of nomadism–a refusal to settle into culturally established modes of thinking and living (Hampson 2000, 189). Laurence Davies claims that one of the most recent trends in Conradian scholarship in the 21st century is "the tendency to think of him as a transnational author, a stranger and at home in many places" (2017, 193).

Despite his rich international experiences, Conrad continued to highlight his Polish heritage, as well as the fact that Poland, contrary to some contemporary opinions, was not under Russian influence culture-wise, but was rooted in the Western European tradition (cf. *NLL* 131, 135). In a letter to Charles Chassé he opposes charges of the impact of Russian culture on himself:

> it would have been more just to charge me at most with "Polonism". Polish temperament, at any rate, is far removed from Byzantine and Asiatic associations. Poland has absorbed Western ideals and tendencies as much as it was possible, across the great distances and in the special conditions of its national and political life, whose main task was the struggle for life against Asiatic despotism at its door. […] Men have but little self knowledge, and authors especially are victims of many illusions about themselves. (Jean-Aubry 1927, 336)

Curiously, Conrad finishes the above-quoted argumentation with a comment on the limitations of self-knowledge in general, and in the case

of writers in particular, just as if reflecting on his own identity, and how he could be classified by others, led him to ponder on the complexity of his own stance as an artist.

Conrad as a stranger to himself

Conrad was aware, therefore, of the strangeness of his situation and of the apparent capriciousness of his life choices. He describes the sudden changes in his thinking and decisions as apparently illogical[4]. In *A Personal Record* Conrad depicts his leaving Poland for Marseilles as a teenager as "a standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations" (*PR* 121), thus inviting parallels with Lord Jim's desertion of the *Patna*. He also alludes to the fact that his own motives behind his decision to leave his homeland and start the life of a mariner in a foreign country remain inscrutable to himself, just as they were at the time "because of the mysteriousness of [the young boy's] impulses to himself. I understood no more than the people who called upon me to explain myself" (*PR* 121). In two letters, he describes the moment of boarding the Vienna Express train, which was the starting point for his journey from Cracow to Marseilles, as stepping into a dream, "Only now it is peopled mostly by ghosts and the moment of awakening draws near" (Jean-Aubry 1927, 157, see also ibid., 155).

He clearly remained an alien to himself and may have lived with this feeling for considerable parts of his life. In his essay "Poland Revisited" in *Notes on Life and Letters* Conrad writes of Cracow, where he lived as a teenager, as a place from which he broke "violently by throwing myself into an unrelated existence" (*NLL* 145). He describes his 1914 journey to Poland as a journey in time, into the past–dreadful "to him who had not known hope to preserve against his impulses the order and continuity of his life–so that at times it presented itself to his conscience as a series of betrayals" (*NLL* 149). The pervading feeling of having tampered with his identity and distorted the flow of natural development must have had a bearing on Conrad's sense of self and rendered him even more sensitive to issues of identity and the experience of observing one's own self as if from the outside. Describing his sentimental journey, he says, "Each of us is a fascinating spectacle to himself, and I had to watch

[4] This is echoed in the narrator's feelings in *The Shadow-Line*. Geoffrey Galt Harpham discusses Conrad's skill of adaptation to new circumstances and notes that "Conrad's acquired sensitivity to the human capacity to assume different forms became the basis for both his self-understanding and his understanding of human beings generally" (2005, 18).

my own personality returning from another world, as it were, to revisit the glimpses of old moons" (*NLL* 164). In his own diligence at becoming a British sailor, he perceives an attempt "to justify my existence to myself, to redeem a tacit moral pledge" (*NLL* 151). Najder considers the narrative strategy of using Marlow as the narrator in some of Conrad's texts as yet another attempt to finalize "his search for a consistent consciousness of self-identity" (1983, 231) as the figure of Marlow embodies what Conrad would have imagined himself to be if he had become fully anglicized (cf. also Lothe 2005, 146)[5].

The sense of the otherness of the self and the need to verify, validate or authenticate one's identity pervades most of his texts. Some of the characters that embody this problem are the eponymous Lord Jim and Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, who fail in constructing their respective identities single-handedly and without any reference to others. David Trotter claims that Jim "fails because he has no reserves of character […] In Patusan Jim will fabricate character […] His word is the only measure of his value, and he is finished as soon as it fails on the reputation market" (1993, 59). According to the critic, Nostromo also "mints faith in himself" by speculating on his reputation: "Like Jim, he is known not by a name but by a title permanently mortgaged to the future" (ibid., 61). Another example is the hollow Kurtz who also constructs, or inflates his name at the expense of others and stylizes his identity. In relation to the complex issues of identity in Conrad's oeuvre, Robert Hampson uses two distinctions borrowed from Aaron Esterson. The first one is between being-for-self, a direct experience of oneself, and being-for-the-other, which is mediated by the other. The second distinction is between identity-for-self, "a person's definition of himself in relation to others", and identity-for-the-other, "whom he feels himself to be in the eyes of others". It is crucial to note that in this arrangement, identity-for-self may but need not be confirmed by identity-for-the-other, and that one may see in identity-for-the-other their true self (Esterson qtd. in Hampson 1992, 10). The Conradian themes of hollowness, rootlessness, or being uprooted lend themselves perfectly to analyses of how characters construct their own identity on the basis of identity-for-the-other–rather than identity-for-self–

[5] Jakob Lothe analyses the relationship between Conrad's own sense of identity and the narratorial creation of Marlow the Englishman linked with such diverse European personages as the aunt and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*; while in *Lord Jim* Marlow's identity formation is "interestingly linked to his ardent attempt to understand another Englishman, Jim, and yet precisely that attempt brings him into contact with characters like the French lieutenant and Stein–[...] whose identities are anchored in France and Germany rather than Britain" (2005, 146).

which places selfhood in more tangible terms of interconnectedness with other people.

Apart from analysing the challenges of constructing an identity for oneself, Conrad also noted and problematized the difficulties inherent in identity itself. In a letter to his aunt the French writer Marguerite Poradowska, he writes, "One must drag the ball and chain of one's selfhood to the end" (1940, 72). Selfhood, or consciousness of the self and the self's circumstances often proved challenging for Conrad. In his letters, he often declared that the tragic dimension of human existence relies on man's consciousness of his plight (cf. e.g. his 1898 letter to Cunninghame Graham, Watts 1969, 70). In certain respects, Conrad perceived consciousness and selfhood as a burden. An analysis of Conradian texts often proves that the burden is more cumbersome when the self is focused on itself, as is exhibited by Lord Jim or Decoud in *Nostromo*. A beneficial transcending of the self is usually linked in the Conradian world with either establishing meaningful relations with others (though many of his characters seem deficient in this ability) or dedicating oneself to work, especially communal work with a clear practical goal, such as the collaboration of sailors on board of ships. In *The Mirror of the Sea* he writes about an escape from the self in the work of a sailor: "To forget one's self, to surrender all personal feeling in the service of that fine art, is the only way for a seaman to the faithful discharge of his trust" (*MS* 30).

On the other hand, the risks of losing possession of one's self also haunted Conrad in both his writing career and in his works. In A Familiar Preface to his *Personal Record*, he writes, "I have a positive horror of losing even for one moving moment that full possession of myself which is the first condition of good service" (*PR* xvii), with service referring to both his seaman's career and his writing years. Later, he emphasizes the value of sober work as an antidote to excessive self-preoccupation and the risks of losing one's grasp of oneself: "all my two lives […] [I have had] an instinctive horror of losing my sense of full self-possession" (*PR* 112). In his insightful study *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession*, H.M. Daleski claims that self-possession is a key concept in Conrad, and one on which all other virtues, notably fidelity, solidarity, duty, discipline, courage and endurance, rely. With no self-possession, the characters are bound to fail in one way or another (1977, 17). It is characteristic that Conrad's obsession with the theme manifests itself in numerous depictions of loss of self–or self-possession–by means of surrender, panic, nullity or suicide (ibid., 20). Significantly, Daleski argues that true self-possession is always based on a capacity for abandoning, or for transcending the self

(ibid., 25). Thus, his argument seems to confirm the thesis that for Conrad man's identity can only be stabilized, and acknowledged by others, when the self is transcended.

The complexity of Conrad's relation to his own self and the issue of selfhood in his characters suggest that it is possible to treat the self as a form of alterity–an internal other to be confronted. Therefore, Arthur Rimbaud's famous dictum, "I–is another" may prove illuminating in an analysis of Conradian texts. While it is difficult to establish whether Conrad knew "The Letter of the Seer" in which this paradoxical statement appears, it is certain that it aptly illustrates the theme of inner duality in Conrad's fiction and biography. It is also certain that Conrad knew at least some works by Arthur Rimbaud[6]. Najder claims that it is not impossible that, in accordance with G.J. Resink's hypothesis, Conrad actually met Rimbaud in Marseilles in 1875, as both of them moved in the same circles, though there would have been only about a week for them to do so (2007, 50). The possibility is also hinted at by Frederick Karl in *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979, 130). Indeed, as has been noted by Yves Hervouet (1990, 312 n. 84), the fact that in *A Personal Record* Conrad declares that the poet should, first and foremost, be "the seer *par excellence*" (*PR* 93) may be claimed to reflect Rimbaud's famous assertions in his "Letter of the Seer":

> I say one must be a *seer* (*voyant*), make oneself a *seer*.
>
> The Poet makes himself a *seer* by a long, rational and immense *disordering* of *all the senses*. All forms of love, suffering, madness: he searches himself; he consumes all the poisons in himself, to keep only their quintessence. Unspeakable torture, where he needs all his faith, every superhuman strength, during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed–and the supreme Knower, among men!– Because he arrives at the *unknown*! Because he has cultivated his soul,

[6] In an 1898 letter to Cunninghame Graham he writes "Can't understand Rimbaud at all" (Watts 1969, 104)–a "typically evasive answer", according to Hervouet (1990, 247). Conrad also comments with appreciation on an influential essay on Rimbaud written by Charles Whibley and declares, in an 1899 letter to William Blackburn: "I happen to know Rimbaud's verses" (1958, 46). Indeed, Hervouet notes that Conrad possessed a much-used 1898 copy of Rimbaud's *Oeuvres* (1990, 312 n. 82). This fact is confirmed by David W. Tutein in his *Joseph Conrad's Reading. An Annotated Bibliography* (1990, 84); he finds proof of this in a catalogue of second-hand books purchased by Conrad. He also notes that Conrad's father translated works of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Gide and Maupassant, which remains another plausible source of Joseph Conrad's familiarity with the French poet.

> already rich, more than others! He arrives at the unknown, and when, maddened, he ends up by losing the knowledge of his visions: he has still seen them! Let him die charging among those unutterable, unnameable things: other fearful workers will come: they'll start from the horizons where the first have fallen!..... ("Letter of the Seer")

What also appears a striking link is Conrad's famous depiction of the writer's task in the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*: to make the reader *see*. Therefore, Conrad seems to perceive the role of the artist as sharing his vision[7].

The theme of the otherness of the self implies limited self-knowledge, which in the case of most Conradian characters is a crucial problem. In one of his letters Conrad labels personality "an aimless mask of something hopelessly unknown" (Jean-Aubry 1927, 186). The difficulty of the Conradian test lies to a large extent in the characters' deficient self-cognition: this is the case in figures such as Kurtz, Marlow, Jim, the young captains in "The Secret Sharer" and *The Shadow-Line*, Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, Winnie and Adolf Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, Gould, Nostromo and Decoud in *Nostromo*.

What may have rendered Conrad all the more sensitive to the difficulties of attaining self-knowledge is the epistemological scepticism resultant from his philosophical outlook. In 1898, Conrad famously wrote to his friend Cunninghame Graham, "There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope" (Watts 1969, 71). Among the issues which plagued Conrad's consciousness and prompted his pessimism were: the general erosion of religious faith in his times, and therefore lack of the reassuring belief in Providence and the world's teleological purposefulness; the general growth of scepticism in the 19th century; the pessimistic conclusions he must have drawn from his personal experience as the son of exiled parents

[7] Furthermore, Hervouet notes the similarities between Kurtz's and Rimbaud's life-stories as uncommon men going mad in Africa (1990, 178). He also refers to Aniela Kowalska's suggestion that sources for the character of Kurtz lie in Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*–"A Season in Hell" (1990, 247). He also perceives a link between Rimbaud's theory of the *voyant*-poet who aims at expressing the inexpressible and Conrad's description of the unearthly nature of writing which transports the writer into a world of hallucinations (this vision is described in Conrad's 1899 letter to E. L. Sanderson) (1990, 247-48). Among those who have also detected traces of Rimbaud's life and art in *Heart of Darkness* is Maciej Żurowski (2007). In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, Ian Watt also makes a case for the influence of the French Symbolists, and Rimbaud in particular, on Conrad, (cf. 1980, 199). The links between Rimbaud's poetry and *Heart of Darkness* are also discussed in Michel Arouimi's article "Rimbaud au coeur des Ténèbres" (2002).

who fought for a country which had been erased from maps and seemed to have poor chances of rebirth; his direct experience of imperialism, especially in the Congo; the rising prominence of science which suggested that soulless mechanisms, rather than a benevolent God determined (human) life; and the rise of determinism and solipsistic thought in European philosophical thought[8]. The fears stemming from these anxieties prompted Conrad to write many a desperate, or even nihilistic letter, for example to Cunninghame Graham:

> The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful–but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life–utterly out of it. [...] In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement for virtue, for knowledge, and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men. Life knows us not and we do not know life–we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. (Watts 1969, 65)

Ursula Lord aptly comments that this paragraph pinpoints the "epistemological crisis that crystallizes into solipsistic despair as we admit the impossibility of truly understanding one another, or even ourselves" (1998, 144). The dire sense of rootlessness and isolation as an aftermath of the erosion of religious faith challenged the very idea of purposefulness of life and the possibility of reaching any objective knowledge.

Conrad and communication with the other

Conrad himself complained that he had not been understood by his contemporaries (cf., for example, his letter to Sidney Colvin, 18 March 1917 in Jean-Aubry 1927, 185). Due to the unreliability of language, the chasms between individual people seemed to him all the more daunting. In a letter to Cunninghame Graham, he complains that "the best of us have but a few thoughts and that of these the best worth saying have a trick of being unutterable–not because of their profundity but because there is a devil that tangles the tongue or hangs the penholder making its use odious and the sound of words foolish like the banging of tin cans" (Watts 1969,

[8] Detailed analyses of the background of Joseph Conrad's outlook are provided by Cedric Watts in his *Preface to Conrad* (1993) and in Torsten Pettersson's *Consiousness and Time: A Study in the Philosophy and Narrative Technique of Joseph Conrad* (1982).

141). Doubts of this sort must have plagued a writer concerned with themes such as human isolation and the effectiveness of storytelling. Indeed, the narrative choices Conrad made in his texts, for example box narratives, again in a "janiform" manner, point to two aspects: that of the need to communicate messages to others and that of the ineffectiveness of human means to do so[9]. Furthermore, in his personal life, Conrad was acutely aware of the different status of information in his sea experience, where a working community communicated in practical matters, and his writing experience, determined by loneliness and its uncertainties, where he would occasionally despair of the possibility of being understood by his readers. Therefore it could be claimed that he experienced the transition "from storytelling as useful, communal art to novel writing as essentialized, solitary art" (Said 1983, 100-101).

John Peters underlines the fact that both the narrative techniques Conrad employs and the subject matter he is concerned with suggest the writer's doubts as to the sources of knowledge about the universe and about an intersubjective meaning of life (2001, 2-3). As phenomena are filtered by individual consciousness, knowledge appears to have an individual, subjective basis and one person's knowledge can never exactly reflect that of another person, nor is it the same as one's own in a different time or space (ibid., 3-4). One of Conrad's most famous sceptical declarations was included in an 1895 letter to Edward Noble:

> Everyone must walk in the light of his own heart's gospel. No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That's my creed from beginning to end. That's my view of life,–a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas and principles of other people's making. These are only a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me. I am telling you things that I would never dream of telling anybody, but I don't want to speak to you from the shelter of false pretences. (Jean-Aubry 1927, 184)

What seems certain for one man can never be beyond doubt for another. According to Daniel Schwarz, in Conrad's world "each man's epistemology is peculiarly his own, the function of his psyche and experience" while man's interpretation of events and moral behaviour are shaped by one's psychological needs which may not even be fully understood or acknowledged (1982, xi, 2). Peters argues, nevertheless, that though in Conrad's eyes absolutes are suspicious and knowledge can never be certain, human subjectivity does remain certain; and it is in human subjectivity that he

[9] Schwarz argues that "Marlow's obsession with the effectiveness of language reflects Conrad's fears that communication may be impossible and that he, as a writer, may be indulging in the illusion of speaking to others" (1980, 215).

perceives the antidote to moral nihilism (2001, 5). The conclusion he draws is that Conrad could not accept nihilism and it is "in humanity and their activities [that] he finds a means to exist in an indifferent universe" (Peters 2001, 159)[10]. This view seems convincing. However, it should be noted that it is not merely in one's subjective consciousness that the grounds for Conrad's ethics and epistemology should be sought, but in human interrelations and the acknowledgment of human interdependence, both of which prompt one to transcend oneself.

The very process of storytelling–the basis for many of Conrad's texts–as well as writing as communication between the author and his readers, may be perceived as attempts of constructing such interrelations. Self-conscious an author as Conrad is, he also highlights the fact that his urge to write stems from a feeling of "sympathy and compassion" towards humanity (*PR* xv). Describing the beginnings of his writing, Conrad evokes the characters who peopled some of his texts set in exotic places and who were probably based on his personal memories: Malays, Arabs and half-castes, and claims they had a special appeal to him which "seems now to have had a moral character, for why should my memory of these beings, seen in their obscure sun-bathed existence, demand to express itself in the shape of a novel, except on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on this earth?" (*PR* 9). Thus a sympathetic rendition of the human lot gains an ethical dimension as an expression of the sense of a communal bond and fidelity to humanity. Indeed, it is fidelity that assumes the proportions of Conrad's key value. In A Familiar Preface to *A Personal Record*, he famously declares, "[t]hose who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity" (*PR* xix). The act of writing about people and addressing other people as his readers is for Conrad an opportunity to both feel and enhance his sense of fraternity against all odds, and especially against the pervading epistemological scepticism that seems to undercut the ethical dimension of the world.

It is also, paradoxically, against moral scepticism that Conrad speaks. In *Notes on Life and Letters*, he emphasizes that "[t]he interest of a

[10] According to Peters, having witnessed the gradual erosion of the certitude placed in science into scepticism and relativity, Conrad recognized the tragic dimension of a world which hopelessly strove to cling to the old absolutes, and of the tension between a desire for epistemological certainty and the illusoriness of that certainty, as "he was born too early to accept fully and unequivocally a relative universe and too late to believe in the absolutes of his progenitors" (2001, 159).

reader in a work of imagination is either ethical or that of simple curiosity. Both are perfectly legitimate, since there is both a moral and an excitement to be found in a faithful rendering of life" (*NLL* 26). Ian Watt argues that Conrad's deep sense of modern alienation stems from himself, his life as an exiled and alienated writer, and his times, "yet Conrad's most vigorous energies were turned away from the ever-increasing separateness of the individual towards discovering values and attitudes and ways of living and writing which he could respect and yet which were, or could be, widely shared" (1979 a, 257). The establishment of values such as fidelity, loyalty and selflessness together with the need for effective communication and the idea of sharing appear to be Conrad's imperatives in the project of writing and publishing in the first place[11]. All of these values require transcending one's own self and engaging with another person.

A yet further merit of literature is, in Conrad's eyes, the growth of self-knowledge, both for the writer and for the reader. He seems to argue that the value of art is intertwined with self-knowledge when he declares in one of his essays about the office of the Censor of Plays: "He must know nothing of art, of life–and of himself" (*NLL* 79-80). The very idea of limiting the flow of thought in literature, or limiting the communication between author and reader, or underestimating the cognitive dimension of art, seems to suggest deficient self-knowledge. The process of writing involves, in Conrad's view, the writer's insightful attempt at drawing on his own self-knowledge. In the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, often perceived as his artistic manifesto, he declares that "The artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal" (*NN* 145).

Self-knowledge as a value appears to be connected in Conrad's Preface to the idea of attaining truth and communicating it to others. Watt sees in the Preface "the most voluntary, single statement of Conrad's general approach to writing", according to which literature becomes the embodiment of "humanly necessary truths which were not attainable elsewhere" (1979 b, 153, 154). This would seem paradoxical in view of

[11] Schwarz argues that in his writing Conrad searched both for a set of values on which social communities and interpersonal relations could be based and for an appropriate mode of communicating his vision to his readers. He longed to define this set of values for the sake of himself and for the sake of his readers, though his life experience prompted him occasionally towards scepticism as to the ability to capture and communicate the sense of life to others. It is in this scepticism and self-doubt about the ability to communicate both his values and his doubts that Schwarz perceives the source of Conrad's characteristic irony (1990, 174).

Conrad's scepticism and the complexity of his epistemology which, as mentioned above, may only be based on subjective cognition. However, Conrad insists that

> art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its lights, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential–their one illuminating and convincing quality–the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker and the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. (*NN* 145)

Even though the truth is cryptically described as "manifold and one", the general overtone of this passage is affirmative.

In *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics*, Daniel Schwarz discusses the role of reading and understanding fiction in the reader's gaining of self-knowledge and highlights the link between reading and establishing/confirming one's sense of identity:

> Because of their ontological status as fictions, novels can be used as reference points to learn about ourselves. By reading we extend our knowledge of ourselves and of the real world; novels enable us to see by showing us versions of not-ourselves and versions of ourselves. Because novels are representative of recognizable experience, they explore, test, question, and, at times, confirm ourselves. […] Regarding self-knowledge as a value, an ethical humanistic reader seeks to discover how and why authors create imagined worlds that mime real ones. (1990, 61)

It is with the intention of drawing on the feeling of his fellowship with mankind, and of strengthening this feeling in others, that Conrad sets out to present sympathetically the plot: "to present an unrestful episode in the obscure lives of a few individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple, and the voiceless. For, [...] it becomes evident that there is not a place of splendour or a dark corner of the earth that does not deserve, if only a passing glance of wonder and pity" (*NN* 146).

Poignant sensitivity to the details of human life reverberates through the Preface and appeals to the readers' sense of community with mankind, "to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation; and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to that solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity–the dead to the living, and the living to the unborn" (*NN* 145-56). According to Najder, for Conrad

"the moral aim of art consisted in the stirring up of this profound sense of solidarity based on tradition immemorial" (2007, 246). In his discussion of the meaning of the term "solidarity" in Conrad's understanding, Watt notes that, rather than collective action, the writer sees it as "man's common experience in general, whether collective or individual, and whether concerned with the human or the natural world" (1980, 81).

According to Jolanta Dudek, what transpires from Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is a conviction that the artist's truth, unlike the abstract truth of philosophers, or the verifiable truth of scientists, is spiritual and communal by nature. It is transferred by means of the artist's own experiences from which the readers can discover the beauty of life and the communal bonds that link him with other people (2017, 40). Apparently, unlike impressionists, Conrad sees in the study of art–and its effect on human thought, imagination and conscience–the process of arriving at the roots of the common identity (2017, 40)[12]. According to Watt, Conrad perceived art as "a memorial record in the long chain of human solidarity" (1979 b, 166). Interestingly enough, the idea of solidarity inherent in hereditary transition of tasks appears also in relation to seamanship, as depicted in Conrad's late sea novella *The Shadow-Line* (1917), partly based on Conrad's own seafaring experience[13]. Thus, Conrad's double career–as a seaman and as a writer–is related to one of his major themes, that of the interdependence of men and the transition between generations which testify to the communality of human experience.

The theme of solidarity and the sense of bonding with other people, between generations, is extended to the sense of a meaningful link with the whole world and the truth hidden in it, which, again paradoxically, runs against Conrad's metaphysical scepticism and pessimism. By conveying for the benefit of the reader "the rescued fragment" of "a passing phase of life" Conrad claims to attempt to "reveal the substance of its truth" and expresses his hope that "the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate–which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world" (*NN* 147).

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[12] Such an attitude, according to Dudek, is also visible in works by the phenomenologists Max Scheler and Roman Ingarden (2017, 40 n. 94).

[13] Najder notes that in explaining in a 1917 letter to Sidney Colvin why the novella is subtitled "*A Confession*", Conrad returns to his own idea from the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, that is "to show the truth about other people through fidelity to his own experience" (2007, 475).

Despite Conrad's scepticism and his declaration towards the end of the Preface that the aim of art "is obscured by mists" (*NN* 148), it is striking that the word *truth* appears in the short Preface nine times. Indeed, what Conrad strives to convey is truth: truth extracted sympathetically from individual lives and the writer's experience and communicated to the readers with the effect of strengthening the sense of fellowship of mankind. It is the lives of men, their inner life, their conviction of both individual uniqueness of feelings and thought, and the common humanity, that are the source of truth for Conrad, rather than abstract philosophy, factual science, or utilitarian art (Dudek 2017, 41).

The process of conveying truth is famously labelled by Conrad in his Preface as showing and seeing:

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel–it is, before all, to make you see! That–and no more: and it is everything! If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm–all you demand; and perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. (*NN* 147)

The verb "to see" may obviously imply the perception of visual impressions, or "spiritual truths" (Watt 1979 b, 160), but it also suggests a possibility of comprehension. Watt argues that Conrad wanted his art to appeal through the senses, and not to them, as was the case with Impressionists; with the ultimate goal being the communication of truth and of sensation (ibid., 160). Even if it is only a glimpse of truth that the readers can extract from what they read, the Preface carries two surprisingly optimistic implications. Firstly, there is some truth to be acquired from reading literature; hence, truth exists and it may be possible to reach it. Secondly, if the readers, apparently, are capable of acquiring it, transmission of ideas–communication in a world of subjective consciousnesses–is also possible. What is crucial is that both the acquisition of truth and bridging the gap between isolated individuals can only happen in relation to other people, be it the characters described empathetically, or the writer through his own experience shared in the form of his work, or the readers who are addressed and become the recipients of the writer's ideas.

In his 1919 Author's Note to *The Mirror of the Sea*, a personal book focused on the theme of man's exertions in the face of the challenges posed by nature, Conrad writes about his hope of man's "holding converse with his kind" (*MS* xxxiv) and claims that having lived through his sea years, he felt the need of "ultimately, some day, at some moment, making myself understood" (*MS* xxxv). It is as if his heightened consciousness of