Fidelity and Loneliness

Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle, by Zdzislaw Najder, *New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984. xxi + 647 pp. $14.95.*

IN HIS YOUTH his uncle sent him frightful letters.

> You always, my dear boy, made me impatient — and still make me impatient — by your disorder and the easy way you take things — in which you remind me of the Korzeniowski family — spoiling and wasting everything .... Do you need a nanny — and am I cast in that role?

Tadeusz Bobrowski, maternal uncle of the young Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, had good reason to be annoyed. Between 1874 and 1878 his ward, the future author Joseph Conrad, cost him some 30,000 francs, the salary of a French naval officer for fifteen years. Nor could the young Pole, pleasantly adrift in Marseilles, render an account of these stupefying expenditures. Without a trace of viciousness in his makeup, Conrad remained to the end of his life an incurable spendthrift. As late as 1907, when belated recognition in America ought to have made him solvent, Conrad confessed, in one of hundreds of appeals to his publisher, "It may be that I don't *count* my money very well."

Conrad inherited his inability to count from two generations of headstrong, Russophobic idealists of the *szlachta*, or Polish nobility. The Korzeniowskis, noted for their overweening fidelity in matters large (war, literature, nationalism) and their abysmal irregularity in matters small (farming, gainful employment) bequeathed to their famous son an early talent for politics, romantic literature, and cigars. Conrad's hereditary improvidence, sustained initially by his uncle's guilt, later became his defense against depression and social insecurity.

Conrad's parents died in exile, political martyrs, a fact which uncle Bobrowski, a pragmatic appeaser, regarded with uneasiness and distaste. Despite his affection for Conrad, Bobrowski maintained for years afterward that his sister had gone to her grave in 1865 an unwitting victim of Apollo Korzeniowski's inflammatory stanzas. The Bobrowski clan, finding Apollo's radical views inimical, had even attempted to marry him into another family. Conrad suffered the discrepancy between the heedless idealism of his father and the balanced, somewhat sterile views of his uncle until 1911, when he resolved the conflict with a nervous breakdown and the writing of *Under Western Eyes*.

Of his father Conrad was to say very little. Accounts of the period 1867–69, which Conrad spent with his father in exile, are sketchy. The boy seems to have preferred the solitary, intellectual companionship of this broken man to the boisterous normality of private school in Switzerland. Apollo's funeral in 1869, a *de rigueur* occasion for thousands of patriotic Poles, left Conrad an orphan at the age of twelve. Five years later, steeped in the sea tales of Cooper and Marryat, Conrad left for Marseilles with a generous allowance and the intention of becoming a sailor. Not until 1915, with the writing of *Victory*, did Conrad return to the painful subject of his father. Yet his fictional remembrance pulses with feeling.

> For three years [Axel Heyst] had lived with the elder Heyst, who was then writing his last book. . . .
>
> Three years of such companionship at that plastic and impressionable age were bound to leave in the boy a profound mistrust of life. The young man learned to reflect, which is a destructive process, a reckoning of the cost. It is not the clear-sighted who lead the world. Great achievements are accomplished in a blessed, warm mental fog, which the pitiless cold blasts of the father's analysis had blown away from the son.
>
> "I'll drift," Heyst had said to himself deliberately.

Drift Conrad did, from the cafés and

theaters of Marseilles, where his uncle's money kept him popular, through a succession of Mediterranean ships, and finally out onto the great oceans as an officer of the British Merchant Marine who rated a slightly higher berth each time.

To the present-day observer Conrad's sea experience seems to constitute a career. Biographers often pay more attention to Conrad's eighteen years at sea than to his equal period of unparalleled literary achievement. Yet, as Mr. Zdzislaw Najder's *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* underscores with documentary exactness, these years were at bottom the extended soul-searchings of an alien. Conrad entered the Merchant Marine at a time when pay scales were so poor that not until his first command did Conrad earn more than a fraction of his uncle's allowance. This remittance, with supplements to cover Conrad's frequent mishaps, continued until Bobrowski's death in 1894. Nor did Conrad rise in his profession with the alacrity of a genuine devotée. His layovers were more extensive than common; he obtained his officer's certificate with the help of false documents. Though he later took pains to deny it, Conrad seems to have known all along that his destination lay beyond the narrow circle of the sea. It was probably in 1887, while chief mate aboard the *Vidar*, a trading scow plying the wide, muddy rivers of the Malay Archipelago, that Conrad began "accidentally," as it were, to write a novel about an irresponsible dreamer entitled *Almayer's Folly*.

We know by his masterful short tales that Conrad obtained invaluable material from the sea. Yet Conrad's greatest achievements, the novels *Nostromo* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and *Victory* (1915), none of which takes the sea as its subject, prove that the most valuable thing Conrad wrested from the sea was not material but wisdom. From the sea Conrad learned his central personal and artistic tenets: honor, fidelity, endurance, and, above all, responsibility.

The Mirror of the Sea (1905) is not Conrad's finest art. Yet it says more about how Conrad shed "the green sickness of late youth" to become a responsible artist than anything ever likely to be written on the subject. Its reflections on a spiritual commitment to life, on the delicacies of human nature, and on the chaos which proceeds from political design find their ultimate expression in Conrad's greatest works. *The Mirror* enables us to understand how a man far from home, harassed by nervous sickness, obscurity, debts, and domestic confusion could create thirteen volumes of the highest excellence.

The Mirror personifies Conrad's "ideal values" in the working materials and conditions of nautical life. In the lore of sailing Conrad discovered a palpable moral tradition. He later compared his experience on sailing ships to a classical education that engenders "a strong inner feeling of that continuity of human thought, effort, and achievement which is such an inspiring and at the same time such a steadying element in national existence."

The theme of responsibility reverberates throughout *The Mirror*: responsibility to men, to ships, to the abstract ideals of craft and mind. In Conrad's lexicon the sea is the great winnower of souls. Moral judgments, while less nuanced, assume greater urgency on the open sea. A bad sailor is not merely detestable; he is dangerous. As the elderly seaman of the sketch "Initiation" has it: "Ships are all right; it's the men in 'em." This reflection recurs in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898), where we also find this description of Donkin, the so-called East-end trash:

> The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty, that knits together a ship's company.

Against this shirker Conrad posits the unsung hero of seafaring life, the man who "does his little share of the world's work

with proper efficiency." As the captain of "The Secret Sharer" reminds us, "exactitude in small matters is the very soul of discipline," a theme Conrad renders vividly in the closing passages of "Youth," where Marlow praises "something inborn and subtle and everlasting" that impels the crew of the sinking *Judea* neatly to furl her sails.

The Mirror pays equal homage to a responsibility toward language, extolling, in the sketch "Emblems of Hope," the homely

> sailor's phrase, which has all the force, precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of things they see in their trade, achieves the just expression . . . which is the ambition of the artist in words.

Conrad's attention to language serves as a rebuke to the novelist of Conrad's day — and our own — who, in his words, "does not go about building up his book with a precise intention and a steady mind." As Conrad reminded his "featherbrained" collaborator Ford Madox Ford, "effort after expression is not wasted, even if it is not paid for."

"Loneliness charged with responsibility," the chief characteristic of both the sea captain's and the writer's vocation, was something Conrad experienced long before he began putting pen to paper. Conrad's first command, as first mate aboard the *Highland Forest*, is recreated vividly in his sketch "Landfalls and Departures." Conrad describes the captain's curious habit of remaining in his stateroom until the ship has lost sight of land. According to nautical usage, this practice demonstrates the captain's implicit faith in his chief mate.

> On my first voyage . . . I remember that I felt quite flattered, and went blithely about my duties, myself a commander for all practical purposes. Still, whatever the greatness of my illusion, the fact remained that the real commander was there, backing up my self-confidence, though invisible to my eyes behind a maplewood veneered door with a white china handle.

This motif of the lonely commander appears in two of Conrad's finest tales, "The Secret Sharer" and "Typhoon." In "The Secret Sharer" the young captain describes his appointed task as one "to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and judges." In "Typhoon" Conrad renders the motif in the thoughts of the chief mate, who, as the barometer plummets ominously, finds himself "uncritically glad to have his captain at hand."

> It relieved him as though that man had, by simply coming on deck, taken most of the gale's weight upon his shoulders. Such is the prestige, the privilege, and the burden of command.
>
> Captain MacWhirr could expect no relief of that sort from anyone on earth. Such is the loneliness of command.

As the typhoon unleashes its full fury against the bows of the *Nan-Shan* we hear, in MacWhirr's unruffled command to keep the ship headed into the storm, an echo of Conrad's own guiding metaphor: "Facing it — always facing it — that's the way to get through."

It is the painful duty of the biographer to separate fact from fancy. In this regard Najder goes above and beyond his call. Those who admire Conrad's personal truths may take exception to Najder's empirical truths, nowhere so evident as when he sets about debunking apocrypha. The sheer weight of Najder's documentation convinces us, however, that particularly in his nonfiction Conrad tended to sentimentalize his years at sea. Conrad's panegyrics to the sailing ship contradict data that Conrad endeavored, whenever possible, to berth on steamships. We can accept Conrad's declaration that at sea he could recall "many hard days, but not a single day of bitterness." Yet assuredly Conrad's love for the sea was without illusion. Following the rescue of nine men from a sinking ship, he wrote:

"Already I looked with other eyes upon the sea. I knew it capable of betraying the generous ardor of youth as implacably as . . . the basest greed or the noblest heroism. My conception of its greatness was gone."

Conrad's rupture with the sea paralleled, or solidified, what in later years became his most prominent trait: pessimism. Despite his belief in fidelity to moral tradition Conrad harbored a powerful distaste for humanity in most of its communal forms. Though badly in need of friends during the years when his greatest works met with indifference, Conrad expressed himself largely through colloquial French epistles to people he hardly knew. His life, like that of his creation Axel Heyst, remained "a masterpiece of aloofness." In the words of critic E.V. Lucas, Conrad "had great charm, but he never quite convinced his companions that he would not be happier alone." We find traces of the eternally suspicious foreigner in Conrad's statement, the basis for his great political novels, that "crime is an essential condition of organized life." Conrad became *homo socialis* only in the last decade of his life when, with shattered nerves and failing health, he sought the company of uncritical admirers. These organized many of his practical affairs and helped him to forget that as a great artist he was finished.

In the postwar years Conrad's least admirable traits asserted themselves. He became energetically commercial, even greedy, with his literary capital, manuscripts, limited luxury editions, and the like. He attempted, somewhat pathetically, to rework his finer novels for the stage. He even contracted, despite his fear of becoming a literary curiosity, to boost sales of his works by giving readings to select audience in America.

As Najder writes, "The fortitude needed to bear his isolation as an outsider had finally begun to fail him." Conrad made things difficult for his family with his incessant fretfulness. Creatively exhausted but craving admiration he became a relentless monologist. Hugh Walpole later recalled, with the malice of the second-rate, that "Conrad never said anything very interesting in his last years; he was too preoccupied with money and gout." Conrad died of a heart attack in the summer of 1924.

Lovers of Conrad's literature might wish to draw a curtain over the final episodes of Conrad's life. Yet by negative example they remind us that greatness derives not only from grace, but from something humbler: human sweat. In an ironic statement to André Gide, Conrad himself provided the basis for a final assessment: "There will always be fools who will say: he aimed so high that he was bound to crack up."

Najder has done an immense job of research. It will be years before anyone learns anything about Conrad that Najder does not already know. Yet *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, while possessing considerable documentary value, succeeds in demoralizing its most ardent readers. Najder, or his translator, displays the most unimaginative command of language ever perpetrated in a work of this importance. Nor does Najder's artless arrangement of events do much to relieve the monotony. His method crushes the life of his subject beneath crates of old letters, dentist bills, and other raw materials of the biographer's trade. Najder's work is wholly devoid of atmosphere, something he himself confesses:

> When reading the best, classical "lives" I was always conscious that I could not, as they did, render the "atmosphere of the time," reconstruct the hero's physical environment, re-create the mood of his relationships with other people. My mind, long ago programmed by logical empiricists, is too angular for that. I haven't even tried.

Najder goes on to say "in self-justification" that lack of material precludes the kind of reconstruction of Joseph Conrad that, for example, Leon Edel performed on Henry James. One could argue that far more compelling histories have been written on

subjects about which far less was known. But that is beside the point. Clearly Najder has written the finest work of which he is capable.

Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle will provide much useful information for future biographers, particularly with respect to Conrad's Polish connection, an aspect of the author's life about which data have been scarce. For the rest, however, Najder presents us with a cipher, swaddled in facts, who fails to achieve an independent existence.

— *Reviewed by Larry Williams*

The Edmund Burke of Massachusetts

Works of Fisher Ames, as published by Seth Ames, edited and enlarged by W.B. Allen, *Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983. Vol. I: liii + 842 pp. Vol. II: xxxvii + 777 pp. $30.00/set (paper $15.00/set).*

FISHER AMES WAS a major second-ranking figure of his day, one of those of every age who, possessing solid talents and distinctive gifts, affect the course of government and public life without achieving real greatness. He was celebrated during his public career as an essayist of learning and as an eloquent speaker. Both Daniel Webster and Abraham Lincoln memorized his greatest declamation — a speech on the House floor in 1796 that assailed an effort to use the House's discretionary power of appropriation, in this case for the implementation of the Jay Treaty with Britain, as a means not specifically authorized in the Constitution to approve or disapprove a treaty. Yet after the mid-nineteenth century, Ames had been pretty well forgotten, and he is not much remembered now.

It is easy to see why. As an essayist, he was no Madison, as a thinker no Burke (although Boston's *Columbian Centinel* in 1814 called Burke "the Fisher Ames of Europe"). His style often ran to romantic excess. Even his compact essays were *piéces d'occasion* and have no particularly enduring value. His pen could be lively and his wit sharp, and he delivered himself of views with a kind of winning sulphurousness and force. But where his reputation must stand or fall is as a conservative political thinker and commentator. And in this respect he ranks high on lists of men of like efforts in the early republic. Among his fellow Federalists, he was not so great a strategist as Hamilton, never so penetrating a thinker as John or John Quincy Adams. Yet, except for the Adamses, until his early death at age fifty in 1808, Ames was the ablest thinking conservative in New England, surely the ablest among the Massachusetts Federalists.

Although, as is so often the case, this conservative often set forth his views in radical hyperbole, he was a moderate who condemned the secessionist impulses of some of his New England party brethren and who supported cautious party-building efforts in behalf of partisan principles. He was a staunch champion of property, writing that "the essence, and almost the quintessence, of a good government, is to protect property and its rights." Not surprisingly, therefore, he viewed the American Revolution not in any way as a social revolution, but as "a resistance to foreign government." He also assailed as "self-conceited blunderers" those statesmen who, like Thomas Jefferson, acted "without regard to circumstances, but solely according to speculative principles."

His opposition to greater democracy — to the greater participation of the people (that is to say, white males) in public life — was typical of most contemporary Federalists. Democracy, he thought, "pollutes the morals of the citizens before it swallows up their liberties." Such views did not endear Federalism to the public,