

The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World

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“Why are you watching?”
Someone must watch, it is said.
Someone must be there.
—Franz Kafka

From casual remarks uttered by my students over the years, one would think that Joseph Conrad only wrote one novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), brief enough to call a *novella*; that he was a gloomy writer and incurable racist; and that his nautical career as a British mariner was limited to shipping routes in and around Africa. It is my guess that these students’ exegetical wings were clipped by moralistic, ideologically rigid teachers who affix taboos to imperialism and hegemony, and hence, by association, to British mercantile shipping and sailors in the 19th Century, when the Royal Navy “ruled the seas.” A sailor like Joseph Conrad who happens to become a writer is not exempted from this stereotyping, which presumes that a writer’s identity is irrevocably damned by his institutional affiliation and not capable of transindividuation by milieu—in other words, that he can’t be transformed by experience or setting. But has anyone rendered experience and setting so atmospherically charged, or with such pensive, wary, introspective *gravitas* as Conrad? One doesn’t pass through his landscapes and remain the same, unless one pays to do so with one’s very life. The oceanic milieu, which poses such a gargantuan yet elusive challenge to the intelligence, training, and resilience of Conrad’s protagonists, inspires the author himself to verbalize (in his third language, English) an alternately splendid and traumatizing panorama of foreign bodies and elemental forces that forms the general ecology in which his seamen often fail to subdue both nature and their own fatal habits and flaws. When they succeed, that is, when they survive to tell their story, their tale is weighted with resignation, the sense of an ending. Within this quasi-deterministic framework, this oceanic—think “cosmic”—milieu, human subjectivity is transindividuated in a synthesis of prior individuations and singular, intensely isolating challenges that confront each conscious being afloat on the high seas, inexorably distinguishing Conrad’s profile from that of the sailors around him, as their personae are likewise distinguished from his and those of fellow shipmates. The specter of Doom and its progeny, Bravery and Cowardice, individuates beings, each memorialized or forgotten according to their unique response to seemingly unbearable pressure. On the one hand Conrad presents us with Lord Jim, who abandons his sinking ship and has to live with his shame and guilt for the rest of his desultory career, in the novel *Lord Jim* (1900); and on the other hand, he depicts in the novel *Victory* (1915) a philosophical recluse named Axel Heist, who endangers his secure existence on a private island by rescuing and sheltering a young woman who flees her predatory employer after suffering unspeakable abuses. In both novels the protagonists are doomed, albeit in morally distinctive ways that highlight singular patterns of individuation which resist stereotyping.

In her compulsively readable study of Joseph Conrad’s career as a mariner and novelist, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*, Maya Jasanoff avoids simplifying Conrad’s

legacy (and loyalties) as a British subject by reminding us of both his Polish upbringing, his apprenticeship in French harbors as a young sailor, and the intercontinental range of his adult voyaging. She argues that “Conrad didn’t set a single novel in a British colony, and even the fiction he placed in Britain or on British ships generally featured non-British characters.” Jasanoff continues:

Conrad cast his net across Europe, Africa, South America, and the Indian Ocean. Then he wandered through the holes. He took his readers to the places “beyond the end of telegraph cables and mail-boat lines,” onto the sailing ships that crept alongside the swift steamers, and among the “human outcasts such as one finds in the lost corners of the world.” (7)

An ideological or overly simplistic treatment of Conrad’s writings is misguided for many reasons, even if Conrad’s often melancholy focus on outcasts is not one’s cup of tea. The stunning innovation of the sailing ship, and later, the steamship, both of which have central roles in many of Conrad’s writings before and after *Heart of Darkness*, by connecting up continents in a global totality, made possible mass emigration and the exchange of raw materials and resources for industrial development. “The sailing ship was perhaps the finest technological achievement of the pre-industrial era; yet it was the network of steamship services which, as much as any other single factor, created the western world and western civilization as they stood in 1900.”¹ These developments are not behind us, relegated to ancient history. As Maya Jasanoff observes, “Ninety percent of world trade travels by sea, which makes ships and sailors more central to the world economy today than ever before.”²

Conrad has much to teach us as a participant in this nautical milieu, as a first-hand observer of globalization, and teachers who dismiss his writing from their postcolonial watchtower throw out the baby with the bathwater. Critical consciousness is stunted at an early age when inexperienced readers in high school learn how to opine and cast judgement instead of exercising nuanced description and interpretation. How much more they could learn and criticize (or secretly appreciate) if they read past *Heart of Darkness* into Conrad’s plentiful trans-Pacific writings that provide misty, weirdly intimate yet remote glimpses of life in the South China Sea, Borneo, the Sulu Islands, the view from coal ships traversing the Makassar Strait “between Borneo and Sulawesi, bound for the port of Donggala.”³ Likewise, if young readers suspend judgment and submit to the vicarious tumult of an oceanic typhoon from the viewpoint of shipmates engulfed on deck in torrential chaos, the stars above them symbols of hope, fading out one by one into cosmic obscurity: “The last star, blurred, enlarged, as if returning to the fiery mist of its beginning, struggled with the colossal depth of blackness hanging over the ship—and went out.”⁴ What, no GPS? With stellar guidance lost, there grows an incipient feeling of panic and claustrophobia, but even more gravely, an awareness that help cannot be outsourced, that each sailor must not shirk his responsibility, and that reciprocal self-reliance (“You do your job, and I’ll do mine.”) must prevail or the ship perish.

Should we learn the art of writing from the distinctive syntactical throes of Conrad’s exquisite prose, which his peers called “literary impressionism,” or absurdly dismiss it as the style of imperialism, or else disqualify it for violating the restrictive norms of college composition? In this regard, I have always sided with Edgar Allen Poe’s critical principle that when it comes to evaluating literary writing, morality is blind to aesthetic and philosophical achievement and should retreat to the Sunday school class where it belongs. Conrad is still worth reading today as a

romantic story teller and stylist, and as a precariously situated first-hand observer of mercantile globalization. Among narrowly informed students, freshly sprung from high school, it is a rare exception to find one who has read widely enough to establish a context or intellectual milieu for legitimate critique. Here the context, which is the span of Conrad's writing career up to the publication of his last novel *Victory* (1915), demonstrates that a writer of such emotional depth and polylingual intelligence does not remain beholden to an imperialist worldview, as reactive condemnation of his early work implies, but negotiates his identity and political viewpoint through acts of existential transindividuation incited by continually diverse experiences and social interactions. With Polish his first, French his second, and English his third language, Conrad's becoming-Captain, his progress as a professional sailor, which parallels his becoming a writer, is not patterned as the instantiation of a vertical hierarchy, as if he had entered the merchant marine directly from a British boarding school, but along transversal lines of individuation, which amounts, as we said, to transindividuation. As he ascends the nautical echelons as a British subject, his minority status is never jettisoned but remains integral to his self-understanding and social interaction. He is fated to be a white officer on his ships, on every voyage, but not to be smugly intolerant of others onboard. "As a white officer in Asia," Jasanoff observes, "Konrad [his Polish name] belonged to a minority privileged by race as well as rank. But as a foreigner on British ships he also knew what it was like not to speak the same language as his officers and shipmates. On board the *Vidar* he picked up some Malay, to facilitate basic communication with the Malay crew" (124).

It is the teacher's responsibility not only to teach the required text, but to adumbrate the writer's metaphysical and moral struggles, and, if pertinent, their geopolitical adventure; the rest is up to the exploratory initiative of her students. I was fortunate to have an English teacher in high school who required students to purchase *The Portable Conrad*, within which the assigned *Heart of Darkness* is one among other Conradian prose works. With such a capacious volume in hand, whether out of curiosity or boredom, a student is inclined to rove and wander beyond the horizon of what is merely assigned. At that time, undistracted immersion in Conrad's writings, including "Prince Roman," "Youth," and "Typhoon," whose long-term learning outcome in students can't be planned or foreseen, was an obscurely decisive factor in my becoming an English professor who ends up teaching in Japan and Guam. Not only did Conrad legitimate the idea of a vocation that takes place in a remote setting, but I somehow fused his concepts of exile and writing to conjure an appealing vision of academic life that was vaguely adventuresome, and that rejected conformist, bourgeois, and above all "safe" modes of employment and being-in-the-world. In the general ecology of academia that I envisioned, a professor was a reader and writer; it didn't matter what he wrote, since pretty much any and all writing, including literary criticism, seemed like a protest against the bourgeois expectations of parents and guidance counselors. This was my version of the *Zeitgeist* in 1972! Only later did I find out that the young Conrad's decision to become a sailor greatly upset his Polish uncle and guardian, who never really accepted his nephew's nomadic vocation due to their once prominent aristocratic heritage, and who often implored Conrad to adopt a safe and prosperous career. To repeat, in my mind, Conrad's sailing to distant ports, with plenty of time at dawn and dusk for deep reflection along the way, became equivalent to a career in which you spend most of your time reading and writing. As for sailors, few read poetry at sea like Conrad; Jasanoff says that Conrad read books while others slept or mended their clothes (91).

But why Conrad when so many other authors are assigned in AP English? Even friends who later became teachers and poets never dreamed of adopting him as a role model. Imagine if

you will a student isolated at a boarding school in rural Vermont at a turbulent time in both cultural history and within his own family in New York, which had suffered the loss of his near-twin sister a year before. While sequestered in his dorm room, he reads and ponders *The Portable Conrad* into the early morning hours long after his peers have gone to sleep. His incommunicable sentiments and thoughts find in Conrad's tales something like a sympathetic tonality or register, an emotional continuum linking his outpost in the Green Mountains with Conrad's dawn watch on the high seas. In the crepuscular insomnia of the dawn watch, this student hears a personal appeal come from Conrad's attentional ecology: language is a resource for self-determination; one can construct the story of one's selfhood, an imaginary community, and a philosophical position sentence by sentence in the middle of nowhere. Moreover, coeval with the novelty of expression and existential positioning afforded by words, the subjectivity of the watchman, attentive to the elemental *Umwelt* in which it is steeped, is also empowered by a nonhuman, preverbal semiotic material. Such is the ecology of the dawn watch whether in the Green Mountains or off the coast of Borneo.

Conrad was my first literary soulmate—or shipmate. There have been other such writers since then, of course, so after many years it was the appealing possibility of a spiritual reunion that attracted me to Maya Jasanoff's *The Dawn Watch*. I was not disappointed. The only arguable weakness in her well-written, sympathetic study is that Jasanoff's attention is narrowly distributed between four of Conrad's fifteen novels and seven collections of stories: *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Agent* (1907). The only Conrad biography that tries to be inclusive, Frederick Karl's incredibly detailed *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (1979), weighs in at 1008 pages, versus Jasanoff's 375 pages. To be sure, brevity has its virtues; furthermore, Karl was an English professor intimately acquainted with Conrad's *oeuvre*, whereas Jasanoff is a history scholar who happens to be a lifelong reader of Conrad, but whose research is not primarily literature and the modern novel. In some ways this unconventional background makes her study of Conrad all the more impressive. What makes her book so engaging--aside from its brevity--is that Jasanoff used research leave from her university to personally travel on ships to the locations depicted in Conrad's writings. Her adventuresome participation in the commercial routes of Conrad's voyaging adds a first-hand intensity to the text which helps to sustain the reader's interest and reminds us of both the grindingly dull routine of months at sea, and the perilous contingencies of oceanic exposure.

Even if one limits his reading in *The Portable Conrad* to Conrad's early writings about Africa and the Congo, such as the fatefully ironic tale, "An Outpost of Progress," it becomes apparent that the effort to establish colonial sovereignty in frightfully remote *regions of otherness* counted among its human casualties underprepared, frankly *disoriented* whites as well as indigenous peoples who perish while resisting their ignoble treatment as subalterns. Conrad's stories do not showcase pride of empire, haughty snapshots of a rich tourist's encounter with picturesque alterity, but the likelihood of human failure in alien circumstances where linguistic commonality and cultural understanding founder, obstructing "forward progress" as typically understood in Enlightenment terms. It is the specter of such failure, the fear of cultivated beings regressing to violence and barbarism, that pervades the obligations and predicaments of the protagonists of Conrad's literary voyages, not the glory of colonial conquest. As Jasanoff says, Conrad's characters "struggle with displacement, alienation, and despair. Seventeen of them commit suicide" (52). When critics accuse Conrad of being an insensitive bigot, when they condemn him as just another emissary of Empire, we need to remind them that his Polish upbringing exposed him and his family to untold abuses at the hands of Russian invaders, and that

he too, and not just the victims of British colonialism, had first-hand experience of ethnic abjection and displacement “in the oppressive shadow of the great Russian empire” (53). To this day, I have not forgotten the concluding episode of “An Outpost of Progress,” when the station master Kayerts hangs himself from a cross in the African jungle. In this scene, the managing director of the Great Civilizing Company has ventured from London to a trading station in Africa to investigate the reported troubles of the two white men who had previously been assigned to this formidable location to coordinate (or at least represent) corporate interests:

He had found one of them! And even he, the man of varied and startling experience, was somewhat discomposed by the manner of this finding. He stood and fumbled in his pockets (for a knife) while he faced Kayerts, who was hanging by a leather strap from the cross. He had evidently climbed the grave, which was high and narrow, and after tying the end of the strap to the arm, had swung himself off. His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his managing Director.⁵

The parodic name of the Great Civilizing Company, whose initial managers, overcome by confusion and loneliness, failed to civilize Africa, is further caricatured in the death grimace of the suicide, Kayerts, who seem to be sticking his tongue out at the official representative of the company as if to say: “See, we accomplished nothing as an institution in this jungle but our own failure and destruction.”

It is unfortunate that aside from his lifelong admirers, for whom he remains an existentially intimate, often desolate witness to the early effects of globalization in the tropical Pacific from Singapore to Sidney, Joseph Conrad represents little more than an anachronistic whipping post for neoliberal tantrums about racism and colonialism. As I said earlier, his novella, *Heart of Darkness*, which had a profound influence on popular classics such as *The Waste Land* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925), is predictably the first and last book by Conrad encountered by the common reader, who absorbs her teacher’s reified, cliché-ridden criticism of Conrad’s account of the brutal ivory trade in the African Congo. In fact, Conrad’s personal experience in the Congo was so disillusioning that he broke a three-year contract after only five months, retreating to London a broken man to reassess his career possibilities. This was not a man gloating over his privileged membership in the British merchant marine service, as if such a membership could protect him from the onslaught of barbaric impressions he absorbed in the Congo. Stories such as “An Outpost of Progress” dramatize what Hegel called the “unhappy consciousness” of participants in the debacle of failed imperialism. Historicity and unconscious cultural presuppositions and prejudices infiltrate and codetermine our thoughts and actions from one century to another, and it behooves educators to carefully explain how these presuppositions determine the often violent and tragic outcomes of globalization for all parties involved in the so-called “clash of cultures.” Well-meaning teachers, who condemn certain authors to infamy from a dizzying moral height, do more harm than good by putting brakes on the literary development of free spirits still in the infancy of their literary education. It is a blessing for us that Maya Jasanoff has the hermeneutic savvy to mediate these issues in her analysis of Joseph Conrad’s by no means straightforward development as a writer and sailor. She pinpoints those crucial moments in his career that can only be described as metaphysical struggles, wherein the individual is forced to synthesize his minority birth status

as a Pole (with all the tragic nuances that this psycho-geographic fate implies) with the cosmic perceptions afforded by oceanic voyaging and the burden of his newfound allegiance to a global empire.

Permit me to indulge in what the Germans call a “thought experiment.” It often proves interesting to ask of a legendary text, what profundity or depth dimension of meaning will be lost to me as a reader if I refuse to read it, whether because some authority figure trashes it, or social media ignores it, or due to my own indolence and aversion to controversy? What is the cost, in spirit, of not reading? For example, there are untold scores of readers who refuse to read anything written by Heidegger, including *Being and Time* (1927), because of the German philosopher’s unforgivably stupid—even if temporary—political outlook in 1933, when he refused to relinquish his academic position during the rise to power of National Socialism. Based solely on my own transformative encounter with *Sein und Zeit* as an undergraduate, then later in a doctoral seminar, I wonder if someone who has not read it truly fathoms the significance of time as the inescapable horizon of being, that is, of human existence, if they fully understand that the secret to a meaningful, productive life is revealed to one as *finitude*, in his or her concrete *affirmation*--and not merely passive acceptance--of mortality. (This is only to appreciate the existential component of *Being and Time*, ignoring its formidable contribution to hermeneutic phenomenology.) The gift of time in the form of a specific *Lebenszeit* (lifetime) that is ours alone enables us to gauge the limits and possibilities of what we can realistically achieve. Finitude, which in its most prosaic form imposes grammar and punctuation on human expression, but which also empowers one to formulate existence in the form of a specific project, is the precondition of meaning in the phenomenal world; an infinite or immortal perspective would utterly scramble human sense making and deprive life of its urgency, which is why Kant divided the phenomenal world from the numinous kingdom of the Divine. Borges’ ironic story, “The Immortal,” depicts the squalid consequences for immortal beings who lack temporal urgency, nested in centuries of dust and grime, befouled by their procrastination regarding basic matters of self-hygiene and domestic order. They seem tranquilized or lethargic.⁶ It is Heidegger’s argument that most people likewise act numb or insensible about death, their *own* death. They unconsciously repress their mortality, hence squander time as if they are immortal. I would wager that someone who has not read *Being and Time* is more likely to waste time and procrastinate than someone who has read it—unless perhaps they have read Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a text cited in *Being and Time*.⁷ Such unforgettable books turn the hourglass full of sand on its head: suddenly the minutes, hours, and days that pour down, irretrievably lost, become grievous losses of one’s very life substance; one seeks to consciously reclaim whatever grains of sand remain, to name and value them, cherish them, take ownership of them, even as they continue flowing, to mark them as projects as yet unaccomplished, friendships to be treasured, loved ones to be loved some more, opportunities, entire vistas to be welcomed or engaged and not ignored through procrastination.

The very idea of a “bucket list” popularized in the multimedia spectacle that captivates our time and attention is exploded when one grasps time as the essence of being, the bucket’s contents integrated and actualized within the span of one’s lifetime so as to enliven it and not mark its closure in a retirement package calculated to reap maximum profits for the financial industry. Retirement is an ideological concept, promoted by the financial industry, which governs the time and money of those who succumb to its logic of passive deferral symbolized in the bucket list—the same logic, framed in moral rather than economic terms, that Nietzsche relentlessly critiqued as providing a guidance system for good Christians who passively defer their most heartfelt desires

and worldly engagements until ascension to the afterlife in the heavenly paradise promised by Christianity.

It is arguable that the writings of Joseph Conrad, a Polish sailor who by “deliberate choice” became a British seaman and gradually made “his way up the ranks of the British merchant marine to captain” (93) to some extent shared the fate of Heidegger in being irrevocably linked to an institutional status with unsavory political connotations which have severely crimped his readership. To assert that Conrad was an uneasy observer and not an agent of British imperialism doesn’t win any points among those critics who stridently quote Chinua Achebe’s accusation that Conrad was a “bloody racist” and *Heart of Darkness* “an offensive and totally deplorable book” (4). As mentioned earlier, teachers take these remarks as the last word on Conrad and teach his work as little as possible, if at all. Students might as well avoid Homer as well, since, as Eva Cantarella has conclusively shown, the very “roots of Western misogyny” can be traced back to Homer’s epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*.⁸ Such pedagogical misuse of good scholarship points to a future in which students only read what supports their own opinion, and scrupulously avoid anything that contradicts it or hurts someone’s feelings. This tendency to only read texts and communications that reconfirm, rather than challenge, one’s sociopolitical viewpoint has of course been intensified by the internet, an insidious development which has exacerbated the violent polarization of civil discourse between American voters and between political parties.

Maya Jasanoff has the temerity to individuate herself within the critical establishment by depicting another Conrad who “saw in Congo a European regime of appalling greed, violence, and hypocrisy, and left Africa in a state of psychological and moral despair. Nine years later, when he’d settled in England and Anglicized his name to Joseph Conrad, he channeled his experience into a novel called *Heart of Darkness*” (3). For those others who follow the critical orthodoxy, the question remains: what is the cost of not reading Conrad?

Over the years, my own reading of Conrad has impressed an indelible image in my memory of someone condemned to make a difficult decision in a milieu or framework that is not entirely controllable, that is beset with multiple, often unforeseeable contingencies and forces that might be life-changing, if not fatal. These contingencies are either man-made or cosmic (elemental, vegetable, meteorological), or both at once. This memory more or less concurs with Jasanoff’s impression as follows: “His [Conrad’s] fiction often focuses on characters who confront some critical choice, only to face consequences more far-ranging than they ever imagined. Conrad’s novel are ethical injunctions. They meditate on how to behave in a globalizing world, where old rulebooks are becoming obsolete, but nobody’s yet written new ones” (11).

Finally, let’s end this review by citing the opinion of the great biographer of Conrad, Frederick Karl, who is inarguably correct to epitomize Conrad’s contribution in terms of what general ecology would call the demographic periphery, namely, Conrad’s abiding interest in depicting social outcasts:

Conrad found in marginality itself a way of life, a form of existence, and a philosophy that added up to more than survival and well-being. In probing exile, dislocation of time and place, language disorientation, and shifting loyalties, he extended our view of the shadows of existence. Indeed, he suggested that the shadows were to be the main area of existence in the twentieth century.⁹

NOTES

¹ T. K. Derry, *A Short History of Technology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), p. 364.

² Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 9.

³ Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*, p. 125.

⁴ Joseph Conrad, "Typhoon," in *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 273.

⁵ Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress," in *The Portable Conrad*, p. 489.

⁶ Without time constraints, one can delay taking a bath or cleaning the house for as long as one wants. For example, the narrator, an explorer who discovers the city of the immortals beneath the desert sands, records the following memory: "I remember one [of the immortals] whom I never saw stand up: a bird had nested on his breast." See Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 115.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 235.

⁸ Of course it is not the intent of Eva Cantarella to steer students away from reading Homer. She is merely establishing, through careful scholarship, "the true female condition in Homer." See her marvelous book, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, trans. Maureen Fant (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 33.

⁹ Frederick Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. xiv.