

Conrad in perspective

Essays on art and fidelity

Zdzisław Najder



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Introduction, or confession of a mastodon

Paraphrasing Conrad, I can say about myself that I have been neither ‘revolutionary’, nor even post-modernist in my critical efforts. I cannot claim methodological innocence: I lost it nearly half a century ago over Roman Ingarden’s theory of the ‘literary work of art’, and have later exposed myself to structuralism and even to the more florid displays of deconstructivism. Still, my own approach to criticism and scholarship of literature has remained antediluvian.

I believe that poems and novels are there to be read by readers, not to be dissected by scholars. And the point of our reading a sonnet or a tale is that we want to feel, after we have finished, somewhat different than before we began. Perhaps emotionally, perhaps intellectually – whatever colours a given aesthetic experience has, whatever are the artistic components of the given piece of literature.

The critic’s sole *raison d’être* is to assist the readers in their enjoyment and understanding. The scholar’s primary *raison d’être* is to help the critic to assist the readers, or to communicate directly with the readers, with the same assisting purpose. The theorist’s task is to make critics and scholars distinguish between talking sense (of different kinds) and spinning out gibberish. We all, critics, scholars, theoreticians, are middlemen (or better: midwives, performing a noble maieutic function) between the work and the reader; we are the reader’s servants.

One trouble is that in the course of acquiring his knowledge and skills the scholar tends to become different from the ‘normal’ reader; and not only in what she or he knows but also in how he or she thinks about works of literature. To remain useful in their maieutic role scholars have

to keep in check their specialist propensities, their professional deviations.

The reader looks to the scholar to help him or her establish the full contents of a given text: the meanings of words used, the sense of images and metaphors and tropes, the significance of dates and names of really existing personalities, the referents of allusions, and so on. Placing the given piece within its historical context and classifying it as 'Romantic' or 'Naturalistic' or 'Symbolic' is equivalent to determining which dictionary of artistic forms we have to use in our interpretation. All these links between signs of various kinds and their meanings are publicly accessible and (in different ways) verifiable. That is, we can check whether 'urgent' could really mean 'severe' in Shakespeare's time; whether in medieval romances the unicorn indeed stood for chastity and invincible virtue; whether when Giorgio Viola mentions the 'accursed Piedmontese race of kings and ministers' he refers to Vittorio Emanuele II and to Cavour; whether Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* links up with the traditions of Zola's naturalism; whether the title of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a rendering of St Augustine's 'regio egestatis'; etc. In many of these cases we have to do with the application of a certain convention, that is with the use of a certain more or less precisely defined but identifiable system of signs – a natural language, a traditional set of symbols and so on.

In contrast to this 'public meaning' of a literary piece (or a painting, or sculpture – which artefacts in some ways offer clearer instances of what I am trying to say), one may see in it a plethora of 'private meanings', to be discovered by reference not to some established convention but to the author's biography and/or to various more or less speculative psychological theories.

Of course, for poets or novelists their work may be an expression of internal tensions and urges, or a means of coping with their emotional problems. In parallel, for a psychologist a work of literature may be a document of its author's inner life, or an example of a certain attitude or type of behaviour. (Analogously, a sociologist may look there for evidence of a trend, fashion, etc.) And psychological or sociological criticism may be perfectly legitimate, whatever the degree of their unavoidable speculativeness. Also, the lives of exceptional men and women attract understandable interest; and biographies of writers may

be deservedly popular and read as an accompaniment to the reading of their works. They should not, however, be confused with criticism.

Having spent a good chunk of the bookwormish part of my life on research into and writing of a biography of Conrad, I guess I have both the duty and the right to issue a solemn warning against the indulgence in the search for private meanings in works of literature (or painting, or sculpture), an indulgence often fostered by biographers. I think that snooping for biographical allusions is not a particularly desirable form of literary scholarship – and often detracts from research and analysis more proper, that is: more rewarding aesthetically, more informative artistically, more illuminating intellectually. For scholars to spend hundreds of pages on hunts for what I would call private meanings contained in novels and poems is to succumb to intellectual debauchery and to stupefy the readers.

Granted, the distinction between public and private meanings is not a sharp one; the stories of Petrarch's love for Laura or Dante's for Beatrice are so well known that it would be difficult to separate them from what we learn from the text of the *Sonnets* or the *Divina commedia*; one can argue, however, that these are instances of biographies of the authors becoming public myths, and thus elements of the European cultural mythology analogous to the stories of Faust or Don Juan.

The author's 'intention'* is the form of private meaning perhaps most frequently looked for. The speciousness of such a search has been the subject of much argument, of which William C. Wimsatt's and Monroe C. Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1954) is probably the best-known example – although the first and very incisive analysis of the difference between a search for the truth and a search for the intended meaning of an author's words is to be found in St Augustine's *Confessions* (XII, 23–32).

I believe that not only intentions but in general all 'private meanings' of works of literature are of dubious use to literary scholars and either unimportant or even detracting from the text for readers.

To begin with, links between intention and final product are difficult

* In the psychological sense of the word; quite different is the concept of 'intention' as used for instance by Erwin Panofsky ('The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline' [1940], *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, NY, 1957, pp. 20–1), or by the phenomenologists.

to describe. We have to install causal connections between mental states (as designs, moods, aspirations, yearnings). If there is no causal connection assumed, then hypotheses about the intended forms or ideas found in a given novel are speculations made not even about that novel but only on the occasion of it. Even if we manage somehow to describe or suggest such links, our hypotheses are impossible to verify. What evidence can one have that the supposed intentions – even, for example, those expressed in a letter – did in fact come to pass? Or lasted long enough to have been implemented? Or were not imposed on the given piece as a hindsight? What Conrad says in his Author's Notes, added to the consecutive volumes of his works when republished in 1919–21, may be interesting as documents of the way he wanted them to be seen by their readers, but does not determine the meaning of the pieces he writes about – and that not only because it is often easy to prove that he dissembles when pointing at his sources or describing the circumstances of writing a given story.

With other kinds of private meanings the situation is similar. Is Thomas Hardy's *Jude* meant to represent the author, or his late friend Horace Moule? How can we know for sure? And why should it matter for the reader? *The Sun Also Rises* was widely supposed to be a *roman-à-clef*, but even if we manage to reach a near certainty as to 'originals' of Hemingway's protagonists, would not such identification result for the reader in a reduction in the thematic scope of the novel, if taken as a portrait of the 'lost generation'?

A hunter for the private 'Conrad's Secrets in *The Secret Agent*' claims that *The Secret Agent* is 'one of the most caustic and bizarre confessions of its kind in recent literature', and that Conrad was motivated by the feeling of 'having betrayed the revolutionary ideals that martyred his parents'. That Conrad's father had nothing in common with the 'revolutionaries' of the type presented in *The Secret Agent*; that consequently Conrad had no 'revolutionary' ideals to betray; and that his parents were martyred not by any 'ideals' but by the Russian autocracy – all these facts are, as Conrad would have said, 'mighty inconvenient' for the above interpretation. But what is indeed more essential is that, even if true, the cited statements would not add anything interesting to the artistic structure or intellectual content of *The Secret Agent*. Focusing on them distracts both the scholar and the reader from more salient

scrutiny: for instance, how Conrad characterizes his types of professional rebels against the existing order. And shouldn't the reader be rather helped to note Conrad's masterful presentation of the police? I often marvel how and where he obtained the knowledge – or intuition? – to describe with such insight his Inspector Heat, his Councillor Mikulin and the historical Joseph Fouché in 'The Duel'.

The search for private meaning is an élitist – if not esoteric – game: only the initiated can play, and for them the more abstruse the alleged hidden signal the better. In practice, this attitude helps to construct a barrier between an ordinary (which does not mean uneducated) reader and the expert, endowed with specialist knowledge, who approaches texts as full of coded (although not in a conventionalized form!) messages about their authors. This makes the discussed novels and poems at once hermetic and self-referential, and turns many readers away. My objections against the search for private meanings are thus based on both methodological and socio-cultural premises. We – scholars and critics – ought to attract the readers to our authors, not to repel them with the gloss of impenetrable superiority.

The life of the author does not form a part of the text of his drama or novel. Biography may only offer pointers in our search for meanings. We read biographies of writers to get acquainted with the authors of books we like, and not the other way around: we do not read *The Magic Mountain* to learn what kind of person Thomas Mann was, nor *The Plague* to get acquainted with Albert Camus. If only for this simple reason, biographical questions have only a secondary importance for literary scholars.

Two examples. The question 'Why did Conrad choose Geneva as the location of the second part of the action of *Under Western Eyes*?' cannot be answered with certainty. Even if 'evidence' were available in the form of an explanatory letter from Conrad, we would have to prove that he was aware of the truth and telling it: an impossible and useless task. What is important for the understanding of the novel is to realize what Geneva stands for, what it represents on the historical, political and moral map of Europe. And was Conrad conscious of the parallel between his novel about St Petersburg and Geneva, and Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities*? We do not know and do not have to know; nevertheless, the parallel exists, as a fact in the history of the English novel. We are entitled to con-

sider this parallel as an aspect in our interpretation of *Under Western Eyes*.

If the author's biography is not a part of the text, then mixing textual and biographical analysis is a sin (at the least, the sin of conceit in showing off one's privileged information). To conflate hypothetical assumptions about Conrad's attitude towards his father with fragments of his fictional texts may be personally enthralling for the critic but leads to a reduction, not to an enrichment, in his or her interpretation of the content of Conrad's work: ultimately, the given piece is turned into yet another psychological outpouring.

But isn't every interpretation simply another (and equally legitimate) use of the text, as Richard Rorty claims in his discussion with Umberto Eco?*

Their fascinating debate has a general philosophical edge to it, a little blunted by the rhetorical skills of the participants – attractive but also conducive to simplifications. I believe Professor Rorty commits an overinterpretation when he adduces Willard Van Orman Quine's 'denial of an interesting philosophical distinction between language and fact, between signs and non-signs' as supportive of his own position of a radical pragmatist who 'makes objects by talking about them'. Apart from the fact that Quine himself considers 'good philosophy' to be 'an exploration of the fundamental traits of reality'† (an 'essentialist's' task, in Rorty's pragmatist eyes), Quine's observation does not deny the fact that the names 'Tower Bridge' and 'Pickwick Papers' refer to different kinds of objects; and so do 'hammer' and 'hypothesis'.

I think the debate whether 'interpretation' differs from 'use' (as Eco claims) or whether there is no difference between them (as Rorty maintains) has been a little misconstrued. The internally non-differentiated concept of 'use', as applied by Rorty, is so all-embracing that it becomes either trivial or empty. I believe that to interpret a text *is* to use it, but in a certain specific way – namely, to use it with respect for its integrity. We are obliged to show such respect notwithstanding whether the text in question is a poem, or a cooking recipe, or a testament; notwithstanding whether we interpret it for aesthetic, legal, or psychological purposes.

* See Umberto Eco with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge 1992.

† Quine interviewed by Christian Delacampagne, *Le Monde*, 4 July 1994.

This obligation has two grounds. The first lies in professional ethics: the interpreter, to be himself worthy of respect, has to perform his task in such a manner as to allow his statements to be checked and, if proven wrong, overturned; otherwise he becomes a conman. The second is that in principle all users of texts (whom interpreters assist) want to receive a communication from an external source, and not a projection, or secretion, of their own anticipations. Even if, like Anatole France, they want to experience ‘adventures among masterpieces’, they want to know the masterpieces in question, and not some ahistorical semiotic plasma. There is a conscious and fundamental difference of attitudes between a computer-user interfacing with the contents of anonymous software programmes, and a reader of the equally anonymous but by no means non-personal *Beowulf*.

Interpretation, therefore, seems to be a use with constraints. If somebody says ‘horrible’ after reading ‘My heart leaps up when I behold . . .’, or ‘very amusing’ after having read *King Lear*, would we say that she or he is making a strange use of these texts, or rather simply that she or he failed to understand them? I think that to choose the first possibility would amount to an abuse of our speech.

But where do the constraints come from? I think that under normal conditions most of them come from the text itself. To begin with, we have to determine to what natural language it belongs, with which dictionary in hand one has to read it: it is not for the user to decide whether the text is in Finnish or in English. Or whether it is medieval or contemporary. Or whether it refers to events which are known from other sources to have happened (and thus can be, in this respect, verified), or not. But perhaps to visualize the constraining force of texts – in Rorty’s terminology, the fact that the text ‘has internal coherence’, quite apart from its actual uses – it is best to point to a non-literary example.

The highway code ‘exists’ in the pragmatists’ sense only in the form of drivers following (or not) certain rules; but it has to ‘exist’ also in another way for us to be able to tell whether drivers follow them or not. In other words: the highway code possesses a coherence independent of the concrete use which is made of it. If I happen to follow other drivers doing 120 km/h on a stretch marked ‘80’ I would be ‘using’ the code as many others do; but I would be breaking it as well. Literary texts are much more complicated but not fundamentally different.

Yet, they are, by the very nature of the attitudes we adopt when reading them, open-ended semiotic structures. The *Iliad* allows for newer readings, for shoals of fresh associations, for recurrent and changing pangs of identification; but we want to feel that we consort with the same poem, not that we join a free-wheeling line of its 'users', each of whom establishes his or her own pragmatic meaning of the text. The very human need for communication, for breaking through the barriers of loneliness, implies the desire for a common ground, for a language in which we can understand texts with a feeling that we have reached out beyond ourselves.

When we use a literary text by interpreting it, we want to know whether our reading of it is sound *not* in any absolute sense, but within a given system of conventions (language included) and set of criteria. Not excessive imagination but irreverence is the enemy of good interpretation. Even the most radical conventionalism does not justify arbitrariness. Nor is Alfred Tarski's definition of truth as relative to the given language a licence to arbitrariness.

Stefan Collini, the editor of the texts of Eco, Rorty, Cullen and Brooke-Rose, is right in saying that their debate was in fact a debate about values; and not only in the sense that interpretation cannot be separated from evaluation, as Wolfgang Kayser demonstrated a long time ago.¹ He is also right in stressing that the present debate has to be seen as a part of a historical process; half a century ago the great Ernst Robert Curtius, taking the cue from the German philosopher Karl Joël, speculated half-jokingly about the 'binding' (*bindende*) uneven centuries (thirteenth, fifteenth, seventeenth, nineteenth) and the 'loosening' (*lösende*) even ones (fourteenth, sixteenth, eighteenth, twentieth).² And when Collini describes the contemporary urge to escape from the 'constraints of history, whether collective or personal', I realize with a pang that such an escape was possible neither for Conrad, nor for most of his European readers, nor for myself. And I believe that even now such an escape is only a debilitating illusion; several of the essays in this volume explain why.

All these pieces are based on a few general assumptions. I think that Conrad wrote his books about the world as he saw and knew it, not about other books. He used other texts as means of communicating not about himself, or about those texts – but about other men and the world they live in.

He was an anachronistic (= out of his proper time) writer. While steeped in tradition, he was not bound by fashions and conventions of his time. On the contrary, he ran straight against some of them, mistrustful of the sovereignty of art for its own sake, suspicious of individualism, unmoved by psychologism. Perhaps this is one reason why many of his works have aged so well and why he has been and still is so widely read by non-specialists.

The fifteen following papers and essays concern various aspects of the work of Joseph Conrad. I suggest that the knowledge of his Polish background allows us to select the proper 'dictionaries', appropriate historical and cultural frameworks of reference in interpreting his stories and novels. The papers about Conrad's parents and his uncle-guardian concentrate on the intellectual and moral legacies bequeathed by them; they are supposed, on the one hand, to help in identifying the traditions and ideas to which Conrad harks back, on the other to put a limit on the more wild speculations concerning his family background. Other essays propose interpretations of a few of his novels and volumes of prose or analyse certain ideas which I consider essential and characteristic for his work, such as the ideas of honour and fidelity; the last two present synthetical glimpses of his writing achievement.

As the distance between Conrad's time and ours keeps growing, our (the scholars' and critics') great problem grows too: that is, how to interpret Conrad in our contemporary terms without simply ascribing to him our contemporary interests, intentions, concepts, terms of reference – but, rather, feeling the tension (aesthetically so fruitful) between his world and ours. My main efforts are concentrated along two lines of analysis: of his ideas and of the forms of his narrative. Not accidentally, as I believe that Conrad's main strength as a writer lies in the innovative combinations and applications of traditional narrative structures, harnessed to a new use in his insistent forcing of the reader to face the fundamental issues of human communal existence.

From the very beginning two factors in Conrad's work have aroused my particular interest: his multifaceted cultural background (which I have been trying to map and describe) and the philosophical and ethical issues he tackled in his novels and stories. Was the latter concern due to my own philosophical professional slant? Rather the contrary. I was attracted by his raising the same problems that had drawn me to study

philosophy: the problems of values, evaluations and moral ideals – in other words, the eternal problems of the meaning of life.

In trying to analyse, explain and highlight the intellectual contents of Conrad's works I have joined the company of (in alphabetical and not chronological order) Jacques Berthoud, Andrzej Busza, Edward Crankshaw, Eloise Knapp Hay, Józef Ujejski, Robert Penn Warren, Ian Watt, and many others. I have had the luck to have known most of them, and several have been my friends. It is with great sorrow that I think that Ian Watt will not be able to read this collection; he read some of its ingredients even before their original publication. Let this volume be a humble and inadequate homage to this great scholar and dependable friend.