Joseph Conrad
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Conrad’s *A Personal Record* has a peculiar status among the volumes of his nonfiction prose and, indeed, in his canon. After its contemporary reception, mainly favorable even if critics were somewhat bemused by its elusiveness and structure, there have been three broad trends of approach: psychoanalytic, aesthetic and formalist, and documentary. Another, more recent and novel approach, has been to treat the text as a “highly ambivalent political document” deploying certain features of mock-autobiography.

Assayed first by Gustav Morf in 1930, the psychoanalytic approach has considered *A Personal Record* a psychological document in which various underlying complexes are revealed. For Morf, Conrad discloses a “guilt complex” over his “abandonment” of Poland. (GoGwilt’s [1995] considerably more sophisticated theoretical work about “the unconscious of the text” expands on this.) Frederick R. Karl, who also sees the text in psychoanalytical terms

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1. See Kertzer 1975; Najder 1988 (rpt. Najder 1997); Abbot 1992; DeVinne 2002; and Kalnins 1998. Although of broad aim, Busza 2000 suggestively discusses the text’s design and ideological underpinnings, also historicizing the biographical impulse.

2. See GoGwilt 1995, which discusses extensively Conrad’s treatment of his Polish past in *A Personal Record* and places the work in the context of nationalist and racialist discourse reshaping the map of Europe at the time of its writing.
and emphasizes how facts yield to “myth-making,” conflates Conrad’s father Apollo in his pyjamas with Olmeijer similarly dressed (both failures, both men at the end of their tether) and relates this to a mode of observation that he calls a “burrowing method of narrative” (135, 245). The aesthetic and formalist approach, responding to the text’s generic diversity, has focused on the several traditions it alludes to and borrows from—the confession and *apologia* in the tradition of St. Augustine, autobiographical experiment (influenced by the narrative strategies of Laurence Sterne’s fiction), and Modernist “autography” (self-writing). It has also analyzed some of its aesthetic facets as, for instance, the ways in which Conrad applies fictional techniques to the story of his life. Lastly, the volume’s status as a “record” of fact has been vigorously interrogated. Hans van Marle (1976 and 1988) and Zdzisław Najder (1983) meticulously compared its statements to the surviving documentary evidence and have shown how Conrad’s reliance on the presentational techniques of fiction—rhythm and narrative shaping, Impressionist poetics—determined certain suppressions and omissions, most notably, the elision of Conrad’s failed Merchant Service examinations to suit narrative shaping.

This essay takes the aesthetic and formalist approach in new directions. Although *A Personal Record* comprises seven separately written autobiographical essays, Conrad sought to give them coherence by flexibly adapting the conventions of both autobiography and epic and by two additional acts of bookmaking: the addition in the late summer of 1911 of “A Familiar Preface” to introduce the collection and partly to give it bulk, and in 1919 the addition of an “Author’s Note” for a new edition. Conrad’s focus is on the development of his identities, first as seaman and then as English writer, not on the discreet facts and events of his life. Such a focus influences his choices about the beginning, middle, and end of his narrative. To demonstrate these claims, this essay will focus extensively on the beginning and then more briefly on the Furka Pass episode and the closing segment in Marseilles.

The alteration of the volume’s original title (“Some Reminiscences”) and the supplementary paratext attempt to mitigate internal tensions and strains deriving from haphazard composition. The volume, in short, lacks unity of impulse and a closely focused theme, cohering mostly by recurrent motifs, a circle of repeated and interlocking allusions, and associative strategies, although, as Andrzej Busza usefully summarizes: “The two lives mirror and throw light upon each other” (2000, 143). As much as unity, loosely defined, may have been an aim at the outset, Conrad’s intentions shifted considerably

during actual composition. His initial idea that the work would be “concerned with Polish life and life at sea” (to J. B. Pinker, 18 September [1908], Letters 4: 125), was rapidly abandoned. Rather than topics in themselves, Poland and the sea serve as backdrops for meditations on the shape, activities, and motives of his life. The Polish material, in fact, plays only a minor role in the final text, being altogether absent from the last four sections, as the theme of his two vocations as seaman and as writer became his principal subjects. Urged by Ford Madox Ford to compose memoirs somewhat in the vein of The Mirror of the Sea but more coherently organized, Conrad was moved to explore selected facets of his past despite his antipathy, temperamental and professional, to self-display. To reveal intensely personal concerns in a public venue mainly to make money was to fail in simple good manners and to abandon an imperative of self-restraint: to recall Conrad’s own phrase in the “Author’s Note” to Notes on Life and Letters, he expressed his horror of appearing publicily en pantoufles (3). Part of this is a reaction to “mediatization” of the author, in its first flush in the opening decade of the twentieth century when journalists saw opportunities in fomenting and then pandering to public curiosity about a writer’s personal life. For Conrad, to indulge such a vein was to abandon Parnassian concerns for what might be considered self-indulgent gossip. He largely opts, then, for a highly selective exploration of the origins of his two vocations: his maritime experience, already long behind him and viewed from retrospect, and the career of authorship, likewise once an adventurous turn in the path but, with time, a daily necessity urged on by the simple need to earn a living.

Not surprisingly, a work hedged in by such fundamentally self-protective attitudes sometimes quarrels with its generic predecessors and is also on occasion anxiously self-conflicted. In this light, Conrad’s hostility to Rousseau’s confessional mode, as the tendency to exaggeration reveals, is, in part at least, self-defensive posturing. Conrad disdains to “confess” but must do so or appear to do so, having chosen to write about “himself.” This tension between inner priority and exterior necessity accounts for the text’s unorthodox, apparently casual structure. The reader is shown selected fragments of the seaman’s life and the writer’s life, being granted what purport to be privileged glimpses of both, whilst the subject often engages in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek, at moments teasingly present and frustratingly absent.

There is here as well the influence of Impressionist poetics, which may also help to explain Conrad’s resort to outright padding: paraphrase and word-for-word translations from Bobrowski’s memoirs function as a convenient subterfuge to meet deadlines and to fill a quota of words, but borrowing implicitly released him from total commitment and responsibility, and digression serves
as a mask behind which he could disappear. However much Sterne or the Polish writer Aleksander Fredro might be invoked as structural precedents for the sense of randomness and the deftly interwoven presentation of personality, incident, and atmosphere, complex psychological factors also determine the work’s contours. No less does Conrad’s impatience with established generic categories. Evident in his experiments with the realist novel (in texts such as *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, for instance), this manifests itself structurally. Non-linked episodes and the reliance on the fragment suggest a heightened reality, conveying more effectively and efficiently than linearity the inner meaning of his life.

J. M. Kertzer, writing toward the end of New Criticism’s hegemony, seeks a thematic unity throughout, justifying the inclusion of the Nicholas B. sections as motivated by the charge of “betrayal”: “the patriotic example of Nicholas B. suggests to Conrad, by way of contrast, his own irresponsible self-indulgence” (1975, 297). Why a desire to go to sea should, *prima facie*, appear self-indulgent and irresponsible suggests the tenacity of Eliza Orzeszkowa’s hysterical charges, first made in 1899.4 Looked at differently, the episode exposes Kertzer’s viewpoint as decontextualized and ahistorical. Nicholas B.’s ardent Napoleonism, the basis for his “patriotic example,” was founded upon an illusion. As Conrad’s treatment of the celebrated Lithuanian dog episode shows, Napoleon cynically and systematically exploited the promise of national restoration for his personal political ends. Conrad’s attitude toward “the great liberator,” here and in “Autocracy and War” and in “The Duel” (in which the fanatical Feraud seems partly based on Mikołaj Bobrowski), suggests the degree to which he distances himself from his great-uncle’s perspective. Indeed, Nicholas B.’s boundless admiration for Napoleon, whose project was to subjugate all Europe yet reward Poland with nationhood for participating in his depredations, is no less “Quixotic” or imaginative than Conrad’s desire to go to sea, except that his grand-uncle’s grand illusion was a communally shared one.

The work’s loosely woven plot is that of all stories of the archetypal hero who discovers and forges his identity in the crucible of experience: following abandonment by (or departure from) the original parents comes adoption by the cultural parent(s), the fraught discovery and realization of a unique personal destiny through strife and travail, and, finally, the fulfillment of a fate or destiny through achievement in the world.5 Conrad’s manipulation of his

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4. Speaking of Conrad, she writes: “[T]his gentleman, who writes popular and very lucrative novels in English has almost caused me a nervous breakdown” (Najder 1983, 1987). At the time, Conrad was selling in a few thousand copies and in serious financial difficulties.

5. For a classic study of the hero and the mythological stages marking his birth and development, see Campbell 1949.
autobiographical materials affords him the hero’s typical double birth: first, into “the world as it is” (his birth in the Polish Ukraine to political idealists of Romantic inclination) and, later, into “the world as he wishes it to be” (rebirth as a French and then as an English sailor, and, finally, as an English writer).

On offering these reminiscences in book form, Conrad expressed the hope that readers would, on completing it, have a sense of “a coherent, justifiable personality both in its origin and in its action” (A Personal Record, xxi). This retrospectively reveals the aim of the work written during 1908–1909. It also betrays a gnawing anxiety that the enterprise required explanation, and it suggests awareness that the methods Conrad had used to present aspects of himself and experience might have proved overly subtle. Even more, the statement places Conrad’s chosen methods under self-interrogation: in autobiography, the boundaries between the art brought to bear on the narrating subject and the subject itself shift fluidly, with, in short, an argument made for the work’s “coherence” and “necessity” as well as for the public self presented in it.

As it turns out, these keywords are related to one of the text’s projects of understanding, on the one hand, how the personality and activities of Conrad’s parents, those of his “personal” father (to use a Jungian term), Apollo Korzeniowski, poet, translator, and nationalist, affected his life; and, on the other, a self-aware appreciation of the nexus of paternal and maternal relationships alluded to (and in some sections more elaborately developed) that contributed to shape and influence his personality and values. The concept of parentage necessarily opens out to embrace not only the motherland/fatherland of “Poland” (to use that shorthand for a cultural condition not then expressed in a nation-state) but also England and the tongue that “adopted” him. commonplace in themselves, the metaphors have far-reaching psychological implications and emerge more strongly in the text published in 1919, since Conrad, contrary to his usual procedures in his prefatory statements, which chattily concentrate on a given work’s “real-life” origins, focuses on a defense of his father’s politics and on his “adoption” of English as the language for his creative endeavor. Indeed, only in the “Author’s Note” of 1919 does Conrad deal extensively with his father, defending him from the charge of being a “Revolutionist.”

Orphaned at the age of eleven, Conrad experienced a conflictual relationship with his actual parents who, in psychological terms, had “abandoned” him by their premature deaths, and not incidentally A Personal Record deals

6. Drawing on a number of contemporary psychoanalytic and critical technologies, Ash (1999) builds a case for seeing Conrad’s unfinished mourning for Apollo Korzeniowski as a significant motivating force in his writings. For a broad, if high speculative, psychoanalytic analysis of the father image in Conrad’s work, see also Dobrinsky 1989.
with themes more fully and fretfully explored in the work Conrad was stalled with, *Under Western Eyes*, where orphanhood, abandonment, and betrayal figure as key motifs. Tellingly, a passage cut from *A Personal Record* in the transition from its serial to book text uses the metaphor of inadequate husband and father to portray Rousseau’s impact on France’s political life: “The writer hailed as the Father of the French Revolution (the husband of the meek Thérèse was obviously predestined to know nothing of his various children) was not in general an abundantly blessed person, and in that respect he was not blessed at all” (1909, 62–63). The deletion of this slighting accusation, an irrelevant diversion from the main discussion, is justified on artistic grounds, but its presence in the serial version indicates the degree to which the theme of the father who abandoned and neglected his offspring is woven throughout the work.

This discussion now turns to three narrative and rhetorical highpoints that structure the themes mentioned: the opening in the Seine at Rouen and concluded at Tadeusz Bobrowski’s estate Kazimierówka in the Ukraine, the Furka Pass episode, and the closing segment in Marseilles.

**Rouen: Aboard the Adowa**

In “A Familiar Preface,” Conrad replied to criticisms of the method he had adopted to narrate his life story, offering a spirited defense: “Could I begin with the sacramental words ‘I was born on such a date and in such a place?’ The very remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest” (xx). From the outset, then, he rejected, even disdained biography’s and autobiography’s most conventional organizational patterns—time and place—for a narrative truer to his sense of himself. As in his fiction, he elects to hammer out formal structures appropriate to his material. Not time but fragments of experience and significant emotional moments structure his narrative in an attempt to mirror the essential discontinuity of his experience. Such a narrative method, in the fashion of a kaleidoscope, offers patterns that articulate and insist on an inner cohesiveness and patterns of meaning not present in the mere recitation of events in the order in which they occurred. The problem of beginnings is actualized here, not just signaling Conrad’s distance from the popular biographer, whose life narrative broadly conforms to conventional chronological and thematic expectations. His rhetorical question

reveals how the problem of beginnings blends into and significantly colors the presentation of narrative overall. As Edward Said has usefully observed in *Beginnings*, “Conrad’s radical uncertainty about himself” derives from two modes of experience: one that frames reality as “an unfolding process, as action being-made, as always becoming,” the other involving a sense of reality “as a hard quantity, very much ‘there’ and definable” (1975, 106). The interplay of these contradictory modes of experience is fully evident in the multiple identities Conrad puts on display in the opening “chapter” of *A Personal Record*.

The chronological displacement and the absence of traditional time-markers (the opening chapter mentions not one date), engender a similarly fluid spatial flexibility: the Seine at Rouen flows, as it were, into the River Pantai of a remote corner of Borneo, past Bessborough Gardens in Pimlico, to a ship off the Cape Colony, to a remote corner of the Ukraine. Further memories are staged on the Congo River, at Friedrichstrasse Bahnhof in Berlin, and in Warsaw. Indeed, it is as if the ship’s stasis, the enforced wait to depart from Rouen, engendered a flow of memory of almost unceasing movement—in ships, trains, boats, in a sledge through the snowbound countryside—across large swathes of time. Just as Conrad rejects limiting time to forward (or backward) movement by privileging flux and randomness, he refuses definition by spatial limits. The strategy, which emphasizes a sense of becoming and the accumulation of experience, thus gradually helps to define a layered, multiple self. Conrad famously confessed to being a “homo duplex,” but the phrase *homo multiplex* more aptly describes the individual he puts on display.

What is absent at this beginning is a conventional discussion of origins, given almost unique explanatory power in much biographical writing: “I am this because I was that,” or perhaps, “I am this because my parents were that.” Instead, Conrad opens with a general philosophical statement about the writing of books: “Books may be written in all sorts of places.” This “personal record” begins, then, in impersonality: not “My books” but “Books” in general. He then goes on to describe what, in view of his life experience, is a seemingly inconsequential moment: the interruption of his writing by a coworker. This insistence on “nowness” on the part of the man in the middle of life’s way is, however, purposeful: the focus on engagement in social activity, both self-imposed and imposed by the economic order, argues that presenting the facts of his genesis would render an inadequate and ultimately misleading account of him. Conrad disdains the formulaic “I was born in such and such a place” precisely because, in his case, it lacks explanatory power: to invoke this worn-out cliché would, moreover, be surrendering to narrative passivity. The announcement of birth and parentage is not simply deferred: only part of it is made at all, the “where” of his birth is more or less revealed but
not the “when.” His narrative gambit thus replaces “This happened to me” (“I was born,” an action over which one exercises no choice or control) with deliberate, elected activity: “I am engaged in doing this,” or more specifically, “I am writing,” or even “I was busy writing Almayer’s Folly until Young Cole interrupted me.” Morf finds a sinister procedure in this: Conrad “hides much more than he reveals” about his family, childhood, and coming of age (1930, 190), but to say this is to misunderstand his purpose, for Conrad is intent less on the biography of a man than on that of an artist and, thus, of a sensibility, a project more akin to Wordsworth’s in The Prelude (1805) than, for example, to The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1793). He is not, then, “hiding” details about his background and past, but choosing to emphasize only those that suit his manifest intentions. Proust in À la recherche (an autobiographical fiction) uses his childhood experience as a crucial element in the genesis of artistic sensibility. Conrad’s tack to play these down is an artistic gambit of equal validity.

Rejecting or modifying the time-honored generic announcement of the subject’s birth in a specific social and cultural milieu, he begins instead in “the berth of a mariner on board a ship” (3) with the “birth” of a book, and by extension of its writer. The pun “birth/berth” dominates the narrative’s opening and replaces Victorian autobiographical convention—“I am born,” as Dickens’s The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger (1849–50) famously begins—with a Modernist gesture, situating the seemingly self-generated writer in the act of creating meaning and perpetuating himself through language. By a series of allusions and by employing various narrative techniques, the heritage Conrad lays claim to is literary. Borrowing the in medias res convention of epic, with the hero embroiled in vicissitude and confronting his destiny, he stakes claims on narrative “paternity” in a genre associated with national identity and nation-founding projects. Traditionally, epic situates the individual and heroic identity within a large cultural and historical framework: either the birth of a society, as in Virgil, or cultural survival against an antagonist, as in Homer or Spenser. The generic claim is particularly bold, as the artist-hero stakes out his individual destiny and argues that writing is fundamentally an activist, even heroic, engagement, deeply social however solitary.

Conrad completes his gesture toward epic by, in effect, the traditional invocation to the Muse, in this case Flaubert, “in his unworldly, almost ascetic, devotion to his art a sort of literary, saint-like hermit” (3). The trope established with the words “devotion” and “saint” is further developed, Conrad noting of his shipboard activity that “we were leading then a contemplative life” (5), and thus evoking secluded monastic orders, and, by extension, the dedication of one’s life to witnessing a revealed word. The trope’s main
thrust, however, moves, contrariwise, to formulate the writer as a bard and visionary, and thus giving him an explicitly social function. Through the mythification of Flaubert (a secular saint devoted to his “work”), Conrad gestures to the long tradition of writing as a sacral act. Writing involves not only the transformation of the writer, the vehicle, but also the eventual transformation of society through the transformative power of language. The artist, then, figures as an epic hero, leading his society to a new destiny or a new revelation.

Significantly, in declining to reply to Young Cole's naïvely put question “What are you always scribbling there, if it's fair to ask?” (4) Conrad withholds precisely this transformation. Alienated from both his intruder and the activity he was engaged in, Conrad, by way of answer, casts his eyes from his interrupted work to the quay outside, and, highly self-conscious about the act of writing, deflects the readers' attention to two fragments of transitory reality: first, to “[a] red-nosed carter in a blouse and a woollen nightcap” leaning against a wheel and to an equally “idle, strolling customs-house guard” depressed by “the weather and the monotony of official existence” (that is, to two individuals engaged in the workaday world), and, then, to a literary event. His sight of the Café Thillard on the Quai de la Bourse (neither named) recalls Emma Bovary’s going to the opera at the nearby Théâtre des Arts. Conrad declines to answer Young Cole's query, excusing himself by an appeal to temperament, both his and his interlocutor's: “I could not have told him that Nina had said: ‘It has set at last.’ He would have been extremely surprised and perhaps have dropped his precious banjo” (4). The elements of rhetorical exaggeration (“extremely,” “precious”) and deprecatory humor express slight resentment toward Cole's ordinary destiny and sensibility. The retreat from response is strategic: on the one hand, the focus on visual details affirms the novelist's craft (the incorporation of selected elements from the external world into his constructed one) and, on the other, it announces a method of indirection and association that will allow Conrad, more fully and honestly, to explain “what” he is “always scribbling.”

This deferral has other parallels in the narrative: the self-imposed task of talking about himself is at times deflected by talking about others. The Mikołaj Bobrowski episodes are tangentially and associatively linked to Conrad’s experience but not his own life. Conrad elects Flaubert as a model artist, an observer of “hermetic” disposition, disengaged and distanced from the subject of observation. In short, this scene, which relies on several fictional strategies (dialogue, chronological and perspectival mobility, literary allusion) proposes an aesthetic of activist engagement at the same time it posits aestheticist withdrawal. The narrative, thus, both announces and enacts an artistic stance and program.
Aboard ship in Rouen and engaged in writing, Conrad the narrated subject thus positions himself as simultaneously doing “the work,” the real work, of writer and seaman, laboring at the two tasks that constitute his subject matter and that, at this stage of his experience, formed his personal and social identities. This focus insists, then, on deferring information about his ancestry and parents and serves instead to convey what was, arguably, the more important public fact about himself: his self-elected maritime and artistic callings. By sleight-of-hand, the narrative lights precisely on public identity, the text’s allusions self-consciously placing the writer and the seaman, or the writer-seaman, in specific historical contexts and in heredity lines stretching back in time. No less significantly, Conrad presents himself as enmeshed in action, impelled to respond, on the one hand, to the demands of his imagination, and, on the other, to his mundane but life-supporting duties as a ship’s officer that require artistic endeavor to be laid aside. However viewed from the outside—and Conrad carefully sets up the banjoist third officer in the role of a counterbalancing normative figure—both demands were for Conrad himself insistent and ineluctable: quotidian reality might at times prevent him from writing, but it also makes up the essential parts of a reality he looks back on and complexly meditates and develops.

Musing retrospectively about the influence of Flaubert on *Almayer’s Folly*, Conrad casually introduces material that again seems incidental or even irrelevant, recalling Flaubert’s “fancy” about his possible Viking origins. This “fancy” (a deliberate use of a word popular in Romantic literature), unrelated to Flaubert’s immediate family history, evokes Viking sovereignty over Normandy in the ninth century. The reference thus meaningfully emphasizes how “the kind Norman giant” (3) was, at least imaginatively, engaged in the same quest for origins as Conrad, finding himself indebted to and explained by remote historical and political events that shaped a specific regional identity and, by implication, his imposing physical presence. Conrad’s reference to Flaubert not as a Frenchman but as a “Norman” stresses a cultural identity grounded in a clearly delineated ancient territory over a secondary, if more embracing, national and linguistic identity arrived at through strife and political compromise. Flaubert’s layered and multiple identities—Norman, Frenchman, artist-writer, saint, hermit—presage the sense of a multiplex self that Conrad proceeds to develop.

Literary, not personal, paternity is the issue here, the adoptive son following in the footsteps of the adoptive father, “Joseph Conrad” following Flaubert, the

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9. Young Cole’s banjo playing none the less hints at another seaman engaged in artistic pursuits.

10. Kertzer (1975, 294) emphasizes the Vikings as seafarers, and thus as a link to the sea.
champion of impersonality in art, not Józef Konrad Korzeniowski following or diverging from the path traced by poet and dramatist Apollo Korzeniowski, who is effectively erased. The descendant of the creator of *Madame Bovary* (a work mentioned a few paragraphs later), Conrad posits filial homage and allegiance to the father of his choice, substituting Flaubert for the father given him by fate. By this gesture, the narrative simultaneously abandons and redefines the narrowly conceived nationalist aspirations traditional of epic. The nation, the tribe, to which Conrad traces his origins is that in which Flaubert had gained his place: the “tribe” of literary men, whose progeny are the books of other literary men.

The narrative then carefully sets up a series of allusions to paternity more fully to work out this theme. The next topic, again seemingly casual, is the vexed father-daughter relationship depicted in *Almayer’s Folly*. Conrad’s quotation from his own text is a meaningful gesture (whether he was actually working on this part of the novel is, of course, undiscernable). The long-awaited sunset will free Nina Almayer from her failed father into the larger world represented by her lover, Dain Maroola: “‘It has set at last,’ said Nina to her mother, pointing to the hills behind which the sun had sunk” (3). What awaits Nina, the result of her efforts, is maturity, womanhood, and liberation from paternal authority, indeed, paternal tyranny. Sanctioned by her mother, her actions present the whole (dysfunctional) family nexus: scheming daughter and mother and dream-besotted father, the latter introduced only by the periphrasis, mentioned in the phrase “Almayer’s romantic daughter” (3). The time chosen for Nina’s liberation draws on archetype: sunset, the moment of symbolic death into Mother Ocean, presages renewal and rebirth even as it enacts extinction.\(^\text{11}\)

That Nina’s words are borrowed from Adam Mickiewicz’s poem *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828) complicates the psychological and literary issues at hand. Her rejection of her father’s self-serving dreams for her future and her comprehensive repudiation of his cultural identity and attachments become entangled with Conrad’s assessment of his past at the very moment when he publicly begins to record it. Jean M. Szczyplien, reading this echo in Morfian fashion, argues that “the exiled Pole residing in England, by echoing *Konrad Wallenrod* . . . is stating resolutely if indirectly that he too is serving his fatherland, even though he is writing in English” (1998, 98). Leaving aside the assertion that Conrad is in “exile”—a word normally suggesting involuntary

\(^{11} \text{Those inclined to discern the unconscious of text might see “son-set” in the unpronounced word “sunset,” with Nina, in the role of Conrad’s self-projection, poised to leave her dream-besotted father in his enclosed, decaying world for a new, self-made destiny.}\)
expatriation (not Conrad’s case)\textsuperscript{12}—and that he could have expected none of his contemporary English and American audience for which \textit{A Personal Record} was written to recognize the quotation from Mickiewicz, this is, at most, private shorthand. It is not an “allusion,” which, by definition, relies on an audience’s (potential) recognition of the source recalled. More importantly, Szczypien’s sentimental assumption is insouciant to context: Nina not only desires to escape from inherited emotional ties (Almayer, his dreams, and plight) and a stultifying death-in-life sociocultural environment, but she also \textit{acts} to effect her escape. For her, the sunset she looks upon is the very last of the old dispensation as Almayer drifts into the past and Dain becomes her future. Her ardent desire for individual identity, shaped by her own actions, and her flight from paternal oppression represent Conrad’s situation. Rather than “majestically” affirming “service” to the fatherland, the private appeal to a canonical Polish literary model acknowledges a desire, even an eagerness, to flee entanglements forged during a severely traumatic childhood. Conrad’s expatriation, a complex act, ended in his liberation from family pressures and cultural constraint. He thus opens his reminiscences, that part of his life he wished to make public, by an appeal to cosmopolitan literary traditions, incarnated by Flaubert and through epic including the whole Western European tradition. In developing these claims, he situates himself in the literary culture of France and, by the mere fact of writing in English, of England.\textsuperscript{13}

The dramatic present in which Conrad situates his opening scene of multiple reminiscence—of reading (Flaubert’s \textit{Madame Bovary}) at a time and place unspecified, of writing (chapter X of \textit{Almayer’s Folly}), and of the humid and sun-drenched tropics—is a delayed ship (unnamed) in Rouen (unnamed) awaiting release. The ship “frozen fast in the river” and “gripped by the inclement weather” acts as a metaphor for his condition at a transitional moment with, as he states, his experience at sea mainly over and his writing life in its fledgling state. Although based on the \textit{Adowa}’s real-life circumstances in December 1893 (again the temporal frame is unmentioned), Conrad’s

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\textsuperscript{12} The term’s meaning has apparently become unsettled: Brooke-Rose (1996, 294) characterizes Conrad as a “voluntary exile,” while Suleiman in the same special issue of \textit{Poetics Today} appears to rely on the word’s more conventional meaning: “expatriates can go home any time they like, while exiles cannot” (1996, 283).
\textsuperscript{13} See Knowles 1996, for a nuanced and contextualized discussion of Conrad’s departure from Poland for Marseilles. The charge made as early as Orzeszkowa’s “Emigration of Talent” of 1899 (see Najder 1983, 182–91) is partly based on the assumption that Conrad would have become a writer had he never left Poland. The still odder assumption is that he ought to have written in Polish while the life-experience he mined for his creative work was experienced largely in English. Tarnawski (1964, 109) follows this line of thinking: “If disloyalty came into it at all, it lay in handing over his creative talent—his soul, as it were—to a foreign literature.”
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presentation gains symbolic force, emphasizing and underlining references to oppression, entrapment, and immobility—with the contraries of flight, progress, and motion—the unspoken keywords that will permit the ship to enter into its function and the writer to assume and then fully inhabit his chosen identity.

The reference to Madame Bovary further elaborates and reinforces the pattern of oppressive familial relationships, patriarchal and cultural authority, and flight. Seeking to escape her marriage, Emma Bovary flees into a substitute reality so “romantic” that it renders her existence in the world impossible. In a tripartite reference, the scene in which Charles and Emma Bovary attend Lucia di Lammermoor, Donizetti’s 1835 operatic adaptation of Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 novel Bride of Lammermoor, Conrad recalls another flight: that of Lucy Ashton fleeing her situation. She does so in three stages: by murdering the husband whom her brother (the representative of paternal and cultural authority) has forced her to marry, by sinking into insanity, and, in ultimate flight from a world hostile to her feelings and sensibility, simply by dying. Extending the theme of escape from psychological oppression, this contrapuntal reference also emphasizes ways in which literary works have antecedents and progeny: Lucia, the creation of Scott, migrates first into Salvatore Cammaranno’s libretto for Donizetti, and then into Flaubert’s writing, and then into Conrad’s. To explore the full context of these allusions is not to suggest that Conrad was consciously working out patterns that cumulatively amount to an open quarrel with his “personal” father or the larger more encompassing archetypal “father” constituted by culture and heritage, but to argue that threaded throughout the text are accusations of constraint that, for psychological and artistic reasons, are made indirectly.

By way of compensation, the chapter alludes to several positive fathers and father figures: the retired colonel, the father of “Young Cole”; the father of Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, Père Roualt (misremembered as Père Renault); and “Dear Captain Froude,” the first of several father surrogates; and, centrally, Tadeusz Bobrowski, guardian of “many orphans of land-owning families” (23) and of Conrad himself. The chapter’s culminating reference to paternity is to Conrad’s own, as a father wishing to leave for his sons in addition to his artistic legacy, “the colours and figures of his hard-won creation” (24), the memory of his early impressions, although, indeed, this is a wish that the text leaves mainly unfulfilled. In a chapter with several references to (surrogate) fathers and (adoptive) sons, Apollo Korzeniowski is present only passingly, as Conrad mentions that his mother, Ewa Korzeniowska, had “followed my father” into exile (23), a fact research has revealed as untrue: condemned to exile, she was an actor in her own right, not simply playing the role of the faithful wife.
From the Furka Pass to the Vieux-Port and England

Conrad’s liberation from paternal and cultural constraint at the end of section 2 is seemingly tagged onto the story of Nicholas B. and his (in)famous dinner of Lithuanian dog. Remembering his “childish horror” of his uncle’s act, he shifts the narrative focus from the participants back to himself and then expands on his own exotic fare—trepang, la vache enragée (misery)—partaken of during his voyages and travels to move to the more serious issues of self-sacrifice and the motivations for action. Structured associatively and by a series of contrasts, the narrative maintains a surface casualness belied by the general reflections about the irresolvable “contradictions of human nature” and the essential inexplicability of the self. Literary allusion, a particularly appropriate means to explore the topic of the writing self, further develops the biographical material: Don Quixote, motivated by dreams and misunderstood by a community in which he is an outsider, is a trope for the imaginative man, the Other within the social framework and, specifically, for Conrad himself. Don Quixote, reading about chivalry, fashions himself a knight; Conrad, reading about the sea, fancies himself a mariner. The hinted-at parallel composes part of an argument whereby Conrad states that inner vision must contend with and finally trump outer constraint. The Barber and The Priest, the normative figures of Don Quixote’s story hostile to his imagination, fade before the image of the ingenioso hidalgo, “his head encircled by a halo—the patron saint of all lives spoiled or saved by the irresistible grace of imagination” (37). (Again, the religious imagery heightens the sense of vocation, with its attendant notions of dedication, service, and self-sacrifice.)

In figuring his embattled younger self in literary terms, Conrad is again claiming membership in a community of dreamers, and thus also embracing the ill-fated Nicholas B. who dreamed, vainly, of a country of his own. From these general associations, Conrad then turns to a specific memory, and for once to a date, to 1873 and the emotional climax: of his last schoolboy holiday, that moment when his tutor (who is unnamed in the text), the delegate of avuncular (patriarchal) and cultural authority, at the top of the Furka Pass in the Swiss Alps, yielded to Conrad’s desire to go to sea.

The episode introduces yet another surrogate father, who is replaced by yet another: vanquished by his concession, Pulman yields place to the “unforgettable Englishman” (40), the harbinger of Conrad’s future. Self-consciously dramatic, the moment is also self-conscious mythmaking as Conrad embraces his dreamt-of future. The climax is staged on a mountaintop, the intersection-point between the upper world and the world of day-to-day experience
and thus the traditional locus of visions and of transformation.14 Behind this scene lies a range of romantic illuminations (Wordsworth, in particular, both in The Prelude and in Sketches from the Alps and Caspar David Friedrich) and the charting of destiny. The Conrad who goes down the mountain is no longer the one who has gone up it: not a boy in his tutor’s charge, he is a man ready to give actuality to his vision.

At this point the narrative moves from retrospect to look forward to the future (now the past): with his master’s certificate gained, Conrad remembers Pulman’s death, singling out his former tutor’s professional achievement as a healing physician. He pays filial homage to the man who facilitated his discovery of his own first calling, also an opportunity to develop aspects of his personality and to widen his knowledge of the world. The intensely rhetorical conclusion to the section, by subtle understatement, pays tribute to his own persistence and achievement: “What greater reward in ambition, honour and conscience,” Conrad writes of Pulman, “could he have hoped to win for himself when, on the top of the Furca [sic] Pass, he bade me look well to the end of my opening life” (45). Pulman, then, his function fulfilled, leads Conrad to an imaginative act of self-definition. The boy setting out is counseled to consider the man he will become, regarding “the end” (both as conclusion and purpose) of his chosen life path. At this moment, Pulman, too, is transformed, dropping his role as Barber and Priest, and becomes, if only momentarily, a visionary himself, seeing how accepting Conrad’s viewpoint was right: “How short his years and how clear his vision!” (45).

With a long by-excursion to speak generally of writing fiction and of the labored composition of Nostromo, Conrad emphasizes his achievement as a writer and thus the fulfillment of his second vocation. The narrative then recounts his Board of Trade examinations and picks up the thread dropped at the close of the Furka Pass scene in that staged in Marseilles’s Vieux Port, in which Conrad reinvented himself. The method is again reminiscent of fictional procedures, in particular the interpolated narrative (of Fielding or Dickens, for instance) whereby the main plot is developed and expanded by thematically germane side incidents. Continuous in a way that no other chapters are, chapters 6 and 7 follow upon one another as if Conrad were belatedly conceding to generic expectations and the demands of serialization. Chapter 6, with Conrad now ensconced in Marseilles receiving la belle Madame Delestang’s warning that he should be wary of “spoiling his life” (127), not on its surface

14. Moses on Mount Sinai, Christ at the Transfiguration, Francis of Assisi on Mount Alverno, and other figures poised to communicate with the upper world on mountains form the episode’s literary and cultural background.
an especially dramatic moment, is rhetorically worked up to become another turning point and perhaps the major statement of Conrad’s attempt to give his life story coherence: by recalling it.

He proves that he had followed the dictates of this woman, the incarnation of conscience at a moment in his feckless youth, and thereby too he replies to the groundless charges of desertion and dereliction of duty. He did not, indeed, “spoil his life,” giving both a private and public significance to the vision that motivated it and to which he had as much right to individual claim as his ancestors who chose to devote themselves to a political cause. Made “thoughtful” by this announcement of destiny, Conrad states himself ready for action: “haunted by no ghosts of the past and by no visions of the future, I walked down the quay of the Vieux Port to join the pilot-boat of my friends” (127).

Again the call is to action within a specific communal context and developed into an initiation into the craft of the sea under the tutelage, in loco parentis, of “l’Ancien,” the patron of the Third Company, and, collectively, of the Syndicate of Marseilles Pilots. Conrad thus establishes a maritime parentage no less thoroughly as his invocation of Flaubert sets out his literary one. And he does so at another transitional moment: his hand reaches out to touch an English ship on his “last outing with the pilots” (134) of Marseilles. Not wholly complete for some years, the transition is from French to English seaman: the “Larguez” of the patron of the Third Company is replaced by the “Look out there” from the deck of the James Westoll. This is an economy of substitution in several ways. The command to “cast off,” made in French, and the English injunction relate not only to the boat and the steamer but also symbolically frame Conrad’s youthful experience: he is to let go and to do so with caution. As if by compensation for the boldness of setting out, the Red Ensign unfurls on the English ship offering, as Conrad points out, protection to the ship and, as his rhetoric establishes, to himself—“the protecting warm bit of bunting.” “Symbolic” in its function, it also offers a new national identity and evokes a tradition of seamanship, Conrad almost literally wrapping himself in the flag of the British Merchant Service.

Unsurprisingly, he argued that this ending was “a perfect terminal” to his reminiscences and that any addition would be damaging. Cut short because of his quarrel with Ford, the text was to have had other installments, but the “personal record” closes with Conrad paying filial homage to the safe lodging, “the roof,” provided by the Red Ensign. The conclusion plays off the time-honored return of the wandering sailor, who, having braved the terrors of the deep, (re)finds his permanent shelter on the land, by extension, his family, nation, and culture. In Conrad’s case the “roof” claimed replaces the psychic territory lost through his parents’ deaths and to the traumas of bereavement and
orphanhood. The note is genuinely celebratory and grateful, not defensively embattled or apologetic, and to speak of this work as one written to settle “an outstanding debt”\(^\text{15}\) is to be deaf to its tonal registers of celebration and achievement. Edward W. Said has rightly noted how both *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record* close “with rapt invocations to symbols of national sentiment” (1966, 156), this sense of rapture celebrating nationality as a conscious and deliberate choice rather than mere accident. The synecdoche of “the roof” is singularly revealing, for though Conrad makes no explicit call on the Ulysses story (as he does in *The Mirror of the Sea*), the sailor-king’s homecoming to Penelope with its affirmation of familial ties and national identity, lies in the background and influences the triumphalist close of *A Personal Record*. The twist, however, is that the returning adventurer-hero discovers “home” in an English and maritime identity. To reaffirm the sense of continuity the narrative closes with a circular structure of departure and return, ending where it opened, at sea, with the tidal Seine standing in for mighty ocean and the link between seaman and writer complete.

\(^{15}\) The words are those of Wit Tarnawski, who goes so far as to claim that Conrad wrote *A Personal Record* to compensate for what he calls his “abandonment” of Poland (1984, 106–7).
Works Cited


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