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British Reception: Englishness and the Act of Reading

As the previous chapter has shown, Conrad’s cultural identity has long been defined according to the either-or dichotomy by a number of his Polish compatriots. The British perception of Conrad is no less ambivalent and biased. Some readers and critics praised him for following in the tradition of major British writers; others dismissed him as a foreign writer who should have written his works in Polish rather than in English. In almost all cases, Conrad was regarded as simply Other, just as his own fiction appears alien and alienating for many a reader, Polish and British alike. The otherness of Conrad’s writing is manifest and can be detected on the thematic, linguistic, and ideological levels. Reading his works is, therefore, tantamount to exploring a multi-layered otherness. First, there is the otherness of the exotic, far-away colonial worlds that Conrad depicts and delivers for the consumption of his British audience. Next, comes the otherness of his style and multi-dimensional worldview. Conrad has a deep, multifarious artistic outlook. His style constructs palimpsests in which Polish, French, and English syntactic patterns coalesce to give his texts exotic resonance and heteroglossic quality. Finally, we have the otherness of Conrad’s own identity, an emigrant from Poland who chose to become a British citizen, grafting in this way a new layer of identification onto his original identity. These characteristics helped to shape Conrad the man and the writer. They endowed him with a density of character and outlook, which distinguishes him from other English writers. Above all, Conrad’s multi-layered otherness determines, more than Conrad perhaps anticipated, the reception of his works in England.

Conrad’s decision to abandon the sea and become a writer was a radical leap. His was an extraordinary case within the English literary tradition in which most writers came from the intelligentsia. They were usually
the products of public schools that bequeathed to them ancestral English traditions and values. Thus, by birth and education as well as by training Conrad was an outsider with a rhizomic identity,¹ that is one with Polish, French, and British ramifications. Nevertheless, he was an outsider with a strong commitment to his adopted country. He enthusiastically embraced British culture and learned English, which he later mastered and chose as the medium of his writing. Both his multicultural background and former profession were to become, to an extent, obstacles in the way of his acceptance by the insular British literary establishment and the British reading public.

Conrad drew extensively on his maritime experience, and this led many of his readers to categorize him as a ‘sea writer’ – a label to which he strongly objected.² His Polish and continental cultural heritage also widely informed his works, either in the form of Polonisms or narrative methods inspired by the Polish literary tradition or by French writers, such as Maupassant and Flaubert. Together, this myriad of features complicated the English readers’ understanding and appreciation of Conrad’s works. And precisely because of his un-Englishness and former profession Conrad often felt the need to justify his presence on the English literary scene and legitimize his writing in a medium not his own by birth.

Conrad’s need for self-justification and the artistic anxiety that persisted throughout his writing career, as Conrad himself acknowledged,³ are prominently featured in A Personal Record. First serialized in 1908–09 in the English Review under the title ‘Some Reminiscences’, A Personal Record appeared in book form in 1912. In this text, blending selective, ‘loose’ personal reminiscences with fictional accounts, Conrad explores his Polish background, his life at sea, his vision of artistic creation, his aesthetic pursuits, and his philosophical outlook. Two particular events triggered Conrad’s decision to write this semi-autobiographical work: financial difficulties and a vicious and provocative attack on 10 August 1908 by a well-known English critic, Robert Lynd. In his review of A Set of Six in the Daily News Lynd wrote:

Mr Conrad, as everybody knows, is a Pole, who writes in English by choice, as it were, rather than by nature. To some of us . . . it seems a very regrettable thing, even from the point of view of English literature. A writer who ceases to see the world coloured by his own language – for language gives colour to thoughts and things in a way that few people understand – is apt to lose the concentration and intensity of vision without which the greatest literature cannot