Joseph Conrad: Sharing the Secret of Command

Joseph Conrad lived command both in practice and in his imagined adventure stories. As a merchant seaman, Conrad qualified for a master’s license in the British merchant marine and assumed his first command on the Otago, a vessel that plied the waters of the South Pacific. He was 31 years old at the time, and had served on merchant vessels for 14 years—starting as an apprentice seaman and gaining his master papers in 1886. He commanded the Otago for only one voyage and left the ship under mysterious circumstances. The owners were satisfied with his command of their vessel and expected to continue their contract with him.

He left the Otago ostensibly to work on his first novel, Almayer’s Folly, but he was not done with the lure of adventure and command. In 1889 he captained a steamer and sailed up the Congo River (this adventure became the basis for Heart of Darkness). Imagination of adventure in Africa had been stimulated in him long before. He tells us in his autobiographical memoir that when he was nine, peering at a map, he put his finger on Africa and exclaimed, “When I grow up, I shall go there.”1 His fascination with Africa had been renewed as he read about Henry Morton Stanley and his African adventures in looking for another lost white man in 1888, replicating his search for Dr. Livingston in 1871. The publicity surrounding this successful search, according to Bernard C. Meyer in his psychoanalytic study of Conrad, renewed Conrad’s childhood fantasy of adventure in the Congo, and it was this renewal that caused him to sign on for the tour of duty on the Congo steamer. Not long after this voyage, he gave up his career as a seaman and devoted himself to writing fiction stories based on his experiences, his fantasies, and his troubled psyche.

In Robert M. Armstrong’s interpretive essay, command for Conrad was a renewal of deep psychological conflict.2 The conflict centered on unconscious passive and active aims—to submit to his father, and to overpower him and take his place. Command represented the oedipal victory over his father, which Conrad could not tolerate, and reuniting with his mother, which also renewed conflict as a legacy of wishes stimulated and unresolved during the early years.
Another way of looking at Conrad’s conflict in taking command is that it arose from his realization that life as a seafarer would not be true to his imaginative capacities. In *Typhoon*, his novel of the sea, Conrad wrote: “Captain MacWhirr had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave, ignorant of life to the last, without ever having been made to see all it may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror. There are on sea and land such men thus fortunate—or thus disdained by destiny or by the sea.”

Command stimulated Conrad’s imagination, but left his true nature unresolved. On the one hand, he sought adventure to satisfy his wishes for an active life in command of men, standing above the ordinary pleasures of companionship among equals. Captaincy of a ship evoked images of the solitary, self-sufficient figure, the epitome of the drama of the loneliness of command. On the other hand, sailing the seas in command of a vessel was boring and the opposite of seeking expression of the inner voices of fantasy. At the core of Conrad’s conflict in taking command was a clash between self-sufficiency, detachment, and isolation in the vision of command, and the force of fantasy and the need to give expression to the inner voices of the psyche. As expressed in his novel *Lord Jim*, “Imagination, the enemy of men, the father of all terrors, unstimulated, sinks to rest in the dullness of exhausted emotion.”

Conrad withdrew from the active life of the sea and command and found, with rare exception, the peace of mind and fulfillment that is supposed to accompany the practice of one’s true vocation. As a writer, he seldom enjoyed freedom from psychological conflict; there were long periods of draught, when his imagination could not find the words to organize the fantasies into narratives. Also, he was ill for a good part of his adult life, suffering from gout, digestive problems, and depression. And his family life was troubled, his relationship with his wife and two sons were disturbed. Yet despite these travails, he continued to write, and savored those rare moments when his imagination and impulses came together to produce outstanding stories such as *The Secret Sharer, The Heart of Darkness,* and *Lord Jim.*

In *A Personal Record,* in 1912, he writes, “Only in men’s imagination does every truth find an effective and undeniable existence. Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life. An imaginative and exact rendering of authentic memories may serve worthily that spirit of piety towards all things human which sanctions the conceptions of a writer of tales, and the emotions of man reviewing his own experiences.”

Conrad set high standards for himself as a novelist. In his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* he writes:

“A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its very colors, in its light, in its shadow, in the aspect of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one