EXILE AS A CONTINUUM IN JOSEPH CONRAD’S FICTION
LIVING IN TRANSLATION

Ludmilla Voitkovska
Joseph Conrad is famous for being an unusual, strange, and even eccentric English writer. However, despite his difference, English criticism has primarily interpreted his fiction from the perspective of the English culture. In turn, Polish criticism has portrayed Conrad as a Pole who happened to write in English. Considering Conrad’s transcultural background, neither an exclusively English nor an exclusively Polish writer, this volume investigates the essential features of his expatriate writing as a form distinctly different from any writing done within a single culture. Conrad’s unique contribution to English literature and sensibility stems from his ability to incorporate the complexity of the exilic condition without discussing it explicitly. Furthermore, this book establishes Conrad’s expatriation archetypes and examines them as they manifest themselves not only in a realistic, but, more importantly, in a symbolic mode. Those archetypal features demonstrate themselves through Conrad’s thematic choices, narrative structure, and critical discourse that reflect his complex relationship with both the parent and the adopted reader. While the existence of these patterns in Conrad’s fiction is not entirely obvious, this book aims to illuminate Conrad’s contributions to the current critical debate concerning the place of the author in his/her own narrative.

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Exile as a Continuum in Joseph Conrad’s Fiction
Living in Translation

Ludmilla Voitkovska
He rubbed shoulders with them,
but they could not touch him;
he shared the air they breathed,
but he was different.

Joseph Conrad. *Lord Jim*
# Contents

**Acknowledgement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Reading Conrad in the Context of Expatriation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Exile as Autobiography in <em>Lord Jim</em></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Textualization of Liminality in <em>The Secret Agent</em></td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Homecoming in <em>Nostromo</em></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Unnaturalness of Naturalization: Doubles in “The Secret Sharer”</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Drawn into Liminal Space: Conrad’s Women in Love</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Reading as Homecoming: Expatriation as a Critical Discourse in <em>Lord Jim</em></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Anxiety of Adopted Reader in <em>Under Western Eyes</em></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bibliography**

**Index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgement

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Introduction

The heights of modern English literature have been dominated by foreigners and émigrés: Conrad, James, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce.

Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Emigres*

In an attempt to account for the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century English culture was unable, “of its own impetus, to produce great literary art” and that “the outstanding art which it achieved has been, on the whole, the product of the exile and the alien,” Terry Eagleton (1970) suggests that only an outsider, exempt from self-consuming participation in intricate networks of social obligation, is able to “grasp that society as a totality” (p. 10). Eagleton contends that since the novelist writes “out of a relationship of intricately detailed intimacy” (p. 10) with his society, exiles and émigrés – who conduct that relationship across a cultural schism – will always observe a different and refracted landscape, impressionistically coloured, and configured in a way that renders the most banal conventions of ordinary life (as experienced by native residents) potentially odd or esoteric, risible or threatening, but always, also, intimately, physically real. Further, within the expatriate’s immediate cross-cultural experience as a social alien, there is, to introduce metaphysical and psychological elements that complicate matters beyond resolution, a compatible and deeply artistic disorientation at the level of sensibility. The expatriate “inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another” (Seidel, 1986, p. ix). He is also, according to the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky,

by and large a retrospective and retroactive being. In other words, retrospection plays an excessive role – compared with other people’s lives – in his existence, overshadowing his reality and dimming the future into something thicker than its usual pea soup. Like the false prophets in Dante’s *Inferno*, his head is forever turned backward and his tears, or saliva, are running down between his shoulder blades.

(Brodsky, 1988, “Condition We Call Exile,” p. 16)
Introduction

An analogously fanciful but not entirely imaginary remove from even basic corporeal referents, coupled with a complex estrangement from geographical, cultural, and linguistic constants, predisposes the émigré to move and act in a culturally liminal world in what seems a disjunction of tenses where perfect and continuous conditions become features of other people’s experience of time and exist at a remove from the way in which he is required to structure incident and episode – by means of a preterite which mediates the terms of an unresolved relationship with his culture of origin, and a juxtaposed present articulating the unresolved as the framework in which immediacy and continuity are contained.

The life and work of Joseph Conrad illuminate these perplexities that arise from his cross-cultural existential condition as well as anything within the literary arena can illuminate anything else. They also place him in the English canon precisely where Virginia Woolf decreed. Musing on the difficulties faced by English novelists in the post-Edwardian era, Woolf noted, sympathetically, that “there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful” (Woolf, 1961, p. 219). Following Woolf while simultaneously disregarding her, English criticism has interpreted Conrad as anomalous, but anomalous from an English perspective, which means different, strange, eccentric, un-English, but in a comprehensively and coherently English manner. By contrast, Polish criticism sees him as a Pole who happened to write in English, making him distinctly un-Polish but also comprehensively a Polish traitor. Properly interpreted, however, Conrad, for whom English was not even his second language, is, by virtue of his liminal expatriate background, neither an exclusively English nor an exclusively Polish writer. Neither can his works be interpreted as a sort of alchemical fusion of the two cultures. His work is alchemical, but only in the banal sense of attempting to transmute linguistic prima materia into a precious substance he conceals in the record of the procedures that create it, leaving his reader with procedures and codes that tell us nothing (except extremely fine tales) and ultimately refer to nothing except what he is as he discloses what he chooses – an expatriate, writing, prolifically, from nowhere continuous towards readers incapable of understanding the schism they blur by the reflexes of reading. Upon examination, one can trace major recurrent patterns which appear in different variations in all of Conrad’s major works (*Lord Jim*, *Almayer’s Folly*, *Nostromo*, *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Heart of Darkness*, among others) that demonstrate connection between the author’s exilic condition and his choice of literary form and thematic patterns.
1 Reading Conrad in the Context of Expatriation

And it is in the appearance of something or somebody unpredictable within a space well used to its contents that creates the sense of occasion. Joseph Brodsky, Acceptance Speech

The contemporary Everyman is a citizen of the world, despite his cultural and emotional integration into the ethos of the country in which he happens to live. What was defined as expatriation in the world of fixed nation-states has become, as a result of the nomadic character of twentieth-century life, the faintly comprehended norm. People routinely leave their home countries, establish themselves in foreign cultures, and adopt foreign languages as their primary medium of communication, or adopt foreign languages and thereby become psychological émigrés without compelling external reasons for leaving Boston or Madrid, but with an internal rationale strong enough to justify a flight from ordinary fluency and the conventional meanings codified in their mother tongue. The specific motivations behind the decision to abandon one’s provenance are normally confused, complicated, and morally correct, but in most cases, the modern nomad becomes what he is because of his difficulty in identifying himself with a political system, his inability to contend with dramatic social change, or his failure in resolving a quasi-paranoid feeling of being personally unacceptable. Intellectuals, particularly sensitive to the hostility of any political environment to individual values and therefore viewed as potentially dangerous, are the first to be banished or “encouraged” to emigrate. But the assumption on the part of would-be intellectuals that they or their genius represent a threat to their social order produce a more common pattern of expatriation in which self-imposed exile and voluntary ostracism provide the basis for the tiresome dramatization of alienation that constitutes the bulk of what passes for contemporary fiction.

The proliferation of fictional accounts of undistinguished “I’s” pursuing their charmlessly quixotic courses, as deplorable as it might be, does offer objective tribute to the success of a general deconstruction of cultural, social, and psychological presuppositions associated with...

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quasi-religious faith in nation groups, national ideals, and the nationalistic version of corporate personality. Certainly, the side effects of this development can be described and discussed as the consequences of a shift in the creative focus of literary culture from an exhausted centre to the vibrant margins where multicultural dynamics become not only subject matter but also sensibility and aesthetic. However, more closely examined, this apparent shift is actually just an extension of the famous and by now clichéd post-war malaise (symptomatized by cultural displacement, angst, loneliness, existential rootlessness) into all the side streets and back alleys of an essentially suburban global village.

Again, the movement away from the ethnic paradigm – where bonds with family, community, religion, folklore, and art constitute an integrated configuration of connections for the individual – and into a general, diffused individualistic culture predicated on economic relations in a hierarchical paradigm – where, despite binding precedents, individuals are still held accountable for their own place and plight – eventuates in the collapse of shared value systems, leaving ephemeral, ad hoc solidarities as substitutes for traditional forms of being and belonging. Psychologically, this transition from a familiar ethos is marked by heightened nostalgia, intense restlessness, extraordinary unease, confusion, ambivalence, and alienation, and is, of course, more acutely felt by men, given women’s habituation, whatever the paradigm, to second-class status (Shu-mei Shih, 1992, p. 65). Inevitably, the sensibility of a writer who has relocated from one culture to another and adopted its language or chosen to stay faithful to his mother tongue in a foreign milieu becomes the laboratory in which these various dynamics are observed, analysed, and modified, before finally being engineered into the typically innovative forms characteristic of expatriate writing. Shock, as ever, dictates the appropriate technical response, and profoundly influences the way in which that response is staged and thematized. But this is nothing new. In Scripture, the shock of cultural exile occasioned the development of prophecy as a genre and a writing style. The main books of the New Testament are all attributed to members of Greek and Aramaic communities disenfranchised through their violent absorption into the Pax Romana. And, in the millennia since, the catalogue of writers without countries reads like a register of literary innovators. Petrarch, for example, one of the most virtuosic exiles of the last thousand years, “explored chasms of alienation previously unfathomed.” His “whole existence, his sense of himself, would be determined by his obsession with origin and exile; by his conviction that he was displaced and marginal” (Wojciechowski, 1992, p. 11).

Of course, this is far from being a groundbreaking observation. Indeed, a quick scan of the European literary tradition reveals, almost exclusively, marginal or alienated figures exploring the colossal significance of something or other no one else seems to consider, and the
matter in question typically a medium or a mythos or, more prosaically, a road, separated from the terms that define and delineate it, and then extrapolated heuristically into a recognizable unknown. In this respect, the writer is always a combination of *Homo ludens* and *Homo viator*, whose way with words is also a way of being away, and whose life tends to seem impractical, flippant, or even heretically wayward to more settled folk, but who remains nonetheless committed to an irrational course which, wherever it leads and however amusingly, he accepts as destiny and a matter of deadly earnest.

One need not enumerate here the staples of literary history – the troubadours and minnesingers, the tales of pilgrimage and knight errancy, the travelogues, the records of harrowing expeditions, the allegories of spiritual ascent or the progress of love – to suggest that literature is nothing if not a continuum stretched between the immobility of tradition (which defines the negative pole of creative inertia) and the spiritual or fantastic mobility beyond which literature becomes mythography. Between these poles, between the living death of the individual completely contained within social convention and the morally exemplary death that qualifies the individual for immortality, there is literary culture and the life of the word. There is also, as an indispensable dimension of the real-world setting, a sociolinguistic norm that serves as the stable background required to contrast the dynamic quality of the literary spirit. More importantly, however, there is the connection literature systematically breaks between the background and whatever is depicted in the foreground. If that connection can be broken, and broken again and again at every reading or hearing, we have literature as a thing apart from everything normative. But if the connection can be restored, we have literature co-opted as reflective or illustrative of the prehistory codified in the social system. In effect, for literature to remain literature, it must retain an exilic remove from the society that would re-appropriate it, or (and this both a symmetrical opposition and precisely the same thing) argue, effectively, that the society is itself in exile from its own authentic but forgotten conditions.

Drama constitutes, for the most part, the exception to this principle, and for the same reasons that differentiate enactment from mimesis and spectation from reading. However, when literature aspires to dramatic ideals, the distinction between exception and rule dissolves, setting up the aberrant conditions that define literature in the nineteenth century and the odd state of affairs experienced by twentieth-century authors when things returned to normal.

For the entirety of the revolutionary 1800s, it was assumed that literary options were available at home, within a stable but suddenly liberated social tradition and a world where national literature, far from being an oxymoron, offered a means to restore society to itself. We need not rehearse the plot structure of this farce, but it is important to note that
at this juncture in history it was possible to distinguish a literature of departure and a literature of circumstance; a poetry of exploration and a poetry of observation; exotic novels and novels organized around the unsettling, definably scandalous events to which settled life is subject. It is also possible, from a critical perspective, to negate these distinctions and identify literature, formally, as literature. This strategy, in fact, works perfectly well. After all, theoretically, it matters little whether this or that literary object were produced by Boccaccio or Hardy, Rilke or Yeats, the Thomas Mann of *Buddenbrooks* or the Thomas Mann of *Doktor Faustus*, an English or Danish or Palestinian writer or an English or Danish or Palestinian expatriate writer. What does matter is the work and the language – given that the author’s condition at the time of the writing is the equivalent of an accidental accretion and of no real pertinence whatsoever until, that is, it becomes pertinent and like any great accident fundamentally changes the past that supposedly predates it and the future it tears from more-likely precedents.

Certainly, it can be argued that the author is always the function of something accidental that divides him from ready-made language and necessitates the cultivation of alternative linguistic means for the realization of consistently unpredictable ends. Thus, both expatriation and the accident that cripples a prima ballerina and leaves her with writing as a mediocre compensation for her loss can be regarded as crises and, as such, interpreted as the selfsame mythic moment that directs the writer from the selfsame mythic status quo through the selfsame mythic alienation to the selfsame *locus scriptorum*. Then again, it is a commonplace that every writer will elevate his crisis to the rank of a world-historical turning point and of the essence in any attempt to understand or evaluate the human project.

Theorists abound who are willing to argue that, as crises go, expatriation is a cut above. Kirpal, for example, maintains that expatriation is not only “a physical or geographical journey out of one’s land to another where the migrant believes he will find greater satisfaction,” but also, crucially, “a severing of the immigrant’s spiritual and symbolic ties with his mother country.” Further, “unless the expatriate has decided to leave his country out of some inner distaste or contempt for his land, every evidence points to the fact that the act of expatriation is a very painful one” (Kirpal, 1989, p. 45). In short, the decision to expatriate is, in most cases, based on feelings of cultural incompatibility, and is exacerbated by an inner distaste or contempt for the very notion of homeland, making the experience both painful and unnatural, given its violation of that fundamental human aspiration to inhabit a bounded domain where physical security can begin to sponsor emotional connection.

Motherland, or *patria*, always exerts a powerful, inexorable influence, which normally exerts sufficient force, even at vast geographical remove,
to subvert any compensatory structure engineered by expatriates (Subbarayudu, 1994, p. 18). In communal cultures, patria is a priori relative to the individual, and expatriation, both linguistically and psychologically, is determined in relation to it. Viewing expatriacy as a metaphor for the archetypal human struggle, G. K. Subbarayudu contemplates the relationship between expatriation and the influence of the parent culture as the basis of an allegory:

Expatriacy flows from an original, changeless patria, and seems inevitably to lead back to patria as the sole determinant of perception and value. Therefore the value of expatriacy lies in its strategic significance as opposed to the deterministic significance of patria. Thus, expatriacy is an allegory of the condition of patria, and enables the expatriate to grasp the patria through the allegorization. An expatriate willy-nilly employs expatriacy as a strategy for recovering the patria; so, like all strategies, expatriacy is temporary by nature i.e. role-specific and without value outside the functional scope.

(1994, pp. 17–18)

_Patria_, then, even when abandoned, remains the desideratum, and irrespective of the expatriate’s new condition, he “is never in a harmonious state till recovery of the patria takes place either in real terms or in notional-historical terms” (Subbarayudu, 1994, p. 18). The poignancy inherent in the experience of expatriation derives from this juxtaposition of a chimerical prospect, a negative retrospect, and a loss of identity conflated with the loss of _patria_.

Poignancy, however, is seldom an element in the expatriate’s own sense of things, given that his reality is dominated by all the practical details that accrue in the course of a transition from a familiar frame of reference and relationships to a foreign, alien, and alienating, set of circumstances. Instead, his dominant mood or emotion has a temporal source and is organized around the dramatic events that resulted in a total break from the traditional environment familiar from birth and the equally dramatic need to reconstruct apace every aspect of his personal life. Expatriation necessitates this comprehensive task; this thoroughgoing creation of continuity and harmony, and despite the radical disruption that occasioned the need and the expatriate’s own sense of responsibility for the occasion. Clearly, the complex social patterns that guided the expatriate in his parent country have to be replaced by a new institutional and axiological code that his naiveté and wishful thinking suggest must be concealed within the language of his adopted country. Just as clearly, the modus operandi adopted by the expatriate will always be, in part, conditioned by the working assumptions in force at home, and, in larger part, exasperated by the unwillingness of grammar to give up the anticipated secrets of successful social integration.
The individual’s experience in a foreign physical environment is another factor with which the expatriate sensibility must contend. As Kirpal notes:

It is almost universally true now that the newcomer to the rich, developed and sparsely populated lands will be met with hostility – ostensibly because he is different, but actually because he is coming to share the national resources, opportunities, advantages of the host country.

(1989, p. 47)

The adopted country’s hostility creates, in turn, a pervasive feeling of mistrust and acquiescence that eventually gives rise to diffidence and resentment in the expatriate. The situation constitutes a sort of environmental paradox in which the host country is reluctant to accept the newcomer, but nonetheless expects him to conform wholly to its norms and values; a conformity towards which the expatriate aspires until he realizes that even perfect fidelity to the pertinent precepts guarantees neither acceptance nor a sense of belonging and, on the contrary, makes him nothing more than a well-behaved foreigner. This constant, structurally conditioned experience of rejection interferes with the émigré’s process of internal adjustment and prevents him from voluntarily surrendering his ethnic identity and merging with the cultural mainstream of the adopted country (Kirpal, 1989, p. 48). As a mechanism of defence against the loss of identity, the expatriate compensates with an even more desperate need to cling to his own heritage.

Literary history offers a representative range of responses to these complexities. T. S. Eliot, typical of the expatriate who exchanges one culture for another with the same primary language, is largely indifferent to the spiritual distance between a desk in London and a desk in New England. By contrast, Stephan Zweig, an Austrian writer of Jewish ancestry, after being driven into exile by the Nazis in 1934, although he emigrated unharmed to England and later to the USA and Brazil, became so lonely and dispirited in his estrangement from his culture and his distance from a German-speaking community, that he, along with his second wife, committed suicide in 1942. More frequently, expatriates manage to repudiate even essential aspects of their culture and still maintain loyalty to their language and to traditional literary themes, as was the case with James Joyce, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Thomas Mann, and Bertold Brecht. Or, as Conrad’s career illustrates, the expatriate can pursue a complete explicit detachment from his culture and his language in an attempt to realize a personal renaissance.

Ordinarily, the parent culture remains passive and ostensibly apathetic to the fate of the émigré, but when he attains any kind of fame within a foreign milieu, the judgement can be vociferous and punitive. Conrad,
for example, was targeted by E. Orzeszkowa, a leading Polish novelist of the time, who, in a personal letter to Conrad and in an article published in 1899, accused him of betraying Poland. At the turn of the century, Polish moral standards made it perfectly acceptable to leave the country and even to write in a foreign language, as long as it was obvious that the author was a Pole and “as long as he tried to work, albeit indirectly, for the sake of Poland” (Morf, 1976, p. 86). This, in fact, was the position adopted by the movement referred to as Warsaw Positivism; its apparent liberalism belied whenever “the sake of Poland” was interpreted in a manner that ran counter to what Orzeszkowa and her confederates regarded as the Polish cause.

Still, although it is comfortable to view these matters from within a framework featuring a cartoon-like nationalism pitted against a heroic and three-dimensional literary personage, the facts of Polish history make the passions surrounding this topic eminently understandable. Polish attitudes to emigration actually changed several times in the course of the nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, the country faced the real possibility of annihilation, having become the object of a secret agreement among Russia, Prussia, and Austria to abolish everything that might suggest the existence of a Polish kingdom in order to eliminate its memory rather as Rome eliminated Carthage. In the area annexed by Russia, the failure of Poles to obtain concessions led to the bloody Polish uprising of 1830, which was put down after a nine-month struggle. After the fall of Warsaw in 1831, Polish writers went into exile. Many of them had taken part in the insurrection; others felt that their political opinions might put them in jeopardy. The exodus that ensued is now known honorifically as the Great Emigration, as a result of which Paris became the foreign and only capital of a Polish culture strictly forbidden in Polish territory. Thus, in a curious twist, the great works of Polish romantic literature were actually written outside Poland, producing another and more concrete historical romance in which the writings of Mickiewicz, Krasinski, and Slowacki, banned by Russian censorship, were smuggled across the border, read in secret, and then burnt, since anyone caught reading or hiding them was imprisoned or sent to Siberia.

After the death of Tzar Nickolas, the Polish students of Kyiv formed a patriotic society called Trinity, whose most active member was Apollo Korzeniowski, the father of Joseph Conrad. At its inception, the objectives of this society were completely apolitical; its mandate, simply, to encourage the preservation of Polish identity and the spirit of Polish culture. However, it also eventually encouraged resistance to the idea that the future salvation of the Polish nation could be achieved through political cooperation with the Russian monarchy, and provided the ideological spark that led to the second nationalist uprising in Russian-administered Poland, which occurred in 1863 and was quickly and soundly defeated.