The Politics of Memory in Joseph Conrad’s  
* A Personal Record  

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Joseph Conrad’s autobiography *A Personal Record* (1912) is difficult to read because of irregular and illogical connections between each sequence. Since a series of memories are invoked by an image of the past and even by a word he writes, they loosely construct a chain of layers of memories, which is far from the exploration of the self. His emphasis on the state of memories is evident in the original title Some Reminiscences during the serialization on *the English Review* from December 1908 to June 1909. Despite this looseness, his claim on memory reveals an inner logic: “One’s literary life must turn frequently for sustenance to memories and seek discourse with the shades,” he writes in “A Familiar Preface,” the first author’s introduction of the book (xv).

Conrad often uses the words “shades” or “shadows” in order to articulate the memories of the dead that haunt him. The usage implies that the dead only limitedly appears to the living being and, more important, that he may not fully take their return into account. In fact, they keep haunting him while he repeats a move of conjuring and exorcising specters, which Jacques Derrida elaborated in his *Specters of Marx* (1994). First, I argue that Conrad’s primal occupation in the autobiography is to negotiate with these haunting spirits. I will show, secondly, that his memory of the past is settled through the author’s identification to patrimonial traditions; this means that in place of these “shades”, crowds are located under leading ideas such as...
the auspices of English imperialism or the patriotism of his father, excluding the possibilities that uninvited spirits may return.

Patrimony and Ontology

Critics have considered the ghosts in the works of Conrad as a mark of his autobiographical inscription or an essential practice for the author. Mark Conroy, for instance, rightly interprets the ghosts in a short story "Karain: A Memory" as "symptoms of dislocation" ("Ghostwriting" 12). Edward Said suggests that the reconciliation with specific specters is a central task in Conrad's writing. Said suggests, instead of, and because of, the rift between words and intention, Conrad supposed "a realm of vision beyond the words." According to Said, "It is a world of such uncomplicated coincidence between intention, word, and deed that the ghost of a fact, as Lord Jim has it, can be put to rest" (World 95). Said emphasizes not only that "his characters [...] remind one of specters" (Beginnings 125), but that his memory of the past in the autobiography embodies "ghost" images (Conrad 155). These insights by Said and Conroy can be elaborated when grafted to a double move of conjuring and exorcizing that Jacques Derrida develops in his contexts and aims.

Derrida’s contention in Specters of Marx is broadly twofold: Firstly, he deconstructs the ontological aspect of Marx and Marxism, whose inheritance includes, according to Derrida, totalitarianism, Stalinism, fidelity to the party, and the static notion of class; secondly and simultaneously, he calls for inheriting spirits of Marx, Marxism, and every ghost without making distinctions between sexes, and for mobilizing an alliance of those who were not necessarily supposed to be contained in the above categorization. Importantly, it is to reveal the complicity between the patrimonial and the ontological that not merely sustains these tasks within Derrida’s context, but also gives a perspective on the critique of Imperialism and of its tradition which texts like Conrad’s more or less belong to.

Derrida argues that to select the memory of the past for an intention, even if for a revolutionary cause, may cause an association with the above complicity. For
instance, a part of opening sequence in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) seems to Derrida to hold “a patrimonial logic of the generations of ghosts” (emphasis original; *Specters* 107). According to Derrida, Marx recommends to the reader, in order for the revolutionary inheritance to succeed without falsely parodying the past revolutions, “[...] the forgetting of the maternal[here, signifies the mother tongue] in order to make the spirit live in oneself” (*Ibid.* 109). Derrida paraphrases Marx’s contention: “[...] one must not forget it, one must remember it but while forgetting it enough[...]” (*Ibid.* 110). A learner of a new language is the figuration of the revolution to come:

> [...] a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new. (*Interpolations deleted; Derrida Ibid.; Marx Brumaire* 104)

For Marx, this impossible status of memory is in order to “find again the spirit of revolution without making its specter return” (*Interpolation deleted; Derrida Ibid.*). Derrida casts doubt onto this distinction between spirits and specters: First, since it is determined by sexual difference. In other words, those which return are normalized by the asymmetrical binary of sexes; second, since it is so as not just to turn the former into realization but thus to give it presence. Marx’s leap from ontology, from the bourgeois life, is inseparable from the danger of being shackled to the complicity between the ontological and the patrimonial.

As he invokes the memory of the dead, Conrad repeats this complicity not in a revolutionary agenda Marx theorized but in the contexts where a fidelity to a language becomes an issue in relation to nationalism, for instance, in his exchange with Wincenty Lutosławski, a young Polish philosopher and a fervent patriot. When he visited Conrad, he asked “why did Conrad not write in Polish?” (*Najder* 234), the answer to which is given in a letter written in 9 June 1897. His lineage is produced as
he refers to the lives and deaths of his ancestors, parents, and Tadeusz Bobrowski, a maternal uncle and a substitute father.

The present generation remembers him—Bobrowski—but death and oblivion follow even the best! I have been writing too much about the dead! But it seems to me that by writing about those who are no longer living I will show you, Dear Sir, in the best way the one who lives. (*Letters 359; partly cited in Conroy 1*)

Firstly, the dead is invoked as a response to his having to testify to his place and belonging or to his being interrogated about his language to write with. Second, it is, the author promises, to be incorporated into his writing to come. In order for this to be realized, the Polish community is expected to remember his deceased uncle and at the same time to forget his lineage. For the memory of the dead is transferred in the last instance onto his pen, and will register the authorial self, “the one who lives”. These strains—conjuring and exorcizing communal witnesses, and a subsequent emergence of the authorial self—determine a typical formula for Conrad’s generation of the patrimonial, whether it is the legitimacy to community or to authorship, which is with variations repeated in his autobiography.

**Authorial Self and the Dead**

In sequences of *A Personal Record*, too, authorial self is generated in close relation to memories of the dead. It is through the movement of conjuring and exorcizing those who insistently haunt him that the authorial self is located as patrimonial provenance with which his characters are gathered together. Particularly, his memories of the birth of *Almayer's Folly* are casually written compared to those of his departure from Poland and his landfall to England. The haunting memories discussed as below reflect how an authorship is delineated and endorsed by them in multiple but consistent ways.⁹
In my first example of these memories, Malay people are momentarily invoked onto a stage as witnesses of the genesis of an author. In Chapter I, a retrospective episode of the first conception of *Almayer’s Folly* is inserted into an account of his later seamanship during which writing came to occupy his mind. While his fellow captain asked him to be a second officer in a scheduled service between Canada and France, he was “a haunted man” who explored only words in his novel though in fact he “showed no sign of being haunted” by the characters and settings (8-9). As if to avoid this haunted state, the author tries to let these haunting spirits materialize: he further recollects that as he began to write four years before, he was rescued by the visitation of specters, of several figures the author met in Malaya. Metaphorically, the activation of his memory parallels to the visitation of those who are not really present at his table but return as the incarnated spirits. He recollects, during “*a long stay on shore*”, “Almayer[...]came nobly to the rescue”: “Before long, as was my only proper, his wife and daughter joined him round my table, and then the rest of that Pantai band came, full of words and gestures” (9). This event became “my[ the author’s] practice directly after my breakfast to hold animated receptions of Malays, Arabs, and half-castes” (Ibid.) Notably, these “receptions” are staged as if these specters testify to and embody his writing of fiction. Owing to this inscription of the forgotten, the trajectory of the way *Almayer’s Folly* materialized is entrusted both to the spontaneous action of their memories and to metaphorical intercourses regularly held between the author and these specters, rather than to his intention to compose a book: “[T]he memory of these beings [...] demanded to express itself in the shape of a novel”, though “[t]here was no vision of a printed book” at that time (Ibid.). At this moment, they surround and penetrate the stage on which he retrospectively inscribes the authorial self.

In my second example, this authorial self is conditioned by a consistent milieu, though Conrad’s attitude here seems to be contrary to the first. In Chapter IV, as a conclusion to a lengthy reminiscence of his encounter with Almayer, the birth of *Almayer’s Folly* is recounted from another perspective: the author begins an imaginary conversation with him that would occur “in the Elysian Fields” (87), and be an occa-
sion for him to unburden himself of the specter of Almayer. The scene visualizes three relations between; first, the motive of his writing and Almayer; second, the author and the character, who perform on an imaginary stage alike; third, the two and those who surround them, that is, a crowd of the unknown dead. Conrad's relation to Almayer in the first scene contradicts that in the second: in the former, Conrad reverently ascribes the origin of his writing to Almayer; he states that without his knowing Almayer, "there would never have been a line of mine in print", and even admits that he "is responsible for the existence of some fourteen volumes, so far" (Ibid.). Contrary to this, the origin of writing is ascribed to the author Conrad in the second scene. He tries to exorcize the specters of Almayer not only by saying that "you haunted me" (88) or repeatedly calling him "O Shade" (87) or "O complaining Shade!" (88), but by counting him as one of the anonymous: his "name was a common property of the winds"; moreover, if "I[the author] had not believed enough in your existence to let you haunt my rooms, [...] you would have been much more lost" (Ibid.). Here the author is both a creator and a father who can pick up a desirable mold of Almayer from countless lives; otherwise he would be forgotten.

Actually, this reversal of the author's attitude occurs through a crowd of the dead who lurks behind the stage. For the conversation is sustained by the backdrop before which the author facilitates the talk; the two figures are surrounded by "the stillness" that is generated "from the impalpable multitudes of the swarming dead" (87). It is only through this stage surrounded by the dead that the subjectivity of the author is inscribed, and he can exorcize the haunting ghost of Almayer. Inversely, this authorship is generated from, as well as written on, the spirits of the dead.

Spectral Memory and the Colonial Politics of Crowds

The inscription of the dead, however, remains potential and limited as long as the dead that is not welcomed and invited is prevented from inhabiting the authorial self. In such cases, the haunting memory of the past seems to be successfully settled, especially when a genealogical spirit is, as a patrimony, isolated out of each commu-
nity of England and Poland. Christopher GoGwilt and Andrea White respectively indicate that Conrad's reconciliation between these countries is accomplished by "fiction of inheritance" (*Invention* 147–50) or by "tropes of continuity and inheritance" (*"Writing"* 246) implicitly directed to the English reader as a performance. Nevertheless, if the inheritance is fictionalized, connecting the ghost images of the past to ontological dimensions, it brings about crucial effects: If it is produced in contact with India or Poland, within and without Europe, a possible emergence of the other could be silenced. For it is through giving these haunting memories a presence, implicitly or explicitly, as crowds that a patrimony, an authorship under the aegis of Britain and patriotism of Conrad's father, becomes temporarily substantial.

In historical perspective, the importance of crowds can be situated at the intersection between early modernist literature and the colonial enterprise of Britain. Above all, the experience of the crowd has been evaluated as a phenomenon specific to the city. On the one hand, the common reaction of early twentieth century writers was to see in them fear and danger. Raymond Williams summarizes the point: "One main response to the city[...]identified the crowding of cities as a source of social danger" (*Country* 217). On the other hand, they need to be manipulated both from political and aesthetic perspectives. Robert Nye reveals that writers from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century "shared[...]the methods to be employed in arousing and manipulating the sentiments of collectivities" (*"Savage"* 43). The most representative document is Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study in the Popular Mind* (1895), a book translated in 1896 and widely read. His derogation to crowd is evident when he connects their fragileness to the necessity of a leader: "A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master" (*Crowd* 72). This sentiment simultaneously occurred in colonial situations: Douglass Kerr sees that "Le Bon's crowd theory fits like a glove over the discourse of colonialism" (*"Crowds"* 57). To sum up, a diplomatic tendency to locate a leader in the crowds, a tendency that emerged in order to control the revolutionary crowds in France—is transplanted to literature in colonial situations as well as latently current in early modernist literature.
Conrad saw in crowds an analytical clue to the nature of colonialism as well as, sometimes racially biased, fear: in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), as Marlow the narrator generalizes African crowds into those who “howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces”, this abstract perception leads to his racist comment, “Ugly” (*Youth* 96); or his another famous phrase, “What redeems it [conquest of the earth] is the idea only”, can be read as the interrogation of what leads the mass when they cannot escape from colonial ideology; when the idea becomes “something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…” (*Ibid.* 51). In light of autobiographical backgrounds, his attitude to crowds in general, however, is complex because of his unsettled sense of belonging: His family is victimized by Imperial Russia, and he feels guilty to his Polish community by his flight to the sea.

On the one hand, the author’s memory of crowds is represented as a cause of the dislocation of his family and his great uncle Nicholas B. The crowd here is narrated through the fragmented life of Nicholas B and is observed without being dehumanized. The procedure through which a liberated crowd of Ukrainian serf turns into a violent mob is embedded in this episode narrated from a servant: Talking with the Cossack officer, he discovers “the whole male population of the village was massed in front” (58). Next, he witnesses a village priest, “arguing vehemently in the thick of the crowd” (59). Despite his holding back, “that bucolic mob”, intent on plundering, “smashed everything in the house” of Nicholas B (62).

On the other hand, this memory is peculiarly transferred to a scene centrally related to his envisioning of a paternal tradition in England. First, when his identification is interrogated, the ghost memory is conjured up. Zdzisław Najder guesses that the birth of *A Personal Record* may be the shock he received from a review by Robert Lynd, which appeared in *The Daily News*, 10 August 1908 (*Life* 391). In this article, Lynd rejects Conrad’s entry into the community of English Literature, insisting on the absence of the author’s “nationalism of language” (*Ibid.* 390). This criticism is implicitly mentioned in Chapter VI; “that robust man” who “leaves not a shred of my substance untrodden” (107). Second, the topic shifts from criticism in literary circles to that on the sea: the papers of “sea appreciations” remind him of
having been denounced for “the want of patriotism” during his service in English
seamanship (110). The sounds of “those bits of paper,” then, invoke his memories:
“In that faint, ghostly sound there live the memory of twenty years[…]” (Ibid.).
Lastly, this memory of anxiety is exorcized by the memory of his entry into the Eng-
lish seamanship: The author recollects the hard procedure of the examination for the
certificate. When it is finished, he hears from the last examiner, a retired old seaman,
about an experience of his service around the Gulf of Bengal. It was 1857, the year of
“the [Indian] Mutiny”. He recounts his internal change: The examiner, “so unexpect-
edly had given me an insight into his existence, awakening in me the sense of the con-
tinuity of that sea-life into which I had stepped from outside,” and through this
insight “I felt adopted. His experience was for me, too, as though he had been an
ancestor” (emphasis added; 118). It is the experience of the one who contributed to
repress the uprising of the masses in India, which makes him an adopted son, and
thus realizes his entry into the patrimonial tradition of English seamanship. At this
moment, the auspices of Imperial Britain are located as a leadership to suppress the
masses.

Certainly, one might raise the objection that it is unknowable whether or not
Conrad’s “insight” included an image of the insurrection of crowds. However, the
uprising in the Mutiny was not only “the great myth of colonial crowd-anxiety” (Kerr
“Crowds” 53), but was repeatedly featured in Victorian novels that reflect “the vio-
ience that crushed rebellion and restored British authority” (Brantlinger Rules 222).
Conrad is not exempted from this contemporaneous tendency. Thus, the fact that
the Ukrainian crowd as a cause of the dislocation of his family is overlapped with the
crowds of the Indian Mutiny, may well be read as “an insight into his existence.” This
crowd, neither dehumanized nor imagined as it is, makes Conrad shift from the reac-
tion against Russian empire to the entry into English empire.

Crowds and Father

On the other hand, the crowd is convoked with visible presence, divested of its
haunting status, as Conrad’s memory of the past is directly related to the Polish community. In “Poland Revisited” (1915), an autobiographical essay, Conrad recollects the memory of his father’s funeral during his return to Cracow, attempting to locate a tie between his deceased father and the crowd who must have occupied the ceremonial place. He conjectures that they attended in order to pay “homage to the ardent fidelity of the man [his father]” and that it is his achievement of his life “that crowd could feel and understand” (Notes 169), but the crowd, unexpectedly mobilized, threatens his retrospection: If he “remained longer there in that narrow street I should become the helpless prey of the Shadows I had called up”, because “[t]hey were crowding upon me, enigmatic and insistent, […]” (Notes 169–170). The haunting spirits invoked by the author here are resistant against his appropriation.

However, Conrad rewrites this event from another perspective in “Author’s Note” (1919). In order to rebut to the critics, who labeled him “the son of a Revolutionist” (vii), saying that his father’s aim is patriotic, he returns to the impression of his father’s funeral. The memory of the attendant crowd does not become specters but remains collected individuals with faces. Again he recollects, this case, “the hushed crowds” in public funeral: “That bareheaded mass of work people, youths of the University, women at the windows, schoolboys on the pavement,” they only knew “the fame of his fidelity to the one guiding emotion in their hearts” (viii). The crowds are thus incorporated to the patrimonial narrative.

Nevertheless, this patrimony is not insistent enough to subsist by itself, since the specter of his father remains unlaid. At the last sequence of this second introduction, Conrad concludes, suggesting that the mourning of his parents must be unfinished: “these Shades [of his parents] may be allowed to return to their place of rest […]”, waiting for “the moment when their haunting reality, their last trace on earth, shall pass for ever with me out of the world” (x). It was necessary for the author to exorcise, and to lay to rest, the memory of his parents several years after the autobiography was published, which explains the interminable nature of his negotiations with those which return, the haunting ghosts.
Conclusion

Conrad's negotiations with the return of the dead in *A Personal Record* make us glimpse a case of political consequences of remembering and forgetting, of memorizing. First, the specters of unsettled memories need to be connected to a patrimony, the English seamanship or Conrad's father, in order for them to return and be laid to rest. Second, when these specters are settled in ontological dimensions, both a crowd and its leader are located implicitly or explicitly. As long as these crowds are engraved in his memory, they can be humanized as crowds or dehumanized as the ghosts that can haunt him. On the other hand, as he glimpses crowds outside his memory, he participates in the imperial scheme of Britain: The crowds in the Indian Mutiny are put outside human categories; they are neither mentioned as a collective composed of individuals, nor can claim their rights to return. This exclusion may suggest the limit of Conrad's vision. In spite of this, he is "the most interesting witness to European imperialism" (Said *Pen and Sword* 68–9).

Notes

(1) Hereafter only page numbers are cited parenthetically.

(2) Derrida's taxonomy is subtle: the word "specters" at least 1) differs from "spirits", since the first can be a corporeal state of the latter (*Specters* 6), 2) differs from "ghosts" which more generally signifies the souls of the dead, 3) connotes the meaning of a French word, "revenant", that which comes back (*Ibid.* 10), and 4) is sometimes given a paternal status in reference to *The Communist Manifesto* (*Ibid.* 13). My discussion follows these gradations.

(3) Asako Nakai suggests the multiple authorships are the consequence of anti-confession, of criticisms Conrad directs to J. J. Rousseau for his confessional style ("Europe" 25–7). I owe it to her argument that this autobiography can be read as the multipli-
cation of authorship, but the difference is clear: Putting *A Personal Record* in the context of criticisms of autobiography from mid-20th century, Nakai sees the former an exploration of "ambivalence and contradiction" of European (or Western) self, the latter a pure construction of it (Ibid. 32).

(4) Conrad read Le Bon (Najder 106). Freud also gives a leader a privileged position in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). His ambiguous relation to Jewishness and Zionism, however, should be taken into account. Jacqueline Rose situates Freud's interest in crowds and its transition within broad range of his life and works (Resistance 62–92).

(5) The liberation of the Ukraine serf has complex backgrounds. First, there was antagonism in terms of class consciousness and racial difference alike. Most of the Polish gentry in Ukraine, in which Nicholas B. belonged to, were landowners, who had 'mistrust of and contempt for the Ukrainian "mob"' (Najder *Life* 8). Second, the event here was provoked when the Ukraine peasants, with the help of tsarist regime, were encouraged by the defeat of the uprising of Warsaw peasants in early 1863, an uprising in which Conrad's father played a leading role.

Works Cited


Hogarth, pp. 65-143.


