

Intellectual Movements

In *The Historical Novel* (1937), Georg Lukács wrote that Walter Scott 'had no knowledge of Hegel's philosophy and had he come across it would probably not have understood a word' (Lukács, p. 30). Conversely, Conrad's fiction incorporated a wealth of historical, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas resulting from the writer's overt dialogue with nineteenth-century European thought. The philosophy of Rousseau, Herder, Hegel, the Polish Romantics and Positivists, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson represents the intellectual backdrop to Conrad's explorations of individual and communal identity.

Conrad was born into a Polish culture dominated by nationalism and patriotism. The 'most powerful element' of Conrad's Polish inheritance 'was the work of the great Romantic poets, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809-49), and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-59). Their Romanticism was of the continental kind, saturated with the spirit of communal and especially national responsibilities' (Najder, 2000, p. 320). Polish Romantic poetry formed part of the broader intellectual current of Polish Romantic historicism, the treatment of the philosophy of history by patriotic Polish writers, which flourished in the 1830s and 1840s. Essential to its development was its dialogue with the thought of G.W.F. Hegel, whose work gave philosophical validation to the power of the Prussian state. Hegel's philosophy posited that history is guided by a 'Geist,' or 'Spirit,' ensuring its logical progress towards freedom, which Hegel saw manifesting itself in the 'State.' Hegel's philosophy greatly informed contemporary historical debate. The 'controversy about Hegel was especially intense in partitioned Poland and [it] gave birth to a number of quite interesting philosophical systems' (Walicki, p. 2). In 1838, August Cieszkowski published an important precursor of Marxist philosophy in *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*. Cieszkowski proclaimed that 'the totality of history must consist of the past and of the future, of the road already travelled as well as of the road yet to be travelled' (Cieszkowski, p. 51). Cieszkowski believed the philosophy of history must transcend Hegel's idealism, and 'the term "historiosophy" – which refers to the interpretation of time in a way that inscribes the past with meaning and offers predictions for the future – was of fundamental importance to Polish intellectuals in the 1830s and 1840s' (Porter, p. 23). Cieszkowski influenced Juliusz Słowacki, and in *Genesis from the Spirit* (1844) Słowacki endowed the past with significance only if it was historically constructive: 'But the teachings and experiences of the past ages were worthless if they did not give us the right directions for the future' (Słowacki, p. 26).

Conrad believed his exposure to the Polish Romantics and their concern with history gave his own writing its inimitability. In a letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham, Conrad wrote: 'I look at the future from the depths of a very dark past, and I find I am allowed nothing but fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future' (*CL* 2, p. 161). In 'Heart of Darkness,' Marlow affirms his historical inheritance: 'I don't think a single one of them [Africans] had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time – had no inherited experience to teach them as it were' (*Y*, p. 103). For Marlow, history should be read in the Cieszkowskian tradition, inherited experience 'teaching' the way to the future. Marlow declares: 'The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future' (*Y*, p. 96). *Nostromo* (1904), while also echoing the political thought of Edmund Burke, unveils Conrad's echoing of Polish Romantic philosophy. In her consideration of history, Mrs. Gould asserts that 'for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after' (*N*, p. 520). The presence of the philosophy of Polish historicism in the poetry of Mickiewicz and Słowacki undoubtedly shaped Conrad's belief that fiction was

a form of historiography, for 'a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience' (*NLL*, p. 17).

After the failed 1863 Polish insurrection against Russian rule, Tadeusz Bobrowski and the Polish Positivists opposed the militant tradition, promoting a pragmatic approach to protecting Poland's national identity in which political independence would be forsaken in favour of strengthening the economic power and cultural bonds of the nation. The writings of prominent nineteenth-century British thinkers, such as Darwin, Spencer, and Buckle, were fundamental to Polish Positivism. The novelist Bolesław Prus summed up the Positivist ethos when he wrote in *The Weekly Review* in 1887 that there were 'intermediate times between the idyll and the battle, when it is not possible to either live with a smile, or die with honour, only work, work, work' (Porter, p. 50). The "dream" became a common positivist trope, allowing them to contrast productive "work" with all sorts of lofty ambitions – most important those of the romantic nationalists' (Porter, p. 49). Conrad's *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* advocates the Positivist necessity of labour: 'No rest till the work is done. Work till you drop. That's what you're here for' (*NN*, p. 93). The crew 'boasted of our pluck, of our capacity for work, of our energy' (*NN*, p. 100). The emphasis on work also features in 'Youth': 'But they all worked. That crew of Liverpool hard cases had in them the right stuff' (*Y*, p. 25). This capacity for the task becomes a force in history, as it has 'a completeness in it, something solid like a principle, and masterful like an instinct – a disclosure of something secret – of that hidden something, that gift of good or evil that makes racial difference, that shapes the fate of nations' (*Y*, p. 28-29). While critics cite the importance to Conrad of Thomas Carlyle's writings on the Victorian work ethic, the Polish Positivist approach to work, adapted from Hegel, along with Conrad's own formative experiences at sea, represents a significant context for Conrad's attitude to practical activity. In his lectures on aesthetics Hegel had earlier noted the contribution of work to individual identity: 'man is realised for himself by his *practical* activity [. . .]. This purpose he achieves by the modification of external things upon which he impresses the seal of his inner being' (Hegel, p. 58). In 'Heart of Darkness,' Marlow advocates the position of work in the establishment of a stable concept of self: 'I don't like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work, – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no man can ever know' (*Y*, 85). As Zdzisław Najder notes, Thomas Carlyle 'was not the father to but only a stepson of a certain political tradition, and therefore a comparison with him will drive us into a side-alley of the history of ideas' (Najder, 1976, p. 78).

Writing in 1924, Conrad insisted that 'the formative forces acting on me, at the most plastic and impressionable age, were purely Western: that is French and English' (Jean-Aubry, p. 336). From his correspondence and the memoirs of his literary acquaintances, it is clear that Conrad, as R.B. Cunningham Graham observed, had a mind 'steeped in the modern literature of Europe, especially in that of France' (*TH*, p. ix). In *A Personal Record*, Conrad recalled the work of Flaubert and Hugo, and Conrad's later admiration for the works of Balzac, Stendhal, and Maupassant supports his recollection late in life that if his 'mind took a tinge from anything it was from French romanticism perhaps' (Jean-Aubry, p. 289). However, Conrad's exposure to 'tones Hegelian, Nietzschean, war-like, pious, cynical, inspired' (*NLL*, p. 125) reveals that a broader German philosophical tradition featured significantly in the writer's work. While Polish responses to Hegelian thought represented Conrad's introduction to German philosophy, Schopenhauer, the great opponent of Hegel, and Nietzsche became the subjects of Conrad's later investigations of German philosophy, with both thinkers excavating to different degrees the underlying condition of human nature in an advanced European civilisation, and later in Conrad's case, at the outposts of European imperialism. Schopenhauer's philosophical scepticism in *The World as Will and Idea* (1818)

is echoed ubiquitously in Conrad's early letters. In 1897, Conrad wrote to Cunninghame Graham: 'It is impossible to know anything tho' it is possible to believe a thing or two' (CL 1, p. 370). *Victory* (1915) unveils a character deeply affected by the teachings of his father's Schopenhauerian (or, to some critics, Nietzschean) philosophy, with Axel Heyst battling, like Conrad, with his philosophical heritage. Schopenhauer, whose fame spread in Europe from the 1850s, identified the impossibility of satisfying the energy of the will as the root of human affliction, and Conrad's pessimism echoes a philosophy that sees life as an attempt at affirmation that simultaneously conceals, knowingly and often necessarily, a profound disappointment. Similarly, Nietzsche's prominence in nineteenth-century philosophical culture represents a major point of dialogue between Conrad and European intellectual thought. Conrad's scepticism about language and its ability to mask human impulses belongs to the cultural climate that engendered Nietzsche's studies of the etymology of ethics and morality in the Schopenhauer-influenced *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Conrad, however, in another example of his fascination with and resistance to German philosophy, while drawn artistically to the 'mad individualism of Niet[z]sche' (CL 2, p. 188), refuses, owing to Conrad's consistent concern with the position of the individual in larger communal groupings, to condone the popularly understood conclusions of Nietzsche's work. However, when Conrad pronounced 'what makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it' (CL 2, p. 30), it articulated his view of an unfeeling, awe-inspiring natural world opposing the struggles of mankind, thereby resonating with contemporary thought grappling with the death of God in a post-Nietzschean twilight.

When Conrad settled in England, late-Victorian Britain approached the new century with a discourse of evaluation on the experience of empire and progress, embodied in the political sphere by the publication of J.A. Hobson's *Imperialism* in 1902, and in the arts by the translation of Max Nordau's polemical attack on burgeoning Modernism in *Degeneration* (1895). Following Darwin's seminal writings in the 1860s, Conrad's new setting was a society where 'it was not the physical but the biological sciences which had the deepest and the most pervasive effect upon the way man viewed his personal and historical destiny' (Watt, p. 32). In 1893, neo-Hegelian Idealist David G. Ritchie published *Darwin and Hegel*, stating: 'Evolution is in every one's mouth now, and the writings of Mr. Spencer have done a great deal (along with the discoveries of Darwin) to make the conception familiar' (Ritchie, p. 42). Such discussions were also contemporary with resurgence in interest in the subjects of time and history in literature and philosophy. As one thinker noted in the journal *Mind* in 1898, 'it is clear that the idea of progress in its current acceptance is essentially knit up with time' (Baillie, p. 521). While Conrad's representation of nature in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* offers a Spencerian interpretation of Darwin's ideas, Conrad's engagement with time and memory in 'Karain,' 'Youth,' 'Heart of Darkness,' *Lord Jim*, and *The Secret Agent* can be read alongside contemporary British responses to Hegelian philosophy. The pages of *Mind* in the late 1890s carried dialogue between prominent British neo-Hegelian Idealists such as F.H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet over the inherent perplexities of time and history as subjects of philosophic study. The French philosopher Henri Bergson's *Matière et Mémoire* (1896) had analysed how the human perception of time involved an amalgamation of both past and present states. Following Bergson, F.H. Bradley wrote in 1908 that 'no one can deny that in a sense we depend on past experience. For, apart from any other consideration, it is from past experience that in the main our minds are filled' (Bradley, p. 156). Although Conrad was 'probably not directly exposed to the systematic theories of the neo-Hegelians, his explicit statements on politics and the dramatic structure of his novels both attest to the presence of his intellectual milieu' (Fleishman, p. 67). Conrad also interacted with English writing that echoed the Polish response to

German Idealism. In the case of Carlyle, Conrad recognised a towering figure in English letters who, along with Coleridge, familiarised English literature with Goethe, Kant, and Hegel. Carlyle represented a British tradition of historical philosophy, continued by F.H. Bradley, which questioned the respective values of a romantic approach to history or a sceptical view of the past. The problems voiced in Carlyle's essay 'On History' (1830) and Bradley's later 'The Presuppositions of Critical History' (1874) reflected philosophical debate in Poland between the adherents of Romanticism and Positivism. In his final essay 'Legends,' left unfinished at his death in 1924, Conrad wrote that he still had 'nothing against a legend twining its tendrils fancifully about the facts of history' (*LE*, p. 44), articulating his career-long occupation with history and its representation.

The politics of nationalism in nineteenth-century European history represents a subject central to *Nostromo* (1904) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and embedded in these novels lies Conrad's response to Rousseau and Herder. Polish Romantics such as Mickiewicz and Cieszkowski drew from the philosophy of Rousseau and Herder, regarding national identity as an inherited spiritual bond founded on shared cultural traditions, historical memory, and a stable political structure. Herder's position as the foremost exponent of cultural nationalism is important in Conrad's presentation of the nation, especially in the cultural diversity and plurality of Costaguana. While Conrad labelled Rousseau an 'artless moralist' (*PR*, p. 95) in *A Personal Record* for the unwieldy size of his *Confessions*, as Edward Said has pointed out, 'if Conrad's hatred of Rousseau was at all like his well-known hatred of Dostoevsky, it may have been that Conrad perceived in the loquacious Swiss a temperament uncomfortably similar to his own' (Said, p. 53). The most problematic aspect of Rousseau's thought for Conrad was Rousseau's insistence on the subjection of the individual to the state, expressed in *The Social Contract* as follows: 'The better the constitution of a state is, the more do public affairs encroach on private in the minds of the citizens. Private affairs are even of much less importance, because the aggregate of the common happiness furnishes a greater proportion of that of each individual, so that there is less for him to seek in particular cares' (Rousseau, p. 78). Nevertheless, as in Conrad's writings on Poland, *The Social Contract* indicates a division of peoples into separate identity groups and analyses 'the rules of society best suited to nations,' each of which Rousseau sees possessing its own unique 'character' (Rousseau, p. 32). In June 1907, Conrad wrote to John Galsworthy that a 'government – believe me – is either the expression of a people's character or an illustrated commentary on the same' (*CL* 3, p. 454). In his understanding of Polish national identity, particularly in the face of Russian power, Conrad agreed with Rousseau that 'a patriotic community [. . .] because of its strong traditional way of life, is able to withstand the shocks which bad political leaders and mediocre laws can give it. Such a community is, in a manner of speaking, protected by tradition against political extremism; it enjoys an internal non-political stability' (Cameron, p. 124). As F.M. Barnard has stressed, while 'Herder and Rousseau saw the transition from national becoming to political becoming in divergent terms, there was full agreement between them that some matrix of national becoming must precede political becoming for the latter to be able to build upon the former' (Barnard, p. 40). Conrad's language of nationality, particularly in *Nostromo*, featuring Giorgio Viola's overt references to Garibaldi and Cavour, and allusions to the political art of Goya, connects to a broad, populist tradition of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. Giuseppe Mazzini embraced Herder's philosophy with his 'Young Italy' movement of the 1840s, and Conrad's sympathetic depiction of Viola in *Nostromo* – Viola is 'the Idealist of the old, humanitarian revolutions' (*N*, p. xix) and the inheritor of Mazzini and Garibaldi's liberal nationalism – is consistent with Conrad's historical support for national independence movements, particularly those opposing the empires that controlled Poland.

Under Western Eyes also subtly engages with a Western intellectual tradition represented by the polarisation of Edmund Burke and Rousseau. Christopher GoGwilt notes that 'there is something historically important in the success with which [Conrad] makes Rousseau stand for a contestation of claims to inheritance of "the West"' (GoGwilt, p. 150). It has been traditionally understood that 'Burke has a reverence for the past; Rousseau has a revolutionary's hatred of the present. Burke has a disposition to conserve; Rousseau, a rage to renovate or overturn. Burke's appeal is to experience; Rousseau's, to natural rights' (Cameron, p. 5). In *Under Western Eyes*, Victor Haldin's radical philosophy can be aligned with this received view of Rousseau, while Razumov's beliefs can be located in the Burkean tradition of evolutionary political development. Razumov writes: 'History not Theory. / Patriotism not Internationalism. / Evolution not Revolution. / Direction not Destruction. / Unity not Disruption' (*UWE*, 66). The narrative's polarisation of the Russian east of the story and the *Western Eye* of the narrator emphasises that Conrad's scrutiny of the Russian nation occurs under the lens of Western intellectual tradition. Alfred Cobban has written that the 'modern Western European conception of the nation has largely been a product of the fusion' of the thought of Rousseau and Burke (Cobban, p.121). In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad sought to portray a Russia lacking the foundation of any historical or cultural experience of nationhood according to the Western models of Rousseau and Burke. For Rousseau, 'Patriotism specifically, but more broadly the whole range of emotional commitments a citizen may feel for the state, will help to make the public self predominate and thus assist in creating the conditions necessary for a stable and legitimate political order' (Cameron, p. 124). For Burke, 'Society is indeed a contract [. . .] a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born' (Burke, p. 93). In Conrad's Russia, no legitimate political order exists or can be established, as Rousseau's patriotism and Burke's tradition have never emerged, thereby negating both Haldin's revolution and Razumov's political evolution.

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