The Mirror of the Sea: An Introduction

"*Odi e amo* may well be the confession of those who consciously or blindly have surrendered their existence to the fascination of the sea." [XXXV]

"To see! To see!--this is the craving of the sailor, as of the rest of blind humanity." [XXVII]

Joseph Conrad went to sea at sixteen in late 1874. He served first in the French merchant marine and then from April 1878 in the British merchant marine. In 1894 he retired from being a seaman at the age of thirty-six, at which point he radically shifted careers and became a writer, publishing on a nearly annual basis some of the greatest novels in the English language. There are many famous anomalies in this personal narrative.

Christened Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski , Joseph Conrad was born on Dec 3, 1857 in a part of Ukraine once owned largely by the Polish nobility, to which his family belonged, but in a territory now in the hands of the Russian Empire. His father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a man of learning and revolutionary politics, juggling the roles of poet, translator of classic English and French literary texts to support his family, sometimes farmer on the old family estates, and sometimes prisoner for political activities on behalf of the vacillating and nearly always tragic cause of Polish independence. Jozef was just five years old when his mother, Ewa Brobowski, died prematurely, leaving Apollo on his own to educate their son and manage the family's precarious finances. Apollo would die when Jozef was twelve, leaving him in the care of a largely benevolent uncle.

From this brief sketch, it would appear that Jozef's birthright included large doses of uncertainty along with a predisposition for passionate action. He was also to demonstrate precocious linguistic and literary inclinations and aptitude. From childhood, he spoke and read French as his second "native" language, after Polish, and probably also had at least smatterings of Russian, German, Latin and Greek. Home schooled by his father, Conrad, in his autobiographical work, *A Personal Record*, says he was, from the age of five, a "great reader", devouring classics in Polish and French, so that by "ten years of age I had read much of Victor

Hugo and other romantics." Indeed, his " introduction to the sea in literature" was through Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, while he claims to have first encountered English literature, during the sad year after his mother's death, when he read Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in his father's translation of the work into Polish. This was followed by an immersion in many other writers of the English canon including Sir Walter Scott, Thackeray and Dickens, the latter of whose idiosyncratic characters broke through all linguistic barriers and "could chatter disconnectedly in Polish," as if it were their natural idiom. [*A Personal Record, cf*]

Though regularly disrupted, Conrad's education, and particularly his literary education, appears to have been flesh, blood, and bone deep, made tangible through manuscript translations lying scattered on his father's writing desk. Yet for all that primal linguistic exposure, the extraordinary achievement of his luxurious, yet precise, prose style in English has rightly astounded his readers and critics since he first began to publish in 1895, the year following his retirement from sea-going. This is particularly striking since he didn't start speaking English until the age of twenty when he switched from the French to the British merchant marine. More improbable still is his claim in the 1919 Preface to *A Personal Record* that "…if I had not written in English, I would not have written at all." Attempting to explain this unlikely proposition he declares:

> I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it (English) had always been an inherent part of myself. English for me was neither a matter of choice or adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And, as to adoption—well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own so completely that its very idioms I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament and fashioned my still plastic character.

In an earlier 1912 Preface to *A Personal Record*, he had already tried to explain his "choice" to write in English rather than his second "native" tongue: Though "familiar with (French) from infancy, I would have been afraid to attempt expression in a language so perfectly 'crystallized'". Based on this very particular choice of words, it is hard not to speculate that what may have attracted him to English was its messy capaciousness, its pliability; the sheer quantity of words, purloined from an array of languages, many not Latin-based; the liberty from

gender agreement between nouns and their modifiers, allowing for rich ambiguities; the way individual words in a sentence can slip and bleed into each other, conjugating, copulating, complicating. Perhaps it was precisely this ruffian character of English—so different from the pleasing formal balance and measured, rational cadences of French and other of the great Romance languages—that gave him the imaginative freedom to recreate himself--in an instant--from sailor to distinctive and distinguished writer. Though it is impossible to know what heights Conrad might have achieved in his "native" Polish and French, it is undeniable that he was able to wrestle unruly English into the loveliness of an unrhymed poetry.

Obviously, great imaginative writing has been achieved in spite and because of the various rules and syntax of all human languages; so this is not meant to say that English is more *geniale* than other languages, but just that Conrad took advantage of the peculiarities and opportunities inherent in English to an extent that argues for him having a deep, natural affinity for the language. This affinity would stand out among any group of native English speakers, including even some of the language's greatest practitioners--both precursors from whom he may have learned, and followers whom he prefigured or may have influenced. To name just a few of these, it is impossible not to think of: Dickens for his sense of place and discovery of character through physical detail; Melville for the use of the sea to reveal the dark forces at the heart of nature and the human soul; Virginia Woolf for her poetry of consciousness; Fenimore Cooper for the ingredients necessary to the shaping of an adventure tale; Mark Twain for his attention to the workings of steamboats and the way they would alter forever the craft of navigating the waters of the earth; Faulkner for his haunting, linguistic lushness.

Often considered an early modernist, as well as an inheritor of the tendencies of European realism, Conrad also has a strong R/romantic streak which erupts irrepressibly, even as he insists on the mortal dangers lurking in the imaginative mind (cf *Lord Jim*). Whatever the exact mixture of these literary tendencies, the true nature of Conrad's hybrid genius and his very particular gifts of expression are on full display in *The Mirror of the Sea*. A collection of short, autobiographical essays published in periodicals in the years between 1904 and 1906, it

came out in book form in 1906 to wide critical acclaim. These dates place this publication within a few years of some of Conrad's greatest works, including *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Agent* (1907). An invaluable companion to these and other of Conrad's most famous works, *The Mirror of the Sea* is a concise, yet revelatory, explanation of how the sea shaped Conrad's character and, ultimately, his craft as writer—in a foreign language, that he wields as an intimate act of love.

In any conventional sense, *The Mirror of the Sea* is not a standard autobiography revealing the key and sequential events of its author's life. Nor is it primarily an adventure story in which Conrad provides his readers with vicarious thrills drawn from his many years at sea in wide-ranging and exotic locations, offering a feast of oddities for Edwardians to gorge on. Except in a few of its chapters—most notably in those that describe his youthful escapades with the "piratical and monkish" Dominic Cervoni [XLII], possible early avatar of Nostr'oumo, Giovanni Battista Fidanza—we do not get much sequence or even much adventure *per se*. Instead we get Conrad's rare selection of "moments of meaning", reminiscent of what Wordsworth called "spots of time," in which impersonal nature encounters human imagination, and is transformed from object, event, and sense impression into language and transcendental significances. The result is not, strictly speaking, autobiography, but a spiritual chronicle that rhythmically tells, like the gonging of the ship's bell, a double-edged love story.

As has often been noticed by critics, at the level of the sentence, Conrad was as much a poet and metaphysician as he was a craftsman of compelling tales of adventure. And, in fact, this dichotomy appears to have created a tension for him. In letters to friends he chafed at the pressures on him to keep producing exotic sea tales, a desire he took to be a mis-reading of the sailing stories he had already published, as well as a demand for a kind of narrative that ran at least partially counter to his gift. In this strange compendium of tales, he almost grumpily proclaims that, "He who starts on a deliberate quest for adventure goes forth but to gather dead-sea fruit…" Rather "adventures…come upon our complacency unawares…like visiting angels." [XL] This, we sense, is an attempt at a broader definition of feats of daring. Though the

structure of *The Mirror of the Sea* may technically speaking be linked to the fact that individual chapters were published first as short pieces in newspapers and journals, the stitching together of them in book form as autobiography appears to serve some of its author's important literary inclinations. The structure of condensed chapters, each organized around a related theme, points to a cross-genre rather than plot-driven intention, in which these formal clusters read like stanzas in a long, epic poem, where images and ideas become inextricable, forming "duplicities" of meaning.

This highly intentional method of doubling is immediately apparent in the opening chapter of this chronicle:

> "Landfall and Departure mark the rhythmical swing of a seaman's life and of a ship's career."

Initially, we find ourselves in the realm of apparently straight-forward physical description, as Conrad links his chosen terms to natural landmarks, showing us how a sailor "reads" the meeting points of earth and sea:

> "Your Landfall, be it a peculiarly shaped mountain, a rocky headland, or a stretch of sand-dunes, you meet at first with a single glance. Further recognition will follow in due course; but essentially a Landfall, good or bad, is made and done with at the first cry of 'Land-ho!' The Departure is distinctly a ceremony of navigation. A ship may have left her port some time before;…but…as long as the coast she was about to leave remained in sight, a southern-going ship of yesterday had not in the sailor's sense begun the enterprise of a passage."

Yet, as if to call our attention to the possible limitations of this purely expository description, Conrad immediately goes on to hint at additional possibilities embedded in his binary terms:

> "The taking of Departure, if not the last sight of the land, is perhaps, the last professional recognition of the land on the part of the sailor. It is the technical, as distinguished from the sentimental, 'good-bye'".

Quite quickly, then, in Chapter II and III, he moves from landmarks to the ways different captains respond emotionally to Departure, what their Departure routines reveal about their "characters", and what they bode for the voyage as a whole. Here we are in an anecdotal realm

in which Conrad reads the tea leaves of his captains' behavior following the disappearance of land:

> "The good MacW- would not even come out to his meals, and fed solitarily in his holy of holies from a tray covered with a white napkin…This grief for his home, which overcomes so many married seamen, did not deprive Captain MacW- of his legitimate appetite. In fact, the steward would almost invariably come up to me, sitting in the captain's chair at the head of the table, to say in a grave murmur, 'The captain asks for one more slice of meat and two potatoes.'"

In this case, Conrad notes that the mingling of grief and animal appetite, along with the captain's politeness to his crew in the asking for additional nourishment, was proof of "an amiable character", bespeaking one who soon enough would appear above decks and allow "the deep-water ship routine to establish its beneficent sway." Not all of Conrad's remembered captains are of this balanced temperament, providing him the opportunity to describe the variable ways Landfall and Departure play their weighty tunes on different souls.

By Chapter IV, from the suggestive description of Landfall and Departure, we have arrived at the sudden subject of anchors:

> "Before an anchor can ever be raised, it must be let go; and this perfectly obvious truism brings me at once to the subject of the degradation of the sea language in the daily press of this country." [IV]

Without warning, we start to realize that the opening chapters were a prelude to a detailed lexicon of sea-worthy terms, and one that holds an apparently simple object like an anchor, along with its associated uses, to be as metaphysically important as the more obviously evocative terms that open the book. In the succeeding pages, it is hard not to think about the deep purposes of Melville's famous "Cetology" chapters from *Moby Dick*. Conrad begins his parsing of terms with a severe condemnation of such loose language as that used by journalists when they speak of an anchor being "cast." He is a strict linguistic disciplinarian:

> "Now, an anchor is never cast, and to take liberty with technical language is a crime against the clearness, precision, and beauty of perfected speech."

But even before we learn the correct language for raising and lowering the anchor, Conrad's initial admonitory tone moves from concrete description of the object, "a forged piece of iron, admirably adapted to its ends," to a loving paean to its sublimity of form and meaning:

> "To its perfection its size bears witness, for there is no other appliance so small for the great work it has to do. Look at the anchors hanging from the cats heads of a big ship! How tiny they are in proportion to the great size of the hull! Were they made of gold they would look like trinkets, like ornamental toys, no bigger in proportion than a jeweled drop in a woman's ear. And yet upon them will depend, more than once, the very life of the ship." [IV]

From this demi-poetry, we move through a full description of the importance of anchors to the seaman who handle them, and to the ships whose very fate may depend on their skillful use. A multiplicity of terms are needed to describe these sacred labors, so that the lexicon starts to broaden out into the nearly holy realms of ship practice and its effect on the character and destinies of the seaman who are capable of its rigors.

We learn that the anchor is not simply a well-tooled iron object but "an emblem of hope", and, moreover, that "a foul anchor is worse than the most fallacious of false hopes..." [V]. Thus is the very character of the seaman who handles the portentous object implicated in and shaped by the object's nearly human potential for good and ill. By this point in his chronicle, Conrad has led us into a moral universe of right and wrong action. Indeed the raising and lowering of anchors are exacting labors, governed by precise language commands, if one is to bring out the "'virtue'" which is in them." Through many such personifications of the deceptively humble anchor, Conrad moves us effortlessly into a world peopled by concrete objects transforming into sentient beings, in which a ship, like a lovely woman, is about to be awakened by the noisy song of her "homeward bound" crew on the brink of Landfall:

> "The rush of expectant men out of the forecastle, the snatching of hand-spikes, the tramp of feet, the clink of the pawls, make a stirring accompaniment to a plaintive up-anchor song with a roaring chorus; and the burst of noisy activity from a whole ship's crew seems like a voiceful awakening of the ship herself, till then, in the picturesque phrase of Dutch seamen, 'lying asleep upon her iron.' " [VI]

From a primer of sea terms, we have slipped into the double, even multi-valent, world of full-blown metaphor in which meanings are fractured, proliferating possibilities while also

consolidating thought and feeling. But we knew that already from the title of the book, *The Mirror of the Sea*.

During the twenty years near the end of the 19th century when he was employed as a seaman in the service of the merchant marines of two countries, Conrad experienced first-hand the conversion of sea trade from multi-masted sailing ships to steam boats. Representing this radical shift as a brutal transition from one state of being to another, he invokes the language of sound and sight to express a deforming fall from grace. The sound of a sailing ship in a gale is:

> " …the wild and exulting voice of the world's soul…always that wild song, deep like a chant, for a bass to the shrill pipe of the wind played on the sea-tops, with a punctuating crash, now and then of a breaking wave." [XI]

How different is the "thudding rhythm" of steamboats, "that plodding sound as of the march of an inevitable future." [X] With the use of "thud" and "plod" (good Old English words), Conrad's language mimics the deadening tones of an encroaching modernity, excised from nature. As he has told us before, "Love and regret go hand and hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of the clouds reflected in the mirror of the sea." [VII] But he is not seeking solace; instead he burrows deeper into mourning with a series of visual images as powerful as his invocation of tonal variants. It is memory through language that provides the only consolation that is to be had. Imagining the central object of his love as a "bird of the sea, whose swimming is like flying," [VIII] he visualizes both the artistry and fragility of all that is lost:

> (A sailing ship) "seems to draw its strength from the very soul of the world, its formidable ally, held to obedience by the frailest bonds, like a fierce ghost captured in a snare of something even finer than spun silk. For what is the array of the strongest ropes, the tallest spars and the stoutest canvas against the mighty breath of the infinite, but thistle stalks, cobwebs and gossamer?" [X]

Here we experience both great love and great regret through a double fervor of sight and sound, with the rolling notes and rhythm of the rippling clauses reaching for anchor in "spun silk" and "gossamer".

If the duplicitous method of metaphor is to help us visualize the physical world while also moving beyond visualization to implication, Conrad provides us here with the two-faced transparency and opacity of great poetry. "Seeing" through the senses is critically important to him: as a faculty for precisely delineating the physical world, but also in the visionary sense of looking past factuality to meaning. His autobiography is an expression of how the sea trained him in both forms of perception--and how his native affinity for language(s), honed by "the practice of the sea", provided him the tools to span the gap between.

Perhaps the most poetical—and often playful--sections of *The Mirror of the Sea* are Conrad's several chapters on storms and winds, which he recalls with strong feeling and wistfulness, personifying them as the sentient beings "with whom (as a sailor) you must live in the intimacies of nights and days." [XXII]

> "And this is one of those gales whose memory in after years returns, welcome in dignified austerity, as you would remember with pleasure the noble features of a stranger with whom you crossed swords in knightly encounter and are never to see again. In this way gales have their physiognomy. [XXIII]

This image of knightly combat with a worthy foe is to recur in his loving yet fearful invocation of the cunning, capricious moods and armaments of the West and East Winds, to whom the South and North Winds are, as he says, mere subordinates:

> "The North and South Winds are but small princes in the dynasties that make peace and war upon the sea…They depend upon local causes—the configuration of coasts, the shapes of straits, the accidents of bold promontories round which they play their little part. In the polity of the winds, as amongst the tribes of the earth, the real struggle lies between East and West." [XXV]

In the following chapters, Conrad, the sailor, proves himself to be a very scholar of the winds, an element that has at its deepest center a prevailing contradiction: "For, after all, a gale of wind, the thing of mighty sound, is inarticulate." [XXIV] It requires man—attentive man, as a sailor (or writer) must be—to be its interpreter: "…it is, after all, the human voice that stamps the mark of human consciousness upon the character of a gale…"[XXIV] Though this interpretative function endows the sailor with a kind of priestly mission, Conrad insists that he remains a minion before his "arbitrary ruler":

> "Clothed in a mantle of dazzling gold or draped in rags of black clouds like a beggar, the might of the Westerly Wind sits enthroned upon the western horizon with the whole North Atlantic as a footstool for his feet and the first twinkling stars making a diadem for his brow. Then the seamen, attentive courtiers of the weather, think of regulating the conduct of their ships by the mood of the master." [XXVI]

In a passage such as this, one sees the sailor, the writer, as a kind of permeable membrane, ever vigilant, ever reverent and subservient to higher powers, soaking up inchoate signs, and translating them into the orderly syntax of human thought and action. It is this gift that Conrad makes to his readers, not simply through the recollection of specific storms--though he also does that-- but in making visceral the acute feelings of the listener, the watcher, the decoder of the mysteries at the heart of nature. The adventures he recounts are not so much stories of danger and derring-do on the high seas, but tales of feeling from the inside of the poem in its moment of making.

The East Wind is, no less than the West a great, and, if anything, more devious force: "It's duplicity is such that will deceive a scientific instrument." It tricks even the barometer, because "the wiles of the East Wind are too much for its fundamental honesty." [XXIX] This wind will literally and figuratively block one's vision, a most terrifying thing for a sailor.

> "The West Wind hangs heavy gray curtains of mist and spray before your gaze, but the Eastern interloper of the narrow seas, when he has mustered his courage and cruelty to the point of a gale, puts your eyes out, puts them out completely, makes you feel blind for life upon a lea shore…Out of his black and merciless heart he flings a white blinding sheet upon the ships of the sea. He has more manners of villainy, and no more conscience than an Italian prince of the seventeenth century. His weapon is a dagger carried under a black cloak when he goes out on his unlawful enterprises." [XXIX]

Where the West Wind is a kind of "barbarian"…violent without craftiness" [XXVIII] Conrad imagines the East Wind as a subtle, treacherous "robber sheik of the sea." As the two key protagonists of a sailor's life, these winds elicit feelings in Conrad of admiration, amusement and ardent attentiveness, deeming them the worthy overlords of a mighty joint purpose. To be a sailor is to be "in service", to recognize sublime power, while learning to ride it, to collaborate with bowed head, but also with cunning. For Conrad, Ulysses is always lurking. Keen and cagey, he is the quintessential companion of "adventurous voyage", the chief avatar of sailors:

"we alone who swayed by the audacity of our minds and the tremors of our hearts, are the sole artisans of all the wonder and romance of the world." [XXXVIII]

In the many chapters about the winds, we are again in the presence of Conrad's prevailing instinct for doubling, his compulsion to take the measure of things by looking at them squarely, and then at their undersides, to play thesis against antithesis, to metaphorically recreate the Pillars of Hercules, along with the *Ne plus ultra,* inscribed upon them, warning of the fearful mysteries beyond the limits of the known world. Homer and his wily Odysseus are ever in the wings In these sections of the autobiography, plying the Mediterranean, "the highway of heroes and sages, of warriors, pirates, and saints," [XXXVIII] whose mythic waters are "the common heritage of all mankind." [XXXVII] Though Conrad uses this legendary material as a kind of grand, implied counter-point to his own fabulous (*nel senso di favola*) depictions of roaming with the winds, he does not limit himself to describing the weather of the great inland sea, but ranges across all the oceans of the globe, from "Finisterre" to "Hatteras, from "the nameless cape" [XXIII]—the Cape of Hope, of Storms—to Cape Leeuwin, to Cape Horn, and back again to the unbeautiful, but fabled Estuary of Father Thames.

Battling the prodigies of weather and landscape associated with this geography, the seaman achieves the apogee of his profession, "that spirit of open defiance against the great waters of the earth which is the very soul of his calling." [XXXVIII} Here Conrad rings the full-throated bell of adventure, answering the hunger of his readers for vicarious participation in the fundamental human longing that underlies their own dreams of listening to the Sirens call and of sailing out beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

If the triumphant chapters on the winds blowing around and beyond the storied inland sea express the audacious, enterprising, cunning and collaborative sides of sea-going, the elemental joy in these images is later eclipsed by a different set of implications that have hovered just out of sight, but not out of mind, around the margins of Conrad's entire narrative. In "Stanza" XXXVI of his epic poem, Conrad describes his emotional coming of age as a sailor

and, perhaps, also as a writer who would one day be famous for the terror always lapping at and shrouding his tales of seeming bluff adventure. This involves a radical transition from "the generous ardor of youth," to a more chastened category of feeling, one that perceives "the true sea—the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death." This realization strips away all facile ideas of chummy personification or collaboration, gainsaying forever the possibility of taking a lover who "knows no bond of plighted troth." In this very particular moment of meaning Conrad rips off the veil from the brutal, impersonal truth:

> "He (the sea) cannot brook the slightest appearance of defiance, and has remained the irreconcilable enemy of ships and men ever since ships and men had the unheard of audacity to go afloat together in the face of his frown…If not always in the mood to smash, he is always stealthily ready for a drowning. The most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty." [XXXVI]

"Stealthily ready for a drowning" leaves us, like Lord Jim, nailed to the deck, not minding so much to die, as he says, if only it could be a simple, soft slip into sleep; "but I thought I would choke, before I got drowned." While listening to the frightful tale, Marlowe ponders that perhaps Jim could bear the idea of dying as long as it came as "a peaceful trance." It is imagination that brings the horror. And how can a sailor, an initiated sailor, not imagine?

The day of this revelation dawns, as Conrad explains, in beauty rather than dark portents:

> " A thin, silvery mist softened the calm and majestic splendor of light without shadows—seemed to render the sky less remote and the ocean less immense. It was one of those days, when the might of the sea appears indeed lovable, like the nature of a strong man in moments of quiet intimacy."

But as the atmosphere begins to clear during "that enchanting forenoon", what had been a mere "black speck" on the horizon at dawn starts to emerge as a recognizable, doomed shape: "A water-logged derelict, I think, sir…". Then a bit later, as the crew on Conrad's ship scans the westward sea, a sudden scream erupts from a man forward: "There's people on board of her, sir!" In that sound, "a voice never heard before in our ship," could be discerned the full horror

embodied in the image of the "low, jagged stump sticking up forward…" on the doomed vessel, "all that remained of her departed masts." As the young Conrad jumps into one of the boats lowered from his own ship to effect rescue, his captain spies an excitement in his face that elicits a sharp rebuke: "You look out as you come alongside that she doesn't take you down with her…What you're going for is to save life, not to drown your boat's crew for nothing…Give way for life." As they draw near, the full impact of the captain's worry comes into focus for the eager oarsmen. The "derelict" ship with its desperate cargo "hung on a hair above that abyss of waters which will not give up its dead till the Day of Judgment…It was a race of two ship's boats matched against Death for a prize of nine men's lives, and Death had a long start." The suck of such a ship going down could easily drag along the boats sent to save the crew.

As they draw aside the crippled hulk, Conrad has "one dismal glimpse" of the ruined deck and masts of the ship, as he "braced myself up to receive upon my breast the last man to leave her, the captain, who literally let himself fall into my arms." This image reads like a deposition from the cross, as the rescuers start to realize the full horror experienced by the "half-naked, tattered men" removed from the sinking ship. Weeks before, a hurricane had carried off their masts and the ship had sprung a leak. As water poured through the gaping hole, they were forced to pump for their lives, day and night, pitting the strings of their hearts against the force of nature seeking to devour them. Floating, starving, exhausted, they continued pumping for their lives, as one ship after another had passed them on the horizon without seeing them. " 'Then, 'as the dazed captain tells his tale 'monotonously' to his rescuers, " ' yesterday evening…just as the sun went down the men's hearts broke' " Listening to the tale of agony , Conrad is changed forever:

> "On that exquisite day of gently breathing peace and veiled sunshine perished my romantic love to what men's imagination had proclaimed the most august aspect of Nature…(as) the cynical indifference of the sea to the merits of human suffering and courage (was) laid bare…I saw the duplicity of the sea's most tender mood…In a moment…I had looked coolly at the life of my choice. Its illusions were gone, but its fascination remained. I had become a seaman at last."

In this moment of meaning, the reader is presented with an intractable recognition apparent throughout Conrad's "adventure" fiction: that it is not only the seaman's artistic practice, its sublime beauties and communal messages that have formed his character, but that the impersonal malevolence of the sea has left its equal, or, perhaps even stronger mark.

For Conrad, this perception of malice and malignity at the heart of things, was not simply a passing observation, but the ugly, even ghastly, underbelly of all being in the universe—a core part of impersonal nature as much as it was fundamental to the nature of mankind itself. This duplicity is no game. As is clear throughout his fiction, evil was an existential problem for him, one clearly noted in Chapter XXXVI that "revolted me." Elsewhere, he is quoted as saying, there is "No need to create a concept of supernatural evil; man is capable of every horror." Or, as he, also elsewhere states, it is not the existence of inherent evil that is the problem, but man's consciousness of it. Indeed, consciousness, like imagination, is man's particular dilemma, and certainly the worriment that Conrad plumbs throughout his writing. In his less damning, gray-tinged moments, the sea is not so much evil, or an image of evil, as it is unknowable, a force that both excites man's restlessness, and baffles his understanding. In this formulation, it is the motive, if abidingly impersonal, force of the world—without which there is simple immensity, nothingness.

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The sea has ever been used by writers, ancient and modern, as a metaphor for infinity, the implacable, the ineffable, of change, death, and consciousness. Conrad did not invent these uncanny aspects and allusions, or the likening of the sea to a mirror that reflects back not only its surface glitter of light, but also the terrifying image of the black, unknowable depths below the surface. As a title and a memoir, *The Mirror of the Sea*, speaks both to the visible and visionary components of the comparison. It is the simplest of metaphors, and the most naked of autobiographical confessions regarding what drew Conrad to his intersecting vocations, as sailor, as writer