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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# “To follow the dream and again to follow the dream”: Don Quixote, Almayer and Conrad as Multiple Reflections of the Dreamer

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Gustave Kahn, the French symbolist poet and critic, called Conrad a “powerful visionary”—“*un puissant visionnaire*” (Kahn 1). This appreciation did not pass unnoticed by the addressee; he cherished the comment and reiterated it to others several times. First, he mentioned it to his literary agent, J. B. Pinker (Karl and Davies, III, 1988: 413). Then he shared the comment with the general public (and thus immortalized it) in his apparently autobiographical work *A Personal Record* (111).<sup>1</sup> Yet Conrad, deliberately or not, modified the phrase when he referred to it. In a letter to Pinker, he used the expression “a powerful seer of visions.” Then, in his 1914 memoirs, he misquoted the French critic again in citing the original French phrase “*un puissant rêveur*”—“a powerful dreamer” (*Personal Record* 111). That seems to be the first prism through which Conrad would prefer to be perceived.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Conrad wished for his books to be placed in line with such captivating literary dreams as Cervantes’s *Don Quixote de la Mancha* or Dickens’s moving stories. He yearned to be perceived as part and parcel of the European literary tradition—not as a revolutionary of literary conventions, as, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The pseudo-autobiographical nuances of *A Personal Record* have been discussed by a number of critics, including, among others Kertzer (qtd. in Carabine III, 252–264); Knapp (191–201); Berthoud (1–22); McLauchlan (11–23); Najder (1996: xiv–xxi); White (241–250); Adamowicz-Pośpiech (2008: 87–97).

<sup>2</sup> Another prism, opposite in terms of the “visual effect,” would be the prism of “sobriety” (the term occurring in Conrad’s naval testimonials), which is discussed at the end of this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Conrad’s attitude toward Rousseau was discussed by Najder (1997: 139–152).

Critics have strongly questioned the veracity of Conrad's reminiscences, since they seem to be colored with the writer's own preferred vision of his sea years and literary career.<sup>4</sup> Najder uses the term "mythologization" (1966: xix) to characterize the memoirs, which he believes were mostly molded to fit the author's unique conception of the times gone by. Perhaps, then, the memoirs should best be treated as Conrad's "autobiofiction."

This, however, does not mean that Conrad's recollections are completely haphazard or disjointed.<sup>5</sup> Conversely: his time-shift technique seems pivotal to his personal record (Kertzer in Carabine, III, 255); moving back and forth in time is by no means arbitrary. As I argued elsewhere, the covert structure of the seemingly chaotic personal memories relies upon two unifying figures: Cervantes's Don Quixote and Conrad's own Almayer, the central character of *Almayer's Folly*, bind all the vignettes together. To Conrad, arguably, they are the supreme embodiments of human dreams, mirroring his own. In this chapter, I would like to expand that argument by adding to it the third unifying concept: the self-reflexive maxim "to follow the dream," which Stein offers Marlow in *Lord Jim* when answering his question of "how to be." Stein suggests that the only possible way to achieve fulfilment in life is to follow one's visions:

[Stein] spoke in a subdued tone, without looking at me [Marlow], one hand on each side of his face. "That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig—usque ad finem.*" (LJ 215)

The precept is doublefold since, on one hand, it advocates the pursuit of one's *idée fixe*, but on the other—the phrase *usque ad finem*<sup>6</sup> accentuates perseverance (which, not infrequently, is the other extreme of man's whims). The same tag was used by Conrad's uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, in a diametrically opposite context: the guardian meant to praise steadfastness, not whimsicality or proneness to follow one's caprices:

I have gone through a lot, I have suffered over my own fate and the fate of my family and my Nation, and perhaps just because of these sufferings and disappointments I have developed in myself this calm outlook on the problem of life, whose motto, I venture to say, was, is, and will be "usque ad finem." (Bobrowski in Najder 1964: 155)

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Carabine I, 342–344 and Stape & Najder xxxviii–xlii.

<sup>5</sup> See Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2009

<sup>6</sup> A proverbial Latin phrase recurring in the Bible (e.g.: Hebrews 3.14).

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marked

perhaps, nor such an unconditional <sup>meaning</sup> as  
all that. I will never <sup>bold</sup> say  
that neither on sea nor shore  
I have ever lost my sense of  
responsibility. There is <sup>no</sup> ~~no~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~one~~ <sup>of</sup>  
~~than~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> intoxication. Even  
before the most seductive <sup>reverses</sup>  
I have <sup>remained</sup> ~~been~~ <sup>been</sup> mindful of ~~that~~  
~~the~~ ~~importance~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~life~~  
sobriety of interior life, that asceticism  
of sentiment in which alone the  
form of truth such as one conceives  
it, such as one feels it <sup>can</sup>  
be rendered without shame. This  
but a mouldin, and indecent  
verity that comes out through  
the strength of wine. I have  
tried to be ~~the~~ a sober worker all my  
life — all my two lives. I did  
so from taste, no doubt, having an  
instinctive horror of losing my sense  
of full self-possession — but also  
from artistic conviction. Yet there  
are so many pitfalls on each side  
of the ~~marked~~ true path that

Fig. 1. A facsimile of the only extant page of the MS of A Personal Record (Ch. 6)

Borrowing his uncle's phrase, Conrad gives it an altogether new life—and the contradiction of such a gesture seems likewise ingrained in his “autobio-fictional” narrative's controlling images: Don Quixote, Almayer, and by extension Conrad, are faithful to their folly (knight errantry, palace and naval career respectively), but at the same time at least one of them—Conrad—strives hard to testify that he had proven himself and aims to demonstrate that he has been consistent in making his dreams come true.

By following the associative loops in parts V and VI of the *Personal Record*—only briefly referring to the other sections—it is possible to distinguish the controlling, if mostly covert, patterns ordering the narrative. The fifth sketch is built around the activities of reading and writing. As in the previous chapters, one may trace numerous parallels to Almayer and Don Quixote. Above all, the predilection “for doing nothing” (PR 90), which Conrad accentuates, seems to faithfully mirror that shared by both fictional characters. That “doing nothing” stands for reading is obvious from the context; in all three cases, the innumerable periods of doldrums and languor, the spells of meditation upon oneself and the nature of the universe are the circumstances propitious for the commencement of writing:

To survey with wonder the changes of one's own self is a fascinating pursuit for *idle hours*. The field is so wide, the surprises so varied, the subject so full of unprofitable but curious hints as to the work of unseen forces that one does not weary easily of it . . . The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all . . . I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular. (PR 92)

Once again, the aura of idleness, irrationality, impracticality imbues this section of the *Personal Record*.<sup>7</sup> Those moments of reflection (“doing nothing”) constituted the artistic foundation of Conrad's creative potential. The Spanish knight, having pored over hundreds of chivalric romances, resolves to combat dragons and evil giants or rescue damsels in distress. Conrad, by analogy, after having read a plethora of books in Polish, French and English, decides to take up a pen. The similarity is rounded up by the allusion to the power of the written word; the pen is like the sword—“the cold steel of our days” (PR 90). Conrad refers to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's

<sup>7</sup> Cf. section 1 of the *Personal Record*; Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2009.



Fig. 2. A facsimile of an illustration by Gustave Doré.  
Published in: *Masterpieces from the Works of Gustave Doré*.  
(New York: Cassell & Company, Ltd., 1887).

famous aphorism “The pen is mightier than the sword” used in a play entitled *Richelieu* (Stape and Najder 218).<sup>8</sup> Whereas Don Quixote fought with a sword, Conrad employed a pen to follow his dreams and to make his visions come to life.

Another parallel that the writer implies derives from his working mode. Like Don Quixote, who traversed the earth in search of Brabantia and who was immersed in the world of his own images and ideas, Conrad was engrossed in the fictitious realm of his own. The scenes of the author’s parleying with his protagonists permeate several sections.<sup>9</sup> Usually, his “interlocutors” are characters from his first book (Nina and Almayer), but in Part V Conrad portrays himself against the backdrop of Costaguana. The stress falls upon the topography of this seaboard state. The veil is partly removed and the readers are, for a brief moment, admitted to the artist’s hermitage and may observe the work in progress:

[F]or twenty months, neglecting the common joys of life that fall to the lot of the humblest on this earth, I had, like the prophet of old, “wrestled with the Lord” for my creation, for the headlands of the coast, for the darkness of the Placid Gulf, the light on the snows, the clouds on the sky, and for the breath of life that had to be blown into the shapes of men and women. . . (PR 98)

Conrad depicts the novelist as God creating his own worlds. The effort of the artist is twofold in character. First, he has to invent a unique universe (he “wrestles with the Lord” for *his* creation) and then to inject life and intensity into it. Yet, like in the case of the knight of La Mancha, nobody can share his book-born visions: Conrad enters his literary world on his own and no one is permitted to intrude. The consequences of a blatant, if unintentional, invasion, are vividly illustrated by the example of the general’s daughter’s unexpected visit:

The whole world of Costaguana . . . men, women headlands, houses, mountains, town, *campo*, (there was not a single brick, stone or grain of sand of its soil I had not placed in position with my own hands), all the history, geography, politics, finance; the wealth of Charles Gould’s silver mine, and the splendour of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores, whose name, cried out in the night (Dr. Monygham heard it pass over his head—in Linda Viola’s voice), dominated even after death the dark gulf. . . —all that had come down crashing about my ears. I felt I could never pick up the pieces—and in that very moment I was saying, “Won’t you sit down?” (PR 100)

<sup>8</sup> The phrase appears in the line: “beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword” (act II, scene ii).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Part I and Part IV of *A Personal Record*.

"The pen is mightier than the sword"



Fig. 3. A facsimile of the portrait of Cardinal Richelieu drawn by H. A. Ogdén.  
Published as an illustration to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Richelieu; Or Conspiracy*.  
(New York: PF Collier, 1892), p. 138.



The essential analogy between the Spanish *hidalgo* and Conrad is aptly encapsulated in the writer's confession: "I love letters" (PR 101). And it is such a passion that makes the artist (like Don Quixote) forget about the real world: Conrad, lost in letters, admits to not being "able to remember when it was that [he] dressed [him]self last, and how" (PR 101). Instead, he feels like "a Costaguana *lepero* after a day's fighting in the streets, rumped all over and disheveled down to [his] very heels" (PR 101). The writer, dragged out of his own imaginings, cannot communicate properly with the people from outside: he is still partly immersed in his visions (PR 101).

In chapter VI all the previously mentioned leitmotifs come together. Thus, we can read about the folly of mankind (PR 107, 121), the love of literature (PR 108) and observe again the protean dress-ups of Don Quixote's and Almayer's. It is in this part of autofiction that the readers may most clearly discern Conrad's concerted efforts to combine two mutually exclusive approaches to life: the "follow the dream" attitude—and sober performance of one's duties.

The fascination with books precipitated Don Quixote's "madness," while the reading habit in Conrad's case fostered his desire to go to sea (and—in consequence—his inclination to write). Conrad emphasized many a time that books constituted an integral part of his life (PR 73) and indeed he had been characterized as a "reading boy" by his relatives. Therefore, when he voiced his wish to go to sea, he was called "an incorrigible Don Quixote" (PR 110), and his aspiration was dubbed a "fantastic caprice," "stupid obstinacy" (PR 120), "folly" (PR 121), or outright madness; it is not incidentally that the writer notes down the following observation: "I was looked upon as partly insane" (PR 122).<sup>10</sup> Yet in the penultimate section, Conrad deliberately juxtaposes those opinions with testimonials he had received, to which he often refers simply as "pages":<sup>11</sup>

I have a small handful of these sea appreciations, signed by various masters, yellowing slowly in my writing-table . . . *rustling* under my reverent touch . . . Strange! It seems that it is for these few bits of paper, headed by the names of a few ships and signed the names of a few Scots and English shipmasters, that I have faced the astonished indignations, the mockeries and the reproaches of a sort hard to bear for a boy of fifteen . . . (PR 110)

<sup>10</sup> The comparison of Conrad's decision to go to sea and Don Quixote's famous exploits occurs already in section II, but there Conrad does not offer any evidence to support the claim that his choice was right (Adamowicz-Pośpiech 2009).

<sup>11</sup> It is then a telling detail that Conrad had been planning to entitle his memoirs *The Years and the Pages* (Karl and Davies, IV, 1990: 139).

This paragraph introduces a major twist to the interpretation of the leit-motifs and metaphors employed in previous sections of the *Personal Record*. Although his desire to become a sailor, demoted to madness, was perceived as a book-born fantasy, he offers written and conclusive proof that the boyish dreams coming true may discredit the arbitrary value of authoritarian opinions. The papers *rustle*—this is the key word conjoining past and present: the childish dreams of sea voyages, the pages of sea tales with the manly certificates confirming their holder's professional skills:

They *rustle*,<sup>12</sup> those bits of paper—some dozen of them in all. In that faint, ghostly sound there live the memories of twenty years, the voices of rough men now no more, the strong voice of the everlasting winds . . . the murmur of the great sea, which must have somehow reached my inland cradle and entered my unconscious ear . . . (PR 110)

This opposition illuminates the overt similarity as well as covert difference with Don Quixote and sheds new light on the former sections of the narrative. The basic difference was Conrad's perseverance in following his dream and his final success materialized in his Master Certificate (PR 120).<sup>13</sup>

I do not know whether I have been a good seaman, but I know I have been a very faithful one. And after all there is that handful of "characters" from various ships to prove that all these years have not been altogether a dream. There they are, brief and monotonous in tone, but as suggestive bits of writing to me as any inspired *page* to be found in literature. (PR 110)<sup>14</sup>

Once again, a strange twist occurs. Although they are mere certificates confirming Conrad's service aboard various ships, yet they possess for their owner the quality of literature. This aspect is accentuated by the poetic lines preceding the quoted passage: "the murmur of the great sea, which must have somehow reached my inland cradle and entered my unconscious ear, like that formula of Mohammedan faith the Mussulman father whispers into the ear of his new-born infant, making him one of the faithful almost with his first breath" (PR 110). However, the paragraph ends with the revelation of the contents of those pages which is anything but literary: "strictly sober" (PR 111).

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the word "rustle" has been used before in connection with some literary pages written by Conrad (PR 99). Thus it is yet another (semantic) link between those two opposing strands.

<sup>13</sup> Yet, we must bear in mind that it is Conrad's own, biased vision of his naval career. It is well known, for instance, that Conrad once failed his examination for his Master Certificate. Cf.: van Marle (99–109).

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis mine.

To conclude, we might venture to say that Conrad attempted to construct his reminiscences along the visionary—realist opposition. The distinctive tropes of Don Quixote, Almayer and the poetic motto “to follow the dream” frame the meandering personal notes into a self-reflective *mise-en-abyme*. And even though one may discern a number of similarities between Conrad and the literary characters hovering over his recollections as well as hidden, if fundamental, differences, between them, it is not the overt and covert similarities/discrepancies that prove helpful in one’s search for Conrad’s fleeting reflection. On the contrary, if one chooses to follow Conrad in perceiving man as an amalgam, a paradox, a tangle of motivations and desires—a view close to the writer’s perception of humanity mirrored in his characters of Almayer and Charles Gould, Willems and Jim—those contradictions may offer an insight into the complexity of Conrad “autobiofiction” and its “protagonist.” Inexplicable, and often inexpressible, as such contradictions prove, Conrad, nevertheless, strove to express some of them and chose to explicate none.

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