

The Rover and Conrad's Returns

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Ever since I undertook the research for my first book, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity*, I have been intrigued by Conrad's late novels as a sustained series of experiments with the form of the novel.¹ In the case of *The Rover*, the starting point is Conrad's accurate assessment of it as 'a feat of artistic brevity'.² He tells Garnett: 'This is perhaps my only work in which brevity was a conscious aim . . . brevity ab initio, in the very conception, in the very manner of thinking about the people and the events' (CL 8, 237). This 'feat of artistic brevity' is evidenced, first of all, in the economic handling of the taut, very tight narrative. One of the early appreciators of *The Rover*, Gary Geddes, has rightly praised the novel for the way in which the final pages are 'the culmination of a movement that builds from the earliest descriptions of character and place'.³

As I have noted elsewhere, the narrative is propelled through a series of overlapping mysteries: the secrets relating to Peyrol's past; the enigma of Arlette's behaviour; the puzzle of the English ship's mission in sending a boat ashore; the mystery of Symon's disappearance; and the uncertainties around Réal's personal and professional motives.⁴ These various mysteries are produced by a further development of a technique used in *Victory*, that of multiple focalisations: in this case, all the characters are the possessors of secrets, and the narrative proceeds through the careful control of point of view and the skilful shifting of narrative perspective.⁵ As a result, the reader watches the revelation of these various secrets and observes the concatenation of events as these

different narratives intersect. In addition, because of these shifting perspectives, the reader generally knows more than the characters and can see the misunderstandings and misreadings made by individual characters. Thus, to take two minor examples, Bolt can ‘see no reason’ why Arlette’s parents shouldn’t still be living at Escampobar (*Rov*, 55) ten years after his last visit, or, later, when Scevola appears on board Peyrol’s tartane, with his pitchfork, looking for Lieutenant Réal, Symons assumes that he is the object of Scevola’s search: ‘Whom could that man be after but him, himself?’ (*Rov*, 196).⁶

A related narrative device is something that Conrad had used in his first novel, where something inexplicable from one narrative perspective is explained later through another. (Indeed, in *Almayer’s Folly*, this is so pervasive as to produce what Cedric Watts has called a ‘covert plot’.)⁷ In Chapter 11 of *The Rover*, for example, Arlette has entered Réal’s empty room at the farm and is lying on his bed: ‘In that position, without hearing the slightest sound, she saw the door handle move down as far as it would go’ (*Rov*, 164). She surmises that ‘It must have been Scevola’ (*Rov*, 165). The accuracy of this surmise is confirmed in Chapter 12, when we learn, from Scevola’s perspective, that he had tried ‘to open the lieutenant’s door, in order to find out whether Réal was in the room’ (*Rov*, 182). More important than this confirmation, however, is the conclusion Scevola draws from this ‘discovery that she made herself at home like this in the lieutenant’s room’. He asks himself: ‘have I waited all those years to see that corrupt creature go off infamously with a *ci-devant*, with a conspiring aristocrat?’ (*Rov*, 182, 183).

In Chapter 10 of *The Rover*, we have a variant of this narrative device, when we are told of something that Peyrol *fails to see* from his position at the look-out: ‘Had he spared a moment for a glance inland he might have caught a whisk of a black skirt, the gleam of a white fichu—Arlette running down the faint track leading from Escampobar to the village’ (*Rov*, 144). We have to wait until the end of the chapter to discover why

Arlette was going to the village, and what we are then given is Arlette's confession, and the fuller revelation of events in Toulon during the massacre.

Related to this narrative device of shifting perspectives is the novel's emphasis on watching, interpreting and problem-solving. Peyrol and Réal, for example, spend much of their time at the 'lookout' watching the English ship, the *Amelia*, which is itself watching the French coast as part of the British blockade. The domestic life of Escampobar is similarly characterised by a complex system of surveillance: Réal watches Arlette and Peyrol; Peyrol watches Réal and Arlette; Catherine watches over Arlette; Arlette watches over Réal; and Scevola maintains his paranoid revolutionary vigilance. Meanwhile, as I have suggested, as the narrative perspective and focalisation changes, the reader's privileged position grants insights into secrets, mysteries and misinterpretations. This privileged position of the reader is foregrounded, early on, by the radical shift in perspective between Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 ends with Réal looking at the *Amelia* through his pocket-glass and his murmured comment: 'I can see the very epaulettes of the officers on the quarter-deck' (*Rov*, 51). The next chapter begins with Captain Vincent on board the *Amelia* looking towards the shore. This device is the equivalent of the cinematic shot / counter-shot or shot / reverse shot.

Conrad told his friend, John Galsworthy, that he had 'wanted for a long time to do a seaman's "return"; the story of Peyrol 'seemed a possible peg to hang it on' (22 Feb 1924 [*CL* 8, 318]). In what follows, I want to consider *The Rover* in relation to the idea of 'the return'. I will start with the idea of the return as a homecoming, and with Conrad's accounts of his own returns home, but I will want to consider other forms of return as well in the course of the essay.

Poland Revisited (1)

Conrad left Poland on 13 October 1874, when he was sixteen, for

Marseilles. It was what he later described, in *A Personal Record*, as making ‘a, so to speak, standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations’ (*APR*, 121).⁸ At the start of 1890, he made his first visit to Poland for sixteen years. He travelled via Brussels where he met Marguerite Poradowska, his cousin’s widow, and had an interview for a job in the Congo—and we know how that story worked out. He then spent 10 weeks in Poland, arriving back in Brussels at the end of April. During these ten weeks, he spent two days in Warsaw, two days in Lublin (visiting his relations, Aniela and Karol Zagórski), and then he travelled by sleigh from Kalinówka railway station to his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski’s estates at Kazimierówka.⁹ Almost immediately, the family left for Nowochwastów, the estate belonging to his uncle’s parents-in-law. Although the family spent several days there, most of Conrad’s visit was actually spent at his uncle’s estates at Kazimierówka, although you wouldn’t know this from the account he gave later—as Najder noted (*A Life*, 140) and as I will show in a moment. Conrad made a second visit to Poland—‘or more precisely Ukraine’ (as Conrad himself puts it [*APR*, 19])—in August 1893—to visit his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, at Kazimierówka. During both these visits he was working on his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*. It was nineteen years before he visited Poland again.

On 25 July 1914, Conrad and his family set off for Cracow via Hamburg and Berlin. On 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and on 1 August Germany declared war on Russia. The Conrad family’s sight-seeing in Cracow was interrupted by the appearance of ‘the men of the *Landwehr* corps, that passed through Cracow to reinforce the Austrian army in Eastern Galicia’ (*NLL*, 157).¹⁰ With the mobilization of Austrian forces, and to avoid the risk of being caught in a battle zone if they tried to return home through Germany, the Conrads changed their plans and headed south to the unmilitarized territory of Zakopane (*CL* 5, 408-09). There they could stay with Conrad’s cousin, Aniela Zagórska. As I noted in my critical biography *Joseph Conrad*, Conrad had found the

war-preparations in Cracow intellectually stimulating, and, to begin with, he also enjoyed the relaxed life of Zakopane—the conversations in cafes and the chance to catch up with contemporary Polish literature.¹¹ I want to consider now the account he gives of those return visits—in *A Personal Record* and the essay 'Poland Revisited'—in order to set up certain ideas for my discussion of *The Rover*.

Poland Revisited (2)

Conrad's account of his earlier return to Poland in *A Personal Record* presents a compacted version of his 1890 return visit. Thus, he begins by describing two days spent in Warsaw with 'a friend of my childhood'; going to dinner with this friend 'in a sporting club'; and the conversation of the 'select little party with which he made me dine', a conversation which was 'extremely animated and embraced most subjects under heaven, from big-game shooting in Africa to the last poem published in a very modernist review' (*APR*, 19). Then he jumps to a later stage of that trip: he skips over his railway journey 'towards the Government of Kiev' to focus on an overnight stay in an inn, and then an eight-mile drive to the country-house at Kazimierówka where his uncle was staying. He describes his encounter at the inn with the person his uncle had sent to meet him—and the anxieties at the receiving end about this returning member of the family: 'the good fellow had remained in doubt of our understanding each other. He imagined I would talk to him in some foreign language' (*APR*, 20), Conrad, of course, 'greeted him in Polish' (*APR*, 20). The focus now shifts to Conrad's experience of returning after an extended absence. First of all, there is the familiar landscape and 'certain villages whose names came with an extremely familiar sound to my ears' (*APR*, 21). Then there are the people: the coachman, Joseph, for example, turns out to be 'the son of that Joseph . . . who used to drive the Captain's late grandmother'. As it happens, Conrad remembers perfectly 'the trusty Joseph who used to drive my grandmother': 'Why! he it was

who let me hold the reins for the first time in my life and allowed me to play with the great four-in-hand whip outside the doors of the coach-house' (*APR*, 21). This return is a return to memories of long-dead relations, long-dead servants, and to his own childhood. No wonder that, when he settled into the sledge, 'I had a delightful boyish feeling of coming home from school when he muffled me up . . . in an enormous bear-skin travelling-coat and took his seat protectively by my side' (*APR*, 21).

Conrad then returns to that familiar landscape and the memories it prompts as he describes seeing again 'the sun setting on the plains as I saw it in the travels of my childhood' (*APR*, 22). He then more precisely notes that it was 'twenty-three years since I had seen the sun set over that land' (*APR*, 22), taking us from his return visit to Nowochwastów in 1890 back to 1866, when Conrad had spent the summer there with his maternal grandmother, Teofila Bobrowska. What he next recalls, however, is an even earlier visit to Nowochwastów, in 1863, when his mother was allowed to visit her relatives there and took him with her: 'I seem to remember my mother looking on from a colonnade in front of the dining-room windows as I was lifted upon the pony, held, for all I know, by the very Joseph—the groom attached specially to my grandmother's service' (*APR*, 23). These are necessarily tentative memories, given that Conrad was only 6 at the time: hence 'I seem to remember' and 'for all I know'. As he says, 'this is also the year in which I first begin to remember my mother with more distinctness' (*APR*, 23-24). What is more important, however, is what he leaves unsaid. As he notes, another aspect of his child's consciousness is that he 'did not understand the tragic significance of it all at the time' (*APR*, 24): his mother was given special leave from exile and there was this 'great gathering of all the relations' because she was dying. If this was 'the year in which I first begin to remember my mother with more distinctness', it was also the last year of her life. Thus, when he recalls this visit to Nowochwastów as 'the very happiest period

of my existence', there is a darkness framing the memory. Similarly, his happy memory of his cousin, 'a delightful, quick-tempered little girl, some months younger than myself' (*APR*, 24) is immediately darkened with the addition that her life, 'lovingly watched over, as if she were a royal princess, came to an end with her fifteenth year' (*APR*, 24). He goes on: 'There were other children too, many of whom are dead now', and, of course, 'over all this hung the oppressive shadow of the great Russian Empire' (*APR*, 24).

As this chapter of *A Personal Record* makes clear, the return to Poland for Conrad is not simply the bitter-sweet return to a familiar landscape with which he had lost contact: 'beyond the village in the limitless blackness of a winter's night there lay the great unfenced fields—not a flat and severe plain, but a kindly, bread-giving land of low, rounded ridges, all white now, with the black patches of timber nestling in the hollows' (*APR*, 26). Conrad does not even need to see the landscape to know what lies 'beyond the village'. There is also the uncanny sense of familiarity and distance in relation to the people he meets: 'his guileless physiognomy of the open peasant type seemed strangely familiar . . . he might have been a descendant, a son or even a grandson, of the servants whose friendly faces had been familiar to me in my early childhood' (*APR*, 27). As with the coachman, the servant's face looks familiar, but, at best, he is a descendant of the servants Conrad knew as a child: there is no direct or immediate bond between them.

The return home also, obviously, involves an engagement with his own family—and, more specifically, with the family dead. Thus, the writing table with which Conrad is provided prompts various memories. His uncle tells him: 'Forty years ago your mother used to write at this very table' (*APR*, 27). More than that, the table was a present to Ewa and her sister from their Uncle Nicholas. This leads Conrad's uncle to the story of the death of his younger sister and to the reflection: 'I have survived five brothers and two sisters, and many of my contemporaries; I

have outlived my wife and daughter, too—and from all those who have had some knowledge at least of these old times, you alone are left’ (*APR*, 30). The return home for Conrad not only prompts memories that enwrap him in these thoughts of the dead, but it also leaves him with this sense of his own existential isolation as the last survivor of this family group.

Poland Revisited (3)

In this third part of the essay I want to focus on Conrad’s essay, ‘Poland Revisited’, his account of his 1914 journey with his family. Conrad begins the second paragraph of that essay by recalling his trip to Sheffield, in June 1914, for his son Borys’s university entrance examination. He describes himself as ‘a stranger in a strange city’ (*NLL*, 141), echoing Moses’ words in Exodus 2.22, but he also records that he did not feel lonely because of the friend (Richard Curle) who had accompanied him there ‘out of pure kindness’ (*NLL*, 141). The journey to Poland, which includes London’s Liverpool Street Station as one of its early stages, takes him back to an earlier arrival at that station, to the time when he was, indeed, ‘a stranger in a strange city’. When he first visited London, he says: ‘No explorer could have been more lonely. I did not know a single soul of all these millions that all around me peopled the mysterious distances of the streets’ (*NLL*, 150-151). At the outset, he regards the return to Poland as a ‘test of the reality’ of his past (*NLL*, 146). He describes the ‘voyage in space’ as ‘a journey in time’ (*NLL*, 149). This is combined with the hope that his sons will feel some ‘fibre’ of responsiveness ‘to the memories of that corner of the earth where my own boyhood had received its earliest independent impressions’ (*NLL*, 146).

However, time-travelling is not so straight-forward, and it is not so much a ‘test of reality’ as a hauntology that characterises his experiences of this return. Thus, on that first night in Cracow: ‘I felt so much like a ghost that the discovery that I could remember such material things as the right turn to take and the general direction of the street gave me a moment

of wistful surprise' (*NLL*, 164). In addition, as he looks up ulica Floriańska towards the Florian Gate, 'there issued ... a small boy of eleven, wending his way, not very fast, to a preparatory school for day-pupils' (*NLL*, 167). The insubstantial Conrad produces from his memory this ghostly little figure along with memories of his father's last illness and funeral. Conrad concludes this episode with the thought: 'It seemed to me that if I remained longer there in that narrow street I should become the helpless prey of the Shadows I had called up. They were crowding upon me, enigmatic and insistent' (*NLL*, 169-170). For a moment, perhaps drawing on a memory from his schooldays, Conrad is Odysseus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, the *Nekyia*, when the shades of the dead surge around Odysseus—although, in Conrad's case, one of those figures is not precisely dead, but rather the memory of his former self. Thus different kinds of ghostliness are present in this return: his sense of his own ghostliness as a revenant, the ghostliness of that remembered earlier self, and the ghosts of his Polish dead.

As I mentioned earlier, Conrad begins the essay by noting how the loneliness of being 'a stranger in a strange city' was prevented by the kindness of the friend who accompanied him to Sheffield. In Book 10 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is given a magical herb, moly, to protect him against the magic of Circe; Conrad has his equivalent for his own journey of homecoming: he mentions how he carried off with him the vision of 'this tiny fragment of Great Britain; a few fields, a wooded rise; a clump of trees or two, with a short stretch of road . . . all this had a very strong hold on me as the embodiment of a beneficent and gentle spirit' (*NLL*, 148). Like Peyrol, Conrad is conscious of different affiliations, different modes of cultural belonging. In this case, Conrad notes how the English landscape of Kent was dear to him 'not as an inheritance, but as an acquisition' (*NLL*, 148). He distinguishes between that which we inherit, that which we are born into, and that which we acquire 'by love, which is a sort of surrender' (*NLL*, 148). That is, he distinguishes between the

culture we are born into and whatever we acquire voluntarily through subsequent affiliations. In Conrad's case, those affiliations were with France and England, two other cultures within which he had lived, and with which he had forged strong bonds. I would suggest, in this light, that Conrad's essay performs one version of transcultural belonging—a condition that he was to explore further in *The Rover*.¹²

The rover's return: 'not a bad Frenchman'

As I mentioned at the start, *The Rover* is conceived of by Conrad as 'a seaman's return' to his country of origin. The opening chapters explore some of the paradoxes of this homecoming, after a lifetime's absence, when Peyrol experiences himself as 'a stranger to his native country' (*Rov*, 2). That word 'stranger' repays a little pressure. To begin with, what he has become through a lifetime's absence makes him a stranger in this place. On the one hand, the life he has lived abroad is unknown and unknowable to the inhabitants of his native country; on the other hand, that life abroad has made him different from those who have stayed. Thus, after various encounters with his countrymen, like other exiles or émigrés, he is haunted by the idea of who he might have been if he had stayed at home rather than living abroad. Secondly, though the places he passes through are 'well-known to him from his boyhood's days', he has an uncanny sense of 'strange familiarity' (*Rov*, 6). These places which are familiar from his childhood have been unseen by him for forty years or more. As a result, as he proceeds he comes to feel that 'his native country was more foreign to him than the shores of the Mozambique Channel, the coral strands of India, the forests of Madagascar' (*Rov*, 15). Because of the life he has led, the exotic has become the familiar, and the familiar has become strange. Despite the familiar topography and familiar landscape, he experiences himself as 'more of a stranger' in his native land 'than anywhere else in the world' (*Rov*, 35). Thirdly, as he realises, it is not just that he feels estranged from his native place, but the natives

regard him as a stranger, too. Nevertheless, he remains conscious that 'he belonged there, to this land' (*Rov*, 96).

At the start of the novel, then, there is not much sense of transcultural belonging but rather of estrangement. The French Revolution is the mark of this cultural estrangement, this separation from the past. Indeed, I would suggest that the fact of the Revolution figures the sense of non-belonging as traumatic. As Peyrol thinks at one point, 'The Revolution had made a clean cut across the consistency of his wild life' (*Rov*, 103). The successive stages of the French Revolution and of Napoleon's subsequent career had made a series of clean cuts across French society and culture.

The final chapters of the novel, however, produce a very different situation, where the focus is on transcultural belonging rather than estrangement. The end of the novel involves a complicated negotiation between Peyrol's past and his present, which is expressed through a negotiation between his inherited sense of loyalty to France and his acquired appreciation of England. Thus, Peyrol's plot, designed to mislead the English, is built on his positive evaluation of the good seamanship of Captain Vincent: he leaves signs, in his manoeuvring of the tartane, that he knows he can rely upon the English captain to interpret in certain ways 'because he is a first-rate seaman' (*Rov*, 266). Meanwhile, the captain, for his part, is explicitly appreciative of Peyrol's 'skilful seamanship' (*Rov*, 261) in his handling of the tartane as it apparently seeks to escape from the pursuing corvette. Their mutual professional appreciation overrides the context of national hostilities. The craft of the sea forms a transnational bond between them. Furthermore, this appreciation goes beyond respect for Peyrol as an individual. Thus, Captain Vincent tells his lieutenant: 'It is very difficult to outmanoeuvre a Frenchman' (*Rov*, 265), and we are reminded that the *Amelia*, which Vincent commands, performs so well because it is actually 'French-built'. As he tells Admiral Nelson: 'They are great shipbuilders' (*Rov*, 275).

Although the historical naval narrative ends with the defeat of the French at Trafalgar (*Rov*, 281), Conrad presents, in this novel, an episode in which the French outwit the English, and he gives the leading role to an English ship built in France and to a self-sacrificing Frenchman who was initially estranged from his native land. As Conrad well-knew, a lifetime spent abroad could be seen as a betrayal by those who have stayed at home. In the figure of Peyrol, as we have seen, he negotiates the problematic aspects of a belated ‘homecoming’. In the end, Peyrol, whose adult life has taken place overseas, sacrifices himself in an attempt to further the French cause, and, in doing so, earns the respect of the young Lieutenant Réal, with whom he has had an uneasy relationship. Indeed, he comes to be recognised by him as ‘not a bad Frenchman’ (*Rov*, 286). At the same time, at the end of this episode, Peyrol dies with ‘the familiar English word’, ‘Steady!’, in his ear (*Rov*, 269). This familiar word is an index of that life lived abroad: it brings with it, for Peyrol, memories of that other life, and it marks, for us, his emotional attachment to particular Englishmen. Peyrol also dies with Vincent’s judgement that he had shown ‘a more than common devotion to duty’ (*Rov*, 277). In a further imbrication, the English captain can appreciate the Frenchman’s performance of his duty towards France. In his death, Peyrol’s patriotic duty to the country of his birth and his affiliation to the English that has come to him ‘not as an inheritance, but as an acquisition’ (*NLL*, 148) through his years of adult service are brought together. Something similar happens with the formal ceremony devised by Vincent: it takes place at ‘about sunset, which is the time of burials at sea’ (*Rov*, 279), when a ‘French ensign’ is attached to the tartane so that they ‘go down with their colours flying’ (*Rov*, 280). Vincent does not know of Peyrol’s links with the English, but this Englishman’s sympathetic appreciation of Peyrol’s service to France is another kind of transnational, transcultural moment. What I am suggesting then is that, where the opening chapters foregrounded a sense of Peyrol’s cultural estrangement, this conclusion

offers a complex, imbricated sense of transcultural belonging: Peyrol's final identification as 'not a bad Frenchman' also acknowledges and contains other cultural loyalties and affiliations.

Political returns

In this section I want to say something about the political context of the events of *The Rover*. The novel begins with the arrival of Jean Peyrol at the port of Toulon to deliver a captured English ship to the Port Office. He has been away for 45 years and much has changed in his absence. It is 1796: England and France are at war, and the French Revolution has changed the nature of France. As Peyrol surveys the quay, he 'noted particularly a good many men in red caps and said to himself "Here they are"' (*Rov*, 2). These 'red caps' are the Phrygian caps (or Liberty caps) worn by French revolutionists. Peyrol had encountered men 'professing sans-culottes principles' among the crews of ships bringing 'the tricolour into the seas of the east': 'But now he was beholding the shore breed. Those who had made the Revolution safe' (*Rov*, 2). Accordingly, 'Citoyen Peyrol' delivers the prize-ship to the authorities and presents the 'ship's papers and his own' to 'the proper officials' (*Rov*, 3). He then 'vanished from Toulon' that same evening (*Rov*, 5) and took up residence at Escampobar Farm in the Giens peninsula.

Chapters 2-4 describe Peyrol moving into the Escampobar Farm to join the strange household of the 'blood-drinker' Scevola, who made himself the master there after the siege of Toulon, the aged Catherine, and her young niece, Arlette. At the start of Chapter 4, there is a time-jump of eight years from 1796 to 1804. These years cover an important turning point in the French Revolution. In 1789, in the context of anxieties about the maintenance of food supplies, the feudal regime had been abolished, and the National Constituent Assembly took control, establishing a new administrative system for the country and a form of parliamentary monarchy. In 1792, after a counter-revolutionary invasion by Austria and

Prussia, the new National Convention abolished the monarchy and established a republic. In November 1795, after the dissolution of the National Convention, the French Directory had taken control: this was a five-member committee which held power until November 1799. That period, from 1795 to 1799, marked, effectively, the last four years of the French Revolution, and, during this period, the Directory worked to end the worst excesses of the Jacobin Reign of Terror of 1793-1794: mass executions stopped; and there was a relaxation of measures against priests and royalists. In November 1799, Napoleon returned from Egypt and staged a *coup-d'état*, abolishing the Directorate and replacing it with the Consulate. In Conrad's words, these were 'the years of political changes ending with the proclamation of Napoleon as Consul for life' (*Rov*, 38). Initially there were three consuls, each with a ten-year tenure. However, in August 1802, Napoleon was proclaimed 'Consul for Life' after a referendum. In May 1804, the Senate passed a bill establishing a French Empire and Napoleon as emperor: he was formally crowned as Emperor of the French in December of that year. During this eight-year period, between Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, then, the Revolution has been over-turned, and Napoleon has consolidated his one-man government by using many of the techniques of the Ancien-Regime. As Réal observes: 'the god of the aristocrats is coming back again and it looks as if he were bringing an emperor along with him' (*Rov*, 77).

The bulk of the novel accordingly takes place in a very different political atmosphere from that of the opening chapter, and this is most obvious from the changed status of Scevola. Scevola has clearly derived his *nom de guerre* from Gaius Mucius Scaevola, a Roman youth famous for his bravery. When he was captured by the Clusian king, Lars Porsena, in the war between Rome and the Etruscan city of Clusium, Gaius Mucius declared he was as ready to die as to kill, and thrust his right hand into a fire. Hence his honorific cognomen: scaevola (left-handed). Conrad's Scevola, however, is a man of a very different mettle. When he first

appears, in Chapter 3, he is described as 'ex-orator in the sections, leader of red-capped mobs, hunter of the ci-devants and priests, purveyor of the guillotine, in short a blood-drinker' (*Rov*, 26). This description already suggests that his career has passed its peak, and, when he first talks with Peyrol, this impression is confirmed. His blood-thirsty rhetoric — 'treachery stalks in the land, it comes up out of the ground, it sits at our hearthstones, lurks in the bosom of the representatives of the people, of our fathers, of our brothers . . . there has not been enough killing'—is undermined when, at the end of this tirade, his voice 'died in his throat as though he had suddenly lost confidence in himself' (*Rov*, 27). Later, we discover how misleading that roll of descriptors was: 'leader of red-capped mobs, hunter of the ci-devants' and so on. As Arlette observes later, 'He is a poor creature . . . They call him "blood-drinker" . . . All the time he was afraid of his own shadow' (*Rov*, 151). In the letter to Garnett that I quoted from at the start, Conrad describes Scevola as 'a pathological case more than anything else': 'he was never formidable except as a creature of mob psychology. Away from the mob he is just a weak-minded creature' (*CL* 8, 238). Now that Napoleon has been installed as consul, and the political tide has turned, Scevola haunts the farm 'like a lost soul in the light of day' (*Rov*, 40). The political reversal (and the reversal in his position) is marked most clearly when he has to be rescued from an armed mob of local people by the newly-restored priest (*Rov*, 41-42).

The other important historical event behind *The Rover* is the siege of Toulon. This took place between 29 August and 19 December 1793. It involved Royalist rebels in Toulon, supported by English and Spanish forces. The Royalist rebels hoisted the royal flag (the fleur-de-lys) over the city, and handed Toulon over to the British Navy (under the command of Vice-Admiral Hood) and a mixed force of British, Spanish and émigré French troops. Toulon had considerable strategic importance: it was a key naval arsenal and the base for the French navy, one third of which the

British seized as a result of this Royalist betrayal. The subsequent siege was the first engagement of the British Royal Navy with the French Revolution. From the French side, young Napoleon was in charge of the artillery bombardment and took part in the assault on Toulon: he was credited with forcing the city to capitulate. The evacuation of Toulon that followed involved British ships taking off some 7,000, 14,000 or 15, 000 Royalist refugees (depending on sources), who fled to the waterfront when it was clear that the city would fall to the Republicans. When the Republican troops entered the city on 19 December, there was a bloody suppression of the Royalists with several hundred shot or bayoneted. It is these events that are recalled fragmentarily in *The Rover*.

In Chapter 2, for example, in Peyrol's conversation with 'the lonely boatman of the Lagoon of Pesquiers' (*Rov*, 17), who directs him to Escampobar, the boatman recalls how, three years earlier, the English 'swarmed about this coast in their big ships' (*Rov*, 19). They were 'fighting all round Toulon on land' and then, 'in a week or two', they had cleared out (*Rov*, 20). He then describes how Scevola, 'a real patriot from the town', was involved in 'purifying the town from all aristocrats . . . even before the English came in' (*Rov*, 20). Then:

After the English got driven out there was more of that work than the guillotine could do. They had to kill traitors in the streets, in cellars, in their beds. The corpses of men and women were lying in heaps along the quays. (*Rov*, 20)

We learn more details in Chapter 7. Here, we are told of Peyrol's search for a boat and his acquisition of a tartane, which he finds beached near the fishing hamlet of Madrague. He discovers that this is 'the tragic craft which had taken Arlette's parents to their death in the vengeful massacre of Toulon and had brought the youthful Arlette and Citizen Scevola back to Escampobar where old Catherine, left alone at that time, had waited for

days for somebody's return' (*Rov*, 85). During this period, 'she listened to the booming of guns about Toulon and with an almost greater but different terror to the dead silence which ensued' (*Rov*, 85). Scevola, at first, is reluctant to sell the tartane to Peyrol: he 'mumbled something about the tartane being very dirty' (*Rov*, 86). Then he explains more frankly:

'You see, when she lay at the quay in Toulon, a lot of fugitive traitors, men and women, and children too, swarmed on board of her, and cut the ropes with a view of escaping, but the avengers were not far behind, and made short work of them.' (*Rov*, 86)

I will say more about the bloodstained cabin of the tartane in a moment.

The last political detail I want to deal with is the context for the return of the English to the farmhouse. In Chapter 3, Scevola tells Peyrol how the English fleet 'hung round the coast before the anti-revolutionary traitors let them into Toulon' (*Rov*, 32). In those days, he explains, 'English officers used to land in that cove at night and walk up to this very house' (*Rov*, 32). Peyrol exclaims at their 'audacity', not immediately realising that Scevola is pointing to the collaboration of Arlette's parents with the English. Scevola goes on: 'It cost her father his life . . . her mother too' (*Rov*, 32). In Chapter 4, after that 8-year time-jump, the English fleet is back as part of the 1803-1804 blockade of French ports under Nelson's command. Lieutenant Réal has been sent to Escampobar to observe the movements of the English ships (*Rov*, 43). In Chapter 5, in a move typical of this novel, as I mentioned earlier, having had the French observation of the English ships from Escampobar, we shift to the English corvette, 'the extreme lookout ship of Admiral Nelson's blockading fleet' (*Rov*, 52), and their view of the shore. The captain has sent a boat ashore, because one of his men is familiar with the coast and had 'actually been ashore there a good many years ago, while

serving with Lord Howe's fleet' (*Rov*, 54).

Mr Bolt, in short, was one of those Englishmen mentioned by Scevola, who had had dealings with the people of Escampobar farm in 1793. As he reports to the captain: 'The people of the farmhouse, husband and wife, were well-to-do, good class altogether, and staunch royalists. He had got to know them well' (*Rov*, 55). More to the point, he adds, he 'could see no reason' why they shouldn't still be living there (*Rov*, 55). This statement is resonant with ironies, given the political history of France that I have just described, but, more specifically, it betrays Bolt's unawareness that his earlier contact with these good people might have played a part in their subsequent killing.

In May 1803, the British had ended the truce created by the Treaty of Amiens by refusing to carry out all the terms of the treaty.¹³ The British were angered by Napoleon's re-ordering of the international system in western Europe. They feared a loss of markets and being excluded from having a voice in European affairs. Instead of abiding by the treaty, they declared war on France and reactivated the blockade of the French and Spanish fleets at Toulon. It is this blockade which has brought the English back to Escampobar and leads to Peyrol's capture of his old ship-mate, Symons. What I would point to here is the economy with which this historical context is sketched in. At the same time, this history is not merely decorative: it is integral to the action of the novel.

I want to turn now from history—and the return of the English fleet with the renewal of the Revolutionary war with France—to a very different kind of return: the return of the repressed.¹⁴

The return of the repressed

In Chapter 2, when Peyrol arrives at Escampobar, the first person he meets is Arlette. He is immediately struck by her beauty: 'The perfect oval of her face, the colour of her mouth, and the whiteness of her throat' (*Rov*, 21). However, this first impression is qualified by a number of false

notes: her smile 'without gaiety', and 'her restless eyes that roamed about the room' (*Rov*, 21). She also asks two disconcerting questions. The first, 'Are you a patriot?' irritates Peyrol, who 'thought that he had "done with all that nonsense"'; the second, 'Have you ever carried a woman's head on a pike?' first takes his breath away and then renders him angry (*Rov*, 22). She leaves him with the chilling promise: 'I'll tell you about the Revolution' (*Rov*, 23).

It is clear from this first encounter that Arlette is one of the damaged women that have central places in Conrad's late novels: Flora de Barral in *Chance*, Lena in *Victory*, and Rita de Lastaolva in *The Arrow of Gold*. Like Flora in *Chance* and like Rita in *The Arrow of Gold*, she has undergone a trauma; in her case, this trauma clearly has to do with her experiences of the Revolution and its aftermath. As Catherine puts it, she was 'smitten on the very verge of womanhood' (*Rov*, 48), like Flora de Barral, and, as she thinks later, she is burdened with 'the guilt of impious and unspeakable horrors which had darkened her mind' (*Rov*, 259). As with Rita (and Flora in *Chance*), the narrative charts her recovery from the trauma that has marked her life to this date.

In Arlette's case, that trauma and its resolution is linked to the story of the tartane. In Chapter 2, Scevola mentions a tartane in his account of the deaths of Arlette's parents. He recounts how Arlette's father 'came over to Toulon just before the evacuation' to collect Arlette: he 'sailed over in a tartane he owned that is still lying her at the Madrague' (*Rov*, 33). I mentioned earlier how Peyrol arranged to purchase the tartane in Chapter 7. One of the details in the first description of the tartane is the 'enormous padlock' on the cabin door 'as if there had been secrets or treasures inside' (*Rov*, 84). As I noted earlier, the tartane is identified as 'the tragic craft which had taken Arlette's parents to their death in the vengeful massacre of Toulon and had brought the youthful Arlette and Citizen Scevola back to Escampobar' (*Rov*, 85). The collocation of these details suggests that the secret of the tartane is linked with this bloody

memory of the massacre. The boat accordingly acts as a memory symbol for the determinants of Arlette's mental state, and Peyrol's subsequent transformation of the tartane parallels the effect he has on Arlette and Réal, the two young people damaged psychologically by the Revolution and its aftermath. The locked cabin of the tartane also undergoes a series of transformations or transvaluations of its symbolic significance as it becomes a prison for Symons and, finally, the tomb for Peyrol, Michel and Scevola.

Later in Chapter 7, Peyrol wrenches the enormous padlock off the cabin door and 'let the light of day into the little cabin' (*Rov*, 87). What he reveals are 'the traces of the massacre in the stains of blood on its woodwork' and the poignant details of 'a wisp of long hair and a woman's ear-ring' (*Rov*, 87). From these traces he can 'figure to himself the little place choked with corpses' (*Rov*, 87). This is the locked tartane as a memory symbol for the massacre at Toulon. At this point, Peyrol hears from Catherine a fuller account of the siege of Toulon. First, there is her account of the siege as she experienced it from a distance: 'the distant growl of the big guns . . . the flickers in the sky' and the 'heavy bursts of gunfire coming over the water' (*Rov*, 90). Conrad was probably drawing here on his own memories of the big guns in France as heard from Kent in World War 1. Then she repeats the alarmist report provided by a 'man coming up from Madrague': 'he believed that the whole town had been blown up . . . there could not be a soul left alive in Toulon, because the few that survived would have gone away in the English ships' (*Rov*, 90-91). Finally, she describes the return of her niece with Scevola: 'she beheld, standing in the middle of the salle, pale like a corpse out of a grave, with a blood-soaked blanket over her shoulders and a red cap on her head, a ghastly looking young girl in whom she suddenly recognised her niece' (*Rov*, 91).

This strong visual image—like an emblem in an emblem book—testifies to Arlette's involvement in the massacres of Toulon; Catherine

registers the visual impression and slowly decodes it as her niece returned from Toulon, but she is silent about the wider implications of the image. When she returns to this image in her account of Arlette's return, she adds further details:

'I tore the horrid blanket off her shoulders. Her hair was clotted with blood and her clothes all stained with it. I took her upstairs. She was as helpless as a little child. I undressed her and examined her all over. She had no hurt anywhere. I was sure of that—but of what more could I be sure? I couldn't make sense of the things she babbled at me.' (*Rov*, 91)

Catherine's primary concern, as this passage shows, is the physical safety of her niece—including, perhaps, whether she has been sexually assaulted.¹⁵ However, her assurance ('She had no hurt anywhere') is clearly misleading. Arlette was taken straight from her convent into the carnage of the streets of Toulon; more than that, her blood-stained clothes, her blood-clotted hair and her earlier question to Peyrol ('Have you ever carried a woman's head on a pike?') suggest that she has taken an active part in the slaughter. Catherine's reference to 'nearly going out of my mind with the thought of what that child may have been dragged through' (*Rov*, 91) represents her continuing refusal to acknowledge this. Her phrase 'what that child may have been dragged through' deliberately blocks out what Arlette might have done as an agent. Meanwhile, Catherine's statement 'I couldn't make sense of the things she babbled at me' is amplified by her subsequent statement: 'it was a long time before she would speak and then nothing to the purpose' (*Rov*, 92). Here Catherine's refusal to let herself understand fully what Arlette might have done is confronted by behaviour on Arlette's part that suggests what we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—and what Conrad's contemporaries knew as 'shell shock'. Once again, I think, traces of the recent war emerge as Conrad's own return of the repressed.

Revenants: ghosts and hauntings at Escampobar

For the final section of this essay, I want to consider the idea of return in relation to ‘revenants’—this is literally someone who has returned, but usually with the suggestion that they have returned from the dead. We have seen a version of this with the return of Arlette: ‘standing in the middle of the *salle*, pale like a corpse out of a grave’ (*Rov*, 90). Indeed, Escampobar farm is haunted by revenants from the start. When Peyrol first met Arlette, he noted ‘her restless eyes that roamed about the empty room as though Peyrol had come in attended by a mob of Shades’ (*Rov*, 21). From what we now know, we can relate that ‘mob of Shades’, like her habitual action of ‘clawing the dress over her chest’ (*Rov*, 42), to the traumatic experiences of the massacre at Toulon.

And these are not the only ghosts or revenants. There is, for example, Scevola’s Sunday behaviour, when ‘he puts on his best clothes, sticks a red cap on his head and wanders between the buildings like a lost soul in the light of day’ (*Rov*, 40), which I quoted earlier. Elsewhere, Scevola, not inappropriately for a ‘blood-drinker’, is described in ways reminiscent of the classic vampire. (For example, when Scevola yawns, he reveals ‘the gleam of unexpected long canines’ [*Rov*, 181], and the ‘blood-drinker’ of the French revolution, the term applied to Jacobins, very readily suggests this other kind of blood-drinker.) When Bolt returns to the corvette, he reports distractedly on the ‘nightwalkers’ around the farm—in particular, ‘a woman whom anybody would have been excused for taking for a ghost’ (*Rov*, 62). This is the context for his feeling that Symons ‘had been spirited away by some supernatural means’ (*Rov*, 63). Michel, who had been on board the tartane when Peyrol had knocked Symons on the head and pitched him from the flat rock from which he had been watching the vessel, has a similar recourse to the supernatural to comprehend the experience: he is filled with terror at the sight of ‘this bewitched corpse that had come on board flying through the air’ (*Rov*,

123). Similarly, when Michel sees the fearful Scevola, flattened against the moonlit wall of the house 'plainly visible in his death-like rigidity', he believed him 'an apparition, not belonging to this earth' (*Rov*, 184). Even Réal, on the morning of his planned mission, undergoes a quasi-supernatural experience:

A strange, dim, cold light filled the room; a light he did not recognise for anything he had known before, and at the foot of his bed stood a figure in dark garments with a dark shawl over its head, with a fleshless predatory face and dark hollows for its eyes . . . (*Rov*, 225)

Understandably, Réal's first reaction is the question he asks himself: 'Is this death?' The 'spectre or old woman' speaks with 'Catherine's unemotional voice' to tell him to go away and leave Arlette, and Réal, with his continuing sense of 'an unearthly experience', thinks of this 'thing' as the 'apparition which resembled Catherine' (*Rov*, 225) rather than as Catherine herself.

These references give the novel an element of the Gothic, but, in each case, it is what is called the 'Gothic rationalised'. There is a perfectly natural explanation for what at first might seem supernatural. We might recall Conrad's words in his 'Author's Note' to *The Shadow-Line*: 'whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part' (*TSL*, v).¹⁶ As he said of that novella, 'there is nothing supernatural in it, nothing so to speak from beyond the confines of this world' (*TSL*, vi).

The final 'ghost' I want to consider is Peyrol. At the very end of the novel, we are told how Réal and Arlette, now married and living at Escampobar, talk frequently of Peyrol and how 'the recollection of his white-headed, quiet, irresistible personality haunted every corner of the Escampobar fields' (*Rov*, 284). Through the memories of Réal and Arlette

the absent Peyrol returns to haunt the area around Escampobar, and the various Shades, ghosts, spectres and apparitions have been replaced by this benign *genius loci*. It is interesting that memory traces of Peyrol haunt the exterior spaces rather than the farm-house. Perhaps this is a less threatening location for this absent presence. In the final sentence of the novel, Peyrol returns again to haunt the landscape, this time as a possible memory trace in the wood-wide web of trees: where the mulberry tree, ‘the only big tree on the head of the peninsula’, ‘sighed faintly in a shudder of all its leaves, as if regretting the Brother of the Coast . . . who often at noonday would lie down to sleep under its shade’ (*Rov*, 286). Here we have moved from the absent presence of a return in talk and memory, through that syntactical manoeuvre (‘as if’) to what Yael Levin has called ‘the otherwise present’.¹⁷ In this case, Peyrol’s return takes place through *representation* in language, but a *representation* that also draws attention to its linguistic and entirely provisional basis. It is also interesting, though I am sure not deliberate, that with that verb ‘regretting’, Conrad testifies to his own complex affiliations: as in ‘An Outpost of Progress’, Conrad uses ‘regret’ with the French sense rather than the English.¹⁸

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented as a lecture at The Fifth Conference of the Joseph Conrad Society of Japan held online on 6 November 2021.

¹ Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); see also Robert Hampson, ‘The Late Novels’ in J. H. Stape (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 140-59.

² Conrad to Edward Garnett, 4 December 1923, *CL* 8, 239.

³ Gary Geddes, *Conrad’s Later Novels* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University

- Press, 1980), 174-75.
- ⁴ Robert Hampson, 'The Late Novels', 151.
- ⁵ See Robert Secor, *The Rhetoric of Shifting Perspectives: Conrad's 'Victory'* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).
- ⁶ All references are to the Dent Uniform Edition: *The Rover* (London, 1925); hereafter cited in text as *Rov*.
- ⁷ Cedric Watts, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1984). For a discussion of this aspect of *Almayer's Folly*, see the chapter 'Covert Plots and Secret Trades' in Robert Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012), 27-51.
- ⁸ All references are to the Dent Uniform Edition: *A Personal Record* (London, 1923); hereafter cited in text as *APR*.
- ⁹ For biographical details, I am indebted to Z. Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007); hereafter cited in text as Najder, *A Life*.
- ¹⁰ Joseph Conrad, 'Poland Revisited', *Notes on Life & Letters* (London: J.M. Dent, 1924); hereafter cited in text as *NLL*.
- ¹¹ Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020), 133.
- ¹² For a discussion of transcultural belonging, see my essay 'Transcultural Negotiations: *A Personal Record*, "Prince Roman" and "The Warrior's Soul"' in Grażyna Branny and Brendan Kavanagh (eds), *Conrad Without Borders* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
- ¹³ This included the removal of British troops from Egypt, the evacuation of the British naval presence from Malta, and the return of Cape Colony to the Dutch.
- ¹⁴ The French Revolutionary Wars were a series of conflicts lasting from 1792 to 1802 as a response to the French Revolution. They pitted revolutionary France against coalitions of various European monarchies. The War of the First Coalition ran from 1792 to 1797. The War of the Second Coalition ran from 1798 to 1802. The War of the Third Coalition (1803-1806) was also the First Napoleonic War. There were four further Coalition Wars (ending in July 1815). Britain had been at war with France since May 1803 after the breakdown of the Treaty of Amiens. But at that point Britain was on its own: Sweden allied itself with Britain in December 1804; Russia joined the alliance in April 1805. The French victory over the combined Austro-Russian forces at the Battle of Austerlitz in December 1805 effectively brought the Third Coalition to an end, but the war began again in October 1806 with the Fourth Coalition of Russia,

Saxony and Sweden. Unlike its coalition partners, Britain remained at war with France throughout the period of the Napoleonic Wars.

¹⁵ In his letter to Edward Garnett (4 December 1923), Conrad explains how this plot detail determined the conception of Scevola's character: 'Postulating that Arlette had to remain untouched, the terrorist that brought her back could have been nothing else than what he is or the book would have had to be altogether different' (*CL* 8, 238).

¹⁶ Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-Line* (London: J.M. Dent, 1923); hereafter cited in the text as *TSL*.

¹⁷ Yael Levin, *Tracing the Aesthetic Principle in Conrad's Novels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2008).

¹⁸ In 'An Outpost of Progress', we are told that Kayerts 'regretted the streets, the pavements, the cafés, his friends of many years' (*TU*, 91), and that Carlier 'regretted the clink of sabre and spurs on a fine afternoon, the barrack-room witticisms, the girls of garrison towns' (*TU*, 92). They did not feel repentant about these things, as in the English usage, but rather missed these things (in the French sense of the word).

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