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Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford: The Collaborative Works

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the three collaborations of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford—Romance, The Inheritors, and The Nature of A Crime—each of which belongs to a different genre. Romance is an adventure story reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson’s works. The technical virtuosity of the novel comes into play when towards the end the hero has to assume the role of an oral narrator in the court where he has been brought under the mistaken identity of being a Spanish pirate. He has to clear his name, otherwise he will be hanged. His life depends on his ability as a story-teller. The Inheritors is a Wellsian science fiction. An aspiring author meets a visitor from the future or the Fourth Dimension, who along with others like her have come to take over the earth by replacing the old established order. The rest of the novel tells how the Dimensionists succeed in their plan. The Nature of A Crime is written in a series of letters by a man to his married lover. So the point of view used is severely limited. Moreover, the protagonist here is an unreliable narrator and a hardened criminal, which makes it the study of a twisted psychology.

Keywords: Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Impressionism, Popular Fiction

It is rare to find two renowned authors of the twentieth-century writing with one another, and particularly rare to find the two doing so at a time when each was relatively unknown and was in the process of formulating his theories and models of novel-writing. This is what is unique about the creative partnership of Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, a partnership which produced two novels and a shorter novella—Romance, The Inheritors and The Nature of A Crime. These were written mostly during the time when Conrad was living at Pent Farm as Ford’s tenant from 1898 to 1907.

Given that these collaborations materially produced what should now be rightly seen as perhaps some of the most important contributions of literary Impressionism to modernist literature, such as the unreliable narrator, the use of non-chronological narrative and progression d’effet, literary scholars should have carefully considered the collective works of Ford and Conrad searching for evidence of the theories, models and techniques that were central to them. Instead when we look at the academic studies on Conrad or on Ford they are mostly dismissive of the collaborations. However, the circumstance in which they started to collaborate is really significant. At the time in 1898 when Conrad and Ford started work on their collaborations,

Conrad was yet to achieve popular success as a novelist; moreover he often found himself short of money. Ford provided him with both—a confidence in himself as an artiste as well as respite from financial worries. By 1898-99 Conrad had gained enough personal and artistic security due to his association with Ford to start writing his deeply troubling modernist masterpiece, *Heart of Darkness*. For these reasons the collaborative texts have a documentary and a historical value for scholars of modernist literature.

Modernist writers like Conrad and Ford wrote books full of introspection and new techniques. Sometimes this became obscure for common readers and as a result their works became difficult to sell. This is a problem that confronted most Modernist writers. Some of them tried to write fiction catering to popular tastes along with their experimental writings. The collaborations of Conrad and Ford can be classified as such. As collaborators, Conrad and Ford explored the various possibilities of contemporary mass-market genre fiction that had become enormously popular at the time, such as the science fiction of H. G. Wells, travel fiction, political satire, espionage novel and the detective novel. As Rob Hawkes says, “each of the three collaboratively-written texts appears to have been an attempt to work within the confines of popular genres: the adventure story (Romance); science fiction (*The Inheritors*); and detective fiction (*The Nature of A Crime*) (Hawkes 71). Norman Page has characterized the commercial aims of these collaborations as follows: “The twin thrust of the collaborations was clear, to reach the audience in two popular areas: hit it high, with a sophisticated science-fiction tale full of political savvy; and hit it fairly low, in the region of pirates, adventure, and romance” (Page 166).

However, there is another aspect to these collaborations. A reading of Conrad’s prefaces to several of his works will show that at the heart of his literary theory was a concern for the proper way of telling the story by positioning a narrator who would maintain a distance between the author and the reader. Ford, too, was concerned about the complex epistemological problems of novel-writing, and in particular with the separation, on the one hand, between the author and the narrator, and, on the other hand, the narrator’s position with respect to the story for which s/he is responsible. Seen in this context, the collaborative works of Conrad and Ford are the only documentary evidence of the series of discussions and experiments on Impressionist techniques that the two undertook in one another’s company to produce a twentieth-century novel, an art form that would be equal to the complexities and ambivalences of modern life. The collaborative texts, hence, are more of an experiment in novel-writing, as the authors were trying to find a “new form” for novel. So these are in reality texts in search of theory.

Among the three collaborations of Conrad and Ford, *The Inheritors* was the first one to be published in the year 1901. However, it was Romance that was the first collaborative work the two authors began soon after their first meeting in 1898. It is also the most substantive of the three works. When they had first met Ford was already working on a historical novel *Seraphina* set in the first decade of the nineteenth century. This later became Romance in their collective hands. Romance was completed in March 1902 and finally published in volume form on October

16, 1903. The novel was a commercial failure. Perhaps this is what prompted Conrad to declare later, “I consider Romance as something of no importance; I collaborated on it at a time when it was impossible for me to do anything else. . . . Nevertheless we took pains with the technical side of the work. You will admit that it is well written” (Najder 335).

Romance seems to be an attempt to capture the then current popular enthusiasm for the kind of adventure tales associated with Robert Louis Stevenson. The characterisation of the younger Kemp reminds us quite vividly of Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* and its teenaged hero David Balfour. The plot of the novel is based on the real-life adventures of Aaron Smith, who had been a prisoner of Cuban pirates, and who later joined the pirates. He was the last man tried for piracy at the Old Bailey in 1824. Smith wrote a book, *The Atrocities of Pirates*, which relates his adventures.

Romance is narrated by the first person voice of John Kemp, the protagonist, who is recounting his own past experiences. Kemp’s narration seemingly is an oral narration. As he comes to the end of his narrative, Kemp turns from being the hero of a romance to explicitly assuming the role of the narrator of a romance. In order to save his life he starts telling the story of his adventures to the jury of the court where he has been brought for trial on a mistaken identity of being a pirate. As the evidence starts to accumulate against him and he feels that he is headed for the gallows, he starts to narrate his adventures of the last two years in an effort to convince the court that there is a confusion of identity, that he is John Kemp and not the pirate Nikola el Escoces. But he is unsure of his ability as a raconteur: “I began to tell my story; it was so plain, so evident, it shimmered there before me . . . and yet I knew it was so useless.” He is further distracted in his concentration by his father’s waving and winking, “Suddenly I saw the white face of my father peep at me . . . He smiled suddenly, and nodded again and again, opened his eyes, shut them; furtively waved a hand. It distracted me, threw me off my balance.” But he knows that he has to make his story as interesting as he can in order to hold his audience’s attention: “I had to tell what I had been through—and to tell it vividly.” Only this can save his life. So he concentrates again. Gradually Kemp gains confidence in his ability as a raconteur, “I knew very well that I was carrying my audience with me.” When at last he concludes his story and feels proud that he has made his audience believe in him, he is elated: “I glowed for a moment with the immense pride of my achievement. I had made them see things.” In his narration there is a disjunction between the voice that narrates and the character that is actually undergoing these experiences. Kemp himself feels that there is an odd separation between the “I” who is narrating and the “I” who stays detached:

I remember the intense bitterness of that feeling and the oddity of it all: of the one “I” that felt like that, of the other that was raving in front of a lot of open-eyed idiots, three old judges, and a young girl. And, in a queer way, the thoughts of the one “I” floated through into the words of the other, that seemed to be waving its hands in its final struggle, a little way in front of me. (Romance 371-74)

In a typical modernistic manner he appears to be aware of his role as the narrator along with the difficulties associated with trying to relate in words his actual past experiences. The romance hero, the man of action, has thus become a decentred modernist narrator like Marlow conscious of his difficulties of reproducing in words his own experiences.

In this background of modernist dystopia the concept of race and nationality assumes a problematic status in the novel. Kemp admits: “I seemed to understand profoundly the difference of races that brings with it the feeling of romance or awakens hate” (Romance 184). The concept of the national identity of Englishness arouses strong reactions among the different characters of the novel. To Kemp, an Englishman, England is “a fortunate island across the seas, an abode of peace, a sanctuary of love” (Romance 303). Carlos is a die-hard Anglophile who “had on him the glamour of things English—of English power emerging from the dust of wars and revolution; of England stable and undismayed”; so he wants to marry his cousin Seraphina to Kemp because he is an Englishman. To him Englishness has come to represent certain values: “English things last forever—English peace, English power, English fidelity. It is a country of much serenity, of order, of stable affection” (Romance 104). Such was the myth of English culture exported by British imperialism to its troubled outposts in South America and elsewhere. Father Antonio, the priest at Don Balthasar’s household, is also an Anglophile. He tells Kemp that England is “a blessed, fertile country, full of beauty and of well-disposed hearts. . . . I love it” (Romance 103). But an examination of British political history shatters this myth surrounding England, which we soon find out through the voice of the disgruntled Irishman O’Brien:

These English—I’ve seen them, spit the child on the mother’s breast. I’ve seen them set fire to the thatch of the widow and childless Sorrow? Ruin? Death? I am acquainted with them. It is in the blood: ’tis in the tone; in the entrails of us, in our mother’s milk. Your accursed land has brought always that on our dear and sorrowful country. (Romance 326-29)

Due to his overriding hatred of the British, O’Brien has identified himself with Spanish Cuba to the extent of becoming a judge and a centre of power in the land, covertly fostering his anti-British agenda by encouraging piracy. Kemp places himself against this kind of obsessiveness. However his pride as an Englishman is undermined in the final pages of the novel as he faces trial in an English court. As Kemp is taken for a Spanish pirate and tried in the court, he faces a hostile and unfair trial by an English Admiralty court with half the jury being West Indian merchants. The irony of O’Brien’s final plot against Kemp is to have the Englishman indicted as the Spanish pirate El Demonio who actually is a Nova Scotian. There is a further irony when a Spanish emissary brings news of the mistaken identity and demands the Englishman’s release. Thus the Englishman has difficulties in maintaining his beloved national identity in the complex world of colonial politics, just as the colonies tend to lose their national allegiance in a revolutionary separatism. In this almost satiric conclusion, as Aarom Fleishman says, Conrad and Ford’s “ambivalent views toward their own national identity and their mixed feelings towards England” are revealed (Fleishman 115).

Though Conrad and Ford had begun working on *Romance* earlier, *The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story* turned out to be their first joint production. Ford had started it as a solo project and had written a considerable part of it by October 1899, when he first showed it to Conrad, who indicated his willingness to be its co-author. Perhaps Conrad did so to get a diversion from the difficulties of the composition of *Lord Jim* that were plaguing him then. The two were to be tempting providence in this joint effort, as Conrad voiced playfully in a letter to Ford dated June 28, 1901: “The time of our conjunction approaches and from shock heavenly fire struck would base metals into gold transmute! (in other words: from Bsh Public’s pocket extract shekels.)” Together, they had it finished by March 1900. Ford did majority of the writing, and Conrad served as editor while he worked on *Lord Jim*. As Conrad himself wrote to Ford, “...the work is all yours – I’ve shared only a little of your worry” (Conrad Collected Letters 2: xxiv, 219). *The Inheritors* was published in the US on June 1, 1901 and in the UK by Heinemann on June 26, 1901. Both editions were limited to about 1500 copies, and the reception of the novel on both sides of the Atlantic was lukewarm. Written during the period of the Boer War as well as the Congo debates, the novel reflects the ongoing discussions between Conrad and Ford and involving such figures as H.G. Wells and the socialist politician and writer R.B. Cunninghame Graham about imperialism, race and capitalism with deep-seated implications for Impressionism as a term of literary-historical analysis. The novel seeks to examine, as John A. Meixner says, “the cynical new attitude which the yellow press and men like Joseph Chamberlain had brought into British public life, the exploitative Boer War being one manifest symbol” (Meixner 7).

In this novel Conrad and Ford use the genre of “scientific romance” which had already been popularly associated with the concept of multiple dimensions. This involves parallel/alternate universe(s) or other imagined planes of existence, just a little distance away from our world but the distance is in a fourth spatial dimension. *The Inheritors* has been seen as drawing inspiration from H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and the concept of “multiple dimensions”. In his essay “Modernism and Imperialism”, Fredric Jameson applies the concept of the fourth dimension to establish the structural connection between daily life and empire in the modernist texts and sees the representational dilemma of early modernism as “the problem of a global space that like the fourth dimension constitutively escapes you.” This new global space, which corresponds to the emergent imperial world order is, as he says, an “unrepresentable totality.” Besides being “unrepresentable” Fredric Jameson also says that it is an “unthinkable” space (Jameson 51), linking it to Conrad and Ford’s depiction of the Fourth Dimension in this novel.

The Inheritors is about an aspiring novelist Arthur Etchingham Granger, a man from an aristocratic but poor family, who meets and falls in love with a visitor from the future times whom he meets at various points in the novel. She is an inhabitant of the Fourth Dimension which, Granger says, is “an inhabited plane—invisible to our eyes, but omnipresent.” Granger observes: “I heard the Dimensionists described: a race clear-sighted, eminently practical, incredible; with no ideals, prejudices, or remorse; with no feeling for art and no reverence for life; free from any ethical tradition; callous to pain, weakness, suffering and death, as if they had

been invulnerable and immortal” (Inheritors 8). She informs Granger of the intention of the Fourth Dimensionists like her to “inherit the earth” and replace the older generation. She explains to him how she plans to do so:

The Dimensionists were to come in swarms, to materialize, to devour like locusts, to be all the more irresistible because indistinguishable. They were to come like snow in the night: in the morning one would look out and find the world white; they were to come as the gray hairs come, to sap the strength of us as the years sap the strength of the muscles. (Inheritors 10)

She teaches Granger about the processes of social change whereby the old order will be replaced by a more efficient and mechanical new order. At the same time, posing as his sister, she gains access to British aristocratic, literary and political circles and constructs a plot to sabotage British interests in the colony of Greenland. She poses as his sister to his friends in the press, to Edward Churchill, the Foreign Minister, and to his widowed aunt, Mrs. Etchingham Granger, as these people could unwittingly help her in her plotting. She successfully fulfils her aim of replacing the existing British Government led by Churchill with the immoral and devious Gurnard as the new head of the government through a cunning exposure of the atrocities committed in Greenland in the name of progress (a clear critique of Boer War policies and Leopold II's investment in the Belgian Congo). Granger remains a transitional figure, caught in a clash between older, nostalgic accounts of national identity and a newer, as yet uncomprehended, geopolitical order symbolised by the Fourth Dimensionists.

The *Inheritors* is topical and showcases the authors' viewpoint that imperialism was not a nationalist enterprise but a commercial one. As Christina Britzolakis says, “The *Inheritors* is marked by Ford's [and Conrad's] polemic against ‘social imperialist’ discourses of national efficiency, collectivism, and administrative expertise. It satirizes the rhetoric of enlightenment and civilization used by financiers, governments, and journalists to justify European expansionism” (Britzolakis 4-5). In the month that the Boer War broke out in South Africa, Conrad and Ford started working on this novel. The novel depicts European capitalists such as the international financier the Duc de Mersch—a fictional representation of King Leopold II of Belgium—investing in colonial schemes. As Granger says:

The Duc de Mersch wanted money, and he wanted to run a railway across Greenland. His idea was that the British public should supply the money and the British Government back the railways . . . in return he offered an eligible harbour and a strip of coast at one end of the line; the British public was to be repaid in casks of train-oil and gold . . . (Inheritors 24)

The *Inheritors* is also a challenging modernist text which has proved to be generically difficult to classify. As Susan Jones says, “We are uncertain whether we are reading science fiction, romance, a thriller . . . or a theoretical work about the nature and meaning of textuality” (Jones 676). What makes it the most radical of the three collaborations is the complexity of this generic construction. The novel has historical and socio-political dimensions. The main thrust of

the novel is to describe the course which the modern world was taking at the turn of the nineteenth century. It presents a discourse on the future of the modern world. At the same time it is a political satire using fictitious names for contemporary leaders. The “romance” element in the novel is also problematic, as Granger has fallen in love with his supposed sister or “pseudo-sister” as he repeatedly calls her. We can detect here a hint of Conrad’s exploration of incest and socially forbidden relationships in the unfinished *The Sisters and Suspense* and of Ford’s *A Little Less than Gods*. Granger is consumed with sexual jealousy when she greets Gurnard “with nonchalance, as beneath eyes, a woman greets a man she knows intimately”, and later when he thinks that the Duc too is “intimate with her, intimate with a pomposity of flourishes as irritating as Gurnard’s nonchalance” (*Inheritors* 62). Granger comments ironically on this theme of incest that “[o]ne remembers sooner or later that a county-man may not marry his reputed sister without scandal” (*Inheritors* 124). Once again our attention is drawn to the “incest” plot, in which the romance plot is subverted.

The confusion regarding the meaning of the text of *The Inheritors* is reflected in the Impressionist rendering of the scenes through the visual motifs of vision, and of light and darkness, as well as the elements of fog and mist. Whereas Granger uses twilight, shadowy, or half-lit landscapes associated with a dying cultural order, the Dimensionist woman’s “insolent modernity” is associated with an unnaturally intensified visibility. Granger calls her a “sinuous, brilliant thing” with “a light of her own.” However this brilliant brightness does not signify warmth or positivity, rather it is characterized by coldness and harshness: “In that clear, transparent, shimmering light, every little fold of the dress, every little shadow of the white arms, the white shoulders, came up to me It was a vision of light, threatening, sinister” (*Inheritors* 87-88). Other people, when associated with her, share this visual brilliance; for example, when the Duc de Mersch was closely involved with her, Granger found that he “glowed with light . . . glowed all over”, but even he “paled ineffectual fires beside her maenadic glow” (*Inheritors* 105). The Dimensionist woman’s appearances to Granger are further connected with a disruption of visual perspective. Looking at Canterbury Cathedral under her direction, Granger comments, “One seemed to see something beyond, something vaster—vaster than cathedrals, vaster than the conception of the gods to whom cathedrals were raised. The tower reeled out of the perpendicular. One saw beyond it, not roofs, or smoke, or hills, but an unrealised, an unrealisable infinity of space” (*Inheritors* 6). In a subsequent encounter, he describes her almost like an Impressionist painter painting a landscape, as having “brought the whole [scene] into composition—the whole of that slumberous, sunny street.” Granger recalls how “the lines of her figure . . . interlace[d] almost tenderly—to ‘compose’ well, after the ideas of a certain school.” In an Impressionistic description marked by a riot of colours, the narrator describes how she “composes” the scene: “The bright sky fell back into place, the red roofs, the blue shadows, the red and blue of the sign-board, the blue of the pigeons walking round my feet, the bright red of a postman’s cart. She was gliding toward me, growing and growing into the central figure” (*Inheritors* 45). These visual descriptions have almost a cinematic effect as they show her moving in slow-motion and becoming the central figure of her own composition. Granger

describes how when she “came toward me . . . the blond maidens disappeared, everybody, everything disappeared” (Inheritors 62). Compared to the visual brilliance she inspires around her, Churchill and the world around him seem softer, more comforting, like a bygone era seen through the passage of time, for Churchill belongs to the past, and the Dimensionists are the present and the future of the human race.

The last of the three collaborations between Conrad and Ford, *The Nature of A Crime*, a short tale of a man’s embezzlement of funds, is mostly Ford’s work. The story had, like both *The Inheritors* and *Romance*, been started by Ford, probably in early April 1905. By 1908, Conrad and Ford were completing it. However, unlike *The Inheritors* and *Romance*, Conrad did not include *The Nature of A Crime* in his list of titles for the collected editions planned during his life, though it does appear in the volume with his plays in the Uniform Edition. Ford was unable to find a publisher for *The Nature of A Crime* and published it himself in serial form in *The English Review* in 1909, under the pseudonym Ignatz von Aschendorf. It was published in book form in 1924. The English edition ran a little over 9,000 and the American about the same; neither was reprinted.

The Nature of A Crime is generally viewed by Conrad scholars as not having much literary merit. Conrad in his June 1924 Preface to *The Nature of A Crime* wrote that “it remains a fragment from its very nature.” Frederick R. Karl calls it “a freakish collaboration . . . a thinly disguised biographical memoir by Ford” (Karl 609). Jocelyn Baines calls it a “worthless fragment” (Baines 277). However the text is noteworthy as an experiment in both the progression d’effet that Ford and Conrad were at that time developing, as well as in the use of a sustained, unreliable, “immersed” narrative voice. The novella is formatted as a thriller or a crime fiction telling the events connected with “the house of Burdens”. The theme of *The Nature of A Crime* reflects the two writers’ abiding interest in financial wrongdoings (Conrad was during the same time working on *Chance* which has financial malfeasance as a subtext). The story of *The Nature of A Crime* is narrated by an unnamed narrator in the first person, who in a series of letters to his married lover tells how he has successfully swindled money utilising his position as the trustee of the huge property owned by Edward Burden, the son of his friend Alexander Burden. At the moment of writing these letters, the protagonist faces a crisis: he is on the brink of having his fraud discovered, and he has determined to commit suicide rather than go to prison. Having been embezzling the Burden family trust funds for the past nine years, the protagonist has acquired not only nine London houses including the one where his beloved woman lives with her husband but also many things else—“all my pictures, all my prints, all my books, my furniture, my reputation as a connoisseur, my governorship of the two charities—all the me that people envy.” He regards himself as a man of his time, that time being not one of great deeds but of colossal speculations. Fraudulent misappropriation is for him a pleasurable addiction. The novella takes the form of a confessional “disclosure” of the protagonist.

In *The Nature of A Crime* the authors have chosen the epistolary form—a technique very different from the narrative techniques used in the novels discussed so far. The story is narrated

by an unnamed narrator in the first person in a series of letters. We inhabit his extremely limited point of view and look at events and persons only from his perspective. No other point of view is present in this novella. In his Preface, Ford alludes to the almost oral kind of narratology employed in the work, saying that it was “for the main part prose meant for recitation, or of that type”. The subjectivity of the narrator is foregrounded, and the readers enter his mind and consciousness as his thoughts come tumbling down page after page. The ostensible subject of the story, hence, is not that important, rather the nature, motive and consciousness of the narrator are held up before us as the subjects of interest. This mind functions in a moral vacuum, where he takes pleasure in not just being immoral with other people’s money, but also appears to be amoral. For example, he says that his embezzlement is partly Edward’s fault, because “he has done nothing to make two and two become four. He has not even checked his accounts.” He pits himself and his lover against Edward and says that his swindling of the latter’s money is an act of revenge on the part of the eternal Have Nots against the Haves, that he feels “a little like a deity, a little like an avenging Providence”.

The narrator of *The Nature of A Crime* is an unreliable narrator, perhaps because he is a hardened criminal. He feels that he has to justify his crime either by lies or by theorizing and philosophizing about the true nature of his action. He says in one of his letters that he is a man of action, but in another letter he says that he “lack[s] courage for a swoop, making him “a man of my time” because “the time is not of great deeds but of colossal speculations”. He is contemplating suicide as the only way out of his predicament, but at the same time paradoxically enough is supremely confident of his own “ability—for of course I have great ability—I could go on fooling Burden for ever. I could restore: I could make sounder than ever it was that preposterous ‘going concern’ the Burden Estate.” He has mentioned more than once that he is now bankrupt, that he has “nothing to leave” in his will. Yet elsewhere he again contradicts himself saying, “I fancy I am rich enough to be able to restore to them all that I have taken.” The narrator is perhaps conscious of his appearing to be unreliable in his narrative, “for it is absolutely true that I am tired of appearing reliable—to Edward Burden or anyone else in the world.” The convoluted and complex mind of the narrator who is trying to “sanctify” his crime of money-laundering by providing these various justifications provides a classic example of an unreliable narrator.

Thus these three collaborations of Conrad and Ford provide a fascinating study of the writers’ use of popular mass market literary genres with which they are not usually associated in the readers’ minds. These stories shed light on a relatively little-known oeuvre of these two men, who are better known for their association with literary Modernism and Impressionism.

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