Foreword

Publishing a collection of essays devoted to Conrad’s short fiction does not speak for itself. More than any other writer, Conrad is perceived as a novelist whose forays into short fiction are at best preliminary, crude exercises in preparation for the great novels and at worst, hackwork done for material survival, unworthy of his greater literary accomplishments. This view owes much to the close association of short-story writing with commercial and popular magazines during the twentieth century’s first two decades, which generated a general view of the genre as material made to order, commodified, commercialized, intended mainly to entertain and distract the masses, and levelled into a show of verbal craftsmanship. Conrad’s own disparaging view of his short fiction did much to propagate this general conception: he refers to these works as “silly short stories” (CL3: 297); he claims that they are “not studies – they touch no problem. They are just stories in which I’ve tried to be simply entertaining” (CL4: 29-30); and he dismisses various individual stories with a reference to “secondhand Conradese” (CL1: 301).

Can we take Conrad at his word and follow his dismissal of these stories with a nod towards the marketplace, his creditors, the pressures of a growing family, ill-health, and other all-too-understandable if not entirely admirable facts of life? The present collection of essays offers an alternative, more complex view. Conrad’s disparaging references to his short fiction evidence remarkably little anxiety (a notable change from his epistolary agonizing over his novels) and indicate no sense of artistic discomfort or embarrassment that would have been natural for a highly self-conscious, relentlessly critical mind. It may well be that his conscious intention to address his short fiction to the popular market had a liberating effect on his writing process and that the relative relaxation of critical self-reflection may have paradoxically enabled the radical narrative experimentation that characterizes a number of the short stories.

While many of Conrad’s short stories were indeed written with an eye on the marketplace, he was, to put it simply, constitutionally unable to produce pulp fiction. Much as he tried to produce formulaic pieces that would satisfy the popular taste for exotic settings, romance,
and melodrama, the end-product would always turn out to be a little less satisfactorily marketable and somewhat more aesthetically intriguing than it was meant to be. Although written for popular consumption, the stories are rarely trivial or formulaic: they are often generically ambivalent, subverting the very conventions that would have slotted them comfortably into popular generic categories.

In addition to the obvious seductions of the marketplace, it is not hard to see why Conrad found this form congenial. Short story theories are notoriously helpless when it comes to generic definitions, and the most enduring attempt at defining the genre is still the most startlingly simple – a definition based on the time it takes to read the story or (as summarily put by one of these critics) “a definition by the seat of one’s pants.” These difficulties notwithstanding, it is generally agreed that the kind of short fiction that emerged during the last decade of the nineteenth century and became widely popular during the first three decades of the twentieth anticipates and encapsulates many of the Modernist novel’s “Impressionist” characteristics: the limitation and foregrounding of point-of-view; an emphasis on inner experience; a reliance on metaphor and metonymy; an elliptical treatment of traditional plot elements and chronological ordering. Often labelled an “Impressionist,” Conrad is strategically placed for a study of the relationship between these two Modernist genres, and much of his short fiction anticipates the more radical and experimental writing of his novels.

Perhaps the most pertinent point of conjunction is the “isolating” tendency of the short story. As Frank O’Connor, a master of the genre, writes: “the novel can still adhere to the classical concept of a civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community ... but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent” (The Lonely Voice, 1962: 21). The viewpoint of the Modernist short story is that of the outsider; its position is on the margins of society; its material is a fragment of what was once a communal web. Conrad’s short fiction, like his novels, revolves on this nostalgia for the sense of community and the awareness of its loss.

A second point of conjunction is the genre’s distinctive orality: unlike the novel that, according to Mary Louise Pratt, often foregrounds its own “writtenness,” short fiction is closely related to the living voice, to spoken language, to oral narrative. This orality, perceived as
generically related to the short story is, in fact, one of the most distinctive traits of Conrad’s work, both in his short fiction and novels, which often revolve on narrative situations and foreground problems of narrative authority, interpretation, and voice.

Most of the essays in this special issue of The Conradian not only make a case for re-evaluating some of Conrad’s short stories but also take new and broader directions, reflecting a novel focus on the intersection of culture and literary production: the relationship between the advertising industry and the production of literary texts; an emergent awareness of the cinema as a new aesthetic challenge; the vexed question of Conrad’s alleged misogyny and his problematic treatment of love; the profound ambivalence of Conrad’s politics; and his uneasy position in relation to the ethos of empire. It is, perhaps, the conception of culture in a broad sense, including ideology, institutions, and discursive practices, that allows for reinterpreting some of the interesting oddities of these ostensibly commodified texts.

At the conclusion of this project, the question that hovered over the conception of this issue – whether the short fiction written by the great novelist can indeed be read as mere “secondhand Conradese” – has become vastly more complex and intriguing for the editorial team that has had the pleasure of compiling this volume. As ever, the last word is left with our readers.

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