

## “Conrad and the Immigrant: the Drama of Hospitality”

**ABSTRACT:** Originally entitled ‘The Castaway’, Joseph Conrad’s tale ‘Amy Foster’ (1901) tells the story of a Polish man who, after leaving his home to sail the seas, comes to reside, work, and raise a family in the county of Kent in south-east England. In this respect it corresponds unusually closely to its author’s own post-maritime history, though the story’s main protagonist, an illiterate peasant from the Carpathian mountains, is very unlike Conrad. Influentially, Edward Said read ‘Amy Foster’ as a great statement on the theme of exile, personally and historically important to Conrad, as to Said himself. This essay approaches the tale as a study of immigration and the reception of the immigrant (a critical issue in many parts of the world today), and discusses its staging of the drama of hospitality, and of what Derrida called ‘hostipitality’, attending to different forms of hospitality, and inhospitality, in the tale. Moving from the content of the story to its narrative rhetoric in the context of practices of Victorian and modernist fiction, the essay goes on to explore what this tale may show of the kind of qualified hospitality that modern fiction such as Conrad’s offers to the characters who come to reside in it.

It is often remarked that one thing that makes ‘Amy Foster’ (1901) unusual among Joseph Conrad’s tales is its overt connection to important themes in its author’s post-maritime biography, as a story about a Polish man who, after leaving his home to sail the seas, comes to reside, work, and raise a family in the county of Kent in south-east England. Edward Said, in his lifelong and very personal engagement with Conrad’s work, returned several times to this tale. In his first book, he reads it as an existential drama and meditation on the relation between thought and action.<sup>1</sup> In ‘Reflections on Exile’, written in 1984, Said came back to ‘Amy Foster’ as ‘perhaps the most uncompromising representation of exile ever written’, though at that point he was suspicious of attempts to aestheticize and romanticize an experience which to many

millions in the twentieth century must remain an unappeasable grief.<sup>2</sup> And later still, in the autobiographical essay 'Between Worlds' (1998), written under the shadow of his own last illness, Said felt that the story was the epitome of a contrapuntal art which was actually constituted by an experience of exile or alienation that could never be rectified. 'It is difficult to read "Amy Foster",' Said reflects, 'without thinking that Conrad must have feared dying a similar death, inconsolable, alone, talking away in a language no one could understand.'<sup>3</sup> Conrad's story became the trigger for Said's autobiographical account of his own loss of home and language.

These are powerful readings of the Conrad tale, and command respect. It may seem churlish to seize on a small detail of Said's account of the story, but such is the starting point for this approach to 'Amy Foster'. For Said says (in both 'Reflections on Exile' and 'Between Worlds') that in his residence in Kent and even after his marriage, the immigrant Yanko Goorall never learns the local language. This is a fascinating and poignant misapprehension. For the narrating Dr Kennedy speaks first of Yanko's 'broken English', but mentions that later, as he acquired the language, he was able to speak expressively and 'with great fluency'.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, if the castaway had not acquired English, the whole issue of his reverting to his own language, on which the story turns, could not make sense. Said's misreading foregrounds the question of language and languages in the story, and with it the

question of the linguistic, cultural and ethical transactions that make up the drama of hospitality, which is one theme of this essay.

My focus on the drama of hospitality is intended also to open up a second level of enquiry, which moves across from the ethical encounter between resident and immigrant, home and exile, self and other, to the aesthetic transaction between author and character, fiction and the world to be represented. 'Amy Foster' was written at a time in Conrad's life when he was forming what we recognize as his mature aesthetic, and thinking creatively, as we see in his tales as well as his letters, about the representation of character and the craft and reading of fiction. In this way, I will argue that the tale is autobiographical in a sense less contingent than that discussed by Said. This self-referential theme remains latent in the tale, as indeed it nearly always is in Conrad's fiction, which is remarkable in its generation for its lack of interest in portraying the figure of the artist and his work. But a possible clue to the story's preoccupation with its own processes is its grim thematising of labour, or laboriousness, an idiom that recurs in the letters when Conrad is talking about his own efforts to work, 'writing under pressure pumping for dear life'.<sup>5</sup> The landscape of the tale may also support this reading, with its bay and beach and farmland, a place of psychotopographical transition between the dangerous sea - where Kennedy, Yanko, and the primary narrator have all adventured in earlier days, as had Conrad - and the monotonous land, low, flat, and familiar, scored by labour

into straight lines of harrow and plough. ‘The uniform brownness of the harrowed field glowed with a rosy tinge, as though the powdered clods had sweated out in minute pearls of blood the toils of uncounted ploughmen.’ (‘AF’, 151) This extraordinary image of the lines of the plough expressing the blood and sweat of labour invested in them is close to a way Conrad frequently describes and complains about his own effortful labour before the demanding page. The day he finished *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), he wrote to Poradowska: ‘Since I woke this morning, it seems to me I have buried a part of myself in the pages which lie here before my eyes.’<sup>6</sup>

First, though, the story. An anonymous primary narrator is visiting an old friend and fellow-traveller, Kennedy, now a doctor in rural Kent. They happen to meet an unprepossessing local woman, Amy Foster, and later in two episodes of oral narration, Kennedy tells the story of Amy and her foreign husband. The Austro-Polish peasant called Yanko Goorall has been lured from his home somewhere in the Carpathian mountains by a fraudulent emigration scheme, promising a life of riches in America. When the emigrant ship is wrecked in a night-time storm off the Kentish coast, Yanko is the only survivor, an outlandish and inexplicable arrival greeted at first with hostility by the English among whom he has come, and later, proving himself a useful labourer, given a qualified acceptance. He settles down and marries the servant girl Amy Foster, and they have a child. But his wife remains

suspicious and scared of his foreignness, and especially when he seems to want to teach their baby his own language. Finally, when he is delirious with fever and babbling in a tongue she cannot understand, Amy panics, takes the child and flees, and Yanko dies abandoned and heartbroken. This is the story. It is presented in three frames of diegetic distance, two narratorial and one temporal. The primary narrator sets the scene. The oral narratives of Dr Kennedy, in two phases, are reported by this primary narrator. And Kennedy's story of Yanko in England tells of a sequence of events completed in the past, so that memory itself adds an extra mediating and distancing frame. It is just the mode of narration Conrad had employed in the recently completed 'Heart of Darkness' (serialized in *Blackwood's*, 1899). At the centre of this is a further inner frame, Yanko's story before his arrival in England - his Polish story - which is reported in Kennedy's own words as told to him by Yanko himself. This includes a number of estranging and defamiliarizing features, consequent on Yanko's limited understanding (he had never seen a train, or a ship, for example).

These distancing devices are of particular interest in a story which is about closing distance, making contact, indeed about what has been called the enigma of arrival, in which the alien irrupts into the familiar: I will return to them. When Yanko arrives on the Kentish coast he could scarcely be more outlandish, washed up in the middle of the night more dead than alive, covered in mud from head to toe, with no idea

where he is (perhaps this is America?), and not a word of the language, so that his wild gestures and incomprehensible shouting lead the locals to think he may be a supernatural being, a monster, a madman, or some kind of animal. Children pelt him with stones: others run away. The story emphasizes the narrowness of vision of the local people, their lack of education and knowledge of the world: agricultural labour has bowed them to the ground, they are ‘uncouth in body’, says the doctor, ‘and as leaden of gait as if their very hearts were loaded with chains’ (‘AF’, 153).

They are not equipped to relate to the strange arrival as a human being in need of help and sanctuary. Various sightings of him are reported, as the local people try to understand what has come to them, with the protocols of their limited categories of the unwelcome: he appears to them as a corpse, a hairy sort of gypsy fellow, a funny tramp, a drunk, a troublesome lunatic, and so on (‘AF’, 158-60). How could hospitality be proffered to such an arrival?<sup>7</sup> He is trapped and locked in a wood-lodge, out of sight.<sup>8</sup>

The local people’s ignorance is diagnosed by Dr Kennedy as a lack of imagination, a deficit which makes them unable to see the outlandish stranger as a human being, or indeed to see him at all, because they will not look. Again and again they avert their gaze and shut their ears to him. He is turned away, often with violence, and in their aversion they turn away from him, driving him or imprisoning him out of sight, and trying to shut up or shut out or shut in his alarming voice, with its weird accents and

incomprehensible words, 'enough to make one die of fright' as one of them says, and heard by Mr Smith, who locks him up in the wood-lodge, as 'this insane, disturbing voice crying obstinately through the door' ('AF', 159, 160). Imprisonment is one of the opposites of hospitality (exclusion the other). The transaction of hospitality cannot even begin so long as the voice of the stranger is not admitted, or not admitted as a human voice; hospitality depends on the possibility of human dialogue. Much more than his bizarre appearance, Yanko's alien speech will remain the chief marker of his foreignness, and disqualify him from hospitality and help until somebody appears who is willing both to see and to hear him. This is Amy Foster, who will emerge as a grotesque late avatar of the 'angel in the house'.<sup>9</sup>

She hardly seems promising material for an angel. She is plain, passive, ignorant, illiterate, charmless, a lowly subordinate with no rights in the household of her employer Mr Smith (and therefore ill qualified to perform the rites of hospitality as a hostess), and in her own family.<sup>10</sup> Kennedy notes that she is short-sighted, and so inert of mind that she seems 'everlastingly safe from all the surprises of imagination' ('AF', 150). And yet this impression is wrong, for alone among the villagers Amy does appear to possess the requisite imagination to see Yanko Goorall for what he is, and sufficiently to overcome her fear of him as to make contact and offer a classic gesture of hospitality, opening a door and offering a gift. 'Holding the door of the wood-lodge ajar, she looked in and extended to him half a loaf of white bread,' an

act of impulsive pity by which, says Kennedy, the stranger ‘was brought back again within the pale of human relations with his new surroundings’ (‘AF’, 163). Amy welcomes Yanko with something like absolute unconditional hospitality, before she can know anything about him or understand a word he says.<sup>11</sup> Like any act of hospitality, this one rests upon a theory which is also a risk. Despite or beneath the man’s terrifying appearance and barbarous language, Amy makes a generous guess at his intention ‘that the man “meant no harm”’ (‘AF’, 159). Seeing Yanko Goorall, she feels she can see into him, and read the innocence in his heart.<sup>12</sup>

This is the gamble of welcome, a gamble on the heart, on which the transaction of hospitality must rest. ‘Hospitality implies letting the other in to oneself, to one’s own space – it is invasive of the integrity of the self, or the domain of the self.’<sup>13</sup> (However foreign to one another, both host and visitor have to put themselves in each other’s power, trust that the other means them no harm, and become - to use a term important to Derrida as to Levinas - each hostage to the other.)<sup>14</sup> Inasmuch as we can never be utterly sure of another’s intentions, this mutual trust has to be a guess, and it is a form - indeed a paradigm - of intersubjectivity, resting on a confidence that we can read and share what lies hidden in the other’s heart.

Yanko will reciprocate Amy Foster’s gamble on him. Long before they can communicate in words, he has started to read her body. Her face, an open book to



him, he remembers ‘as the only comprehensible face amongst all these faces that were as closed, as mysterious, and as mute as the faces of the dead who are possessed of a knowledge beyond the comprehension of the living’ (‘AF’, 166).

Others are closed to us by the burden of their own knowledge, history, subjectivity – their foreignness, experienced as alienation and estrangement. Penetration of this mask or shield requires imagination and involves a risk, because it entails an interpretation that may be wrong. Yanko soon claims access to Amy Foster’s inner life, declaring confidently that he can see that Amy has a heart of gold beneath the frankly unattractive appearance, even though Kennedy warns him against disappointment: ‘But sometimes, cocking his hat with a little conquering air, he would defy my wisdom. He had found his bit of true gold. That was Amy Foster’s heart; which was “a golden heart, and soft to people’s misery,” he would say in the accents of overwhelming conviction.’ (‘AF’, 169)

Into mutual trust Yanko and Amy admit each other, in the transaction of hospitality in which host and guest make themselves vulnerable to each other. Though her family and community are unenthusiastic, the two become close, marry, settle down and start a family of their own. But if Amy Foster’s quantum of unexpected imagination is the faculty that enables her to see Yanko Goorall, there is another pair of eyes that sees and welcomes him as imaginatively, but more circumspectly. This is the vision, and the narration, of Kennedy, who is the local doctor but not native to

the place, an experienced observer, scientist, and man of the world, a notable traveller with something of an ethnographer's estranged perspective, accustomed to dealing with foreigners and to being treated as one.<sup>15</sup>

Kennedy's acquaintance with the stranger rests on a professional basis: like a priest, the doctor has access everywhere, but neither as a social equal nor as an economic rival. His imagination, nurtured by education and travel, is sympathetic but controlled by professional distance. We see him as closer to his visiting friend the primary narrator than to any of his rural patients. It is Kennedy who befriends Yanko and hears (and passes on) the story of Yanko's own narrative hinterland, his provenance and the journey which brought him to this place. Indeed it is proof of the doctor's imagination that he actively elicits the stranger's words, asking for his story, unlike his neighbours who do all they can to silence his voice. Kennedy's representation of Yanko is unique in Conrad, I think, for its admiring lyricism, its captivation by this exotic and vulnerable creature, whom Kennedy calls 'this soft and passionate adventurer': 'Ah! He was different: innocent of heart, and full of good will, which nobody wanted, this castaway...' ('AF', 158, 168).

The most splendid hospitality in the tale is afforded to Yanko by the narration of Dr Kennedy, a gift of which, of course, Yanko himself must be unaware, since the narration is made after his death so that the gift is, in this sense, not personal.<sup>16</sup> The

doctor's voice hosts the stranger's story, and clothes the indigent arrival in gracious, light and lyrical English, so that we see in him an almost unearthly swain among the dour Kentish peasants - 'amongst these heavy men a being lithe, supple and long-limbed, straight like a pine, with something striving upwards in his appearance as though the heart within him had been buoyant' ('AF', 153).<sup>17</sup> This remarkable version of pastoral performs with much greater eloquence, but from a distance or height, the gesture of hospitality we have seen made by Amy Foster, seeing the stranger and adducing the innocent heart beneath the outward appearance.

Kennedy's welcome of Yanko is kindly, disinterested, professional.<sup>18</sup> Amy Foster's gamble on Yanko, her faith in him, is the more absolute, however, since she puts her trust in the stranger's essence with no knowledge of his provenance, his history, or even his name, the existential hinterland which Dr Kennedy will be able to explore out of curiosity related to his own worldly experience, and because eliciting a new patient's 'history' was a routine procedure of the medical practice in which he is trained.<sup>19</sup>

Kennedy has linguistic resources unavailable to Amy, and his hospitality to Yanko is enacted discursively in his narrative report of the story Yanko has told him about his journey. Elsewhere Kennedy has expressed admiration for Yanko's beautiful voice, and in retelling the emigrant's story, he pays him the compliment of reproducing, in his own English, the estranged and defamiliarizing modality with which the story was

told to him, so that Kennedy and Yanko embrace dialogically, indeed contrapuntally, in one of the most striking narrative sequences in all Conrad.<sup>20</sup> I must illustrate with a long example.

There was a roof over him, which seemed made of glass, and was so high that the tallest mountain-pine he had ever seen would have had room to grow under it. Steam-machines rolled in at one end and out at the other. People swarmed more than you can see on a feast-day round the miraculous Holy Image in the yard of the Carmelite Convent down in the plains where, before he left his home, he drove his mother in a wooden cart - a pious old woman who wanted to offer prayers and make a vow for his safety. He could not give me an idea of how large and lofty and full of noise and smoke and gloom, and clang of iron, the place was, but someone had told him it was called Berlin. Then they rang a bell, and another steam-machine came in, and again he was taken on and on through a land that wearied his eyes by its flatness without a single bit of a hill to be seen anywhere. One more night he spent shut up in a building like a good stable with a litter of straw on the floor, guarding his bundle amongst a lot of men, of whom not one could understand a single word he said. In the morning they were all led down to the stony shores of an extremely broad muddy river, flowing not between hills but between houses that seemed immense. There was a steam-machine that went on the water,

and they all stood upon it packed tight, only now there were with them many women and children who made much noise. A cold rain fell, the wind blew in his face; he was wet through, and his teeth chattered. He and the young man from the same valley took each other by the hand. ('AF', 156)<sup>21</sup>

If Amy Foster displays an exemplary or utopian hospitality towards the uninvited stranger, and Dr Kennedy offers him a cooler enlightened and worldly welcome, their neighbours' reception of Yanko hardly counts as hospitality at all. They never really transcend or relax the aversion and fear with which they first greeted him. Every step in his integration to the community is difficult, and grudgingly conceded. First glimpsed, he is a protozoic mud man: his first sanctuary on English soil is a pigsty. Later he is shut in Mr Smith's wood-lodge, like a dangerous animal, then, against Smith's advice, released to live in the eccentric Swaffer's outhouse and work in his fields as, in effect, a slave, and to be displayed as a freakish curiosity. 'I've got something here,' Swaffer tells the doctor, and asks: 'don't you think that's a bit of a Hindoo we've got hold of here?' ('AF', 164) He is fed at the back door, like a farm dog. After providentially saving the life of Swaffer's grandchild, Yanko is given access to the domestic space of the farmhouse kitchen, and all the while Amy Foster is developing her interest in him, but what earns him a measure of acceptance by the locals is the discovery that he can labour. First he is put to work in the garden, where he digs barefoot, and later it is discovered that he can help at ploughing, milking,

feeding the bullocks and looking after the sheep. Slowly he comes into visibility. 'His foreignness had a peculiar and indelible stamp. At last people became used to seeing him. But they never became used to him.' ('AF', 168) Even working for them, he is suspected of divided loyalty at the least.

Here Derrida's coinage, 'hostipitality', becomes appropriate.<sup>22</sup> For indeed, the more Yanko moves into the space of the local – wearing the clothes, doing the work, picking up the language, marrying the girl – the more starkly that peculiar and indelible foreignness stands out. Acts of hospitality serve as a constant reminder of the difference of the guest (or guest worker), since hospitality requires, *a priori*, an outsider to receive it and an insider or host to confer it. I cannot offer hospitality in another's house: my hospitality is a reminder or assertion that I am the master of the house, even as I voluntarily relinquish a corner of that mastery to the guest.<sup>23</sup>

'Injustice ... begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality,' Derrida says.<sup>24</sup> The imposition of language is frequently one of the first acts of mastery asserted by the host: immigrants are expected to speak or learn a language not their own. Yanko (an uninvited guest after all) is tolerated, but not trusted, and certainly not assimilated. He experiences the immigrant's double bind: he will always be mistrusted for being too foreign, and he cannot be allowed to become too local. Unable to assimilate, he will be suspected, and correctly, of divided loyalties. In his adopted neighbourhood he moves in an atmosphere of hostility that pains and

puzzles him. 'He wondered what made them so hardhearted and their children so bold.' ('AF', 169) But indeed his neighbours are only asserting the conditionality of their hospitality, the condition being an acknowledgement that they belong here and he does not. Although he becomes a familiar figure in the village, and even eventually a parent and a property owner, they will never mistake him for one of them. When he is ill, not one neighbour can be found to come and help his wife.

Curiously, it is when Yanko has been admitted to the centre of local social life, the tap-room of the village pub called the Coach and Horses, that he experiences most sharply the limits of the hospitality offered him. On both occasions it seems he is a bit drunk; in any case, his obstinate foreignness re-emerges in uninhibited ways. The first time, he upsets his fellow-drinkers by singing a love-song of his country: they shout him down. The next time, he tries to show them how to dance, a demonstration that involves jumping onto the table and uttering wild and exulting cries. He is chucked out, gets a black eye. This is hospitality, both acceptance and a reminder of the limits of welcome, this time administered with violence instigated by his host the pub landlord, the master of the house.

It seems the borders are most strictly policed when it comes to overt expression of the immigrant's cultural difference, and the evidence of the basis of his subjectivity in alien cultural practice and tradition. Yanko's simple Catholic piety is an issue here,

and is regarded with suspicion by the local folk; but more important is the question of his language.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, from his first appearance among them it is his voice that arouses most hostility, incomprehension and fear in the locals, as the illegible code of a difference they find hard to forgive. To the cosmopolitan Kennedy, Yanko's voice in song is 'light and soaring, like a lark's, but with a melancholy human note'; but the neighbours, hearing the identical sound, grumble about the stranger going about the fields 'screaming dismal tunes' ('AF', 168). To them, his native language is a scandal that will always remind them he is somewhere he does not belong, and that he contains within him a history and experience that will always be dark to them. Amy Foster, we remember, felt she could access that interiority in a welcoming act of imagination. But it turns out tragically that that imagination too has severe limits, and her husband's alien language comes to be a thing of horror to her. She has shared a house and a life with the man, but things reach a stage where she literally cannot bear to hear his language in her house, because his alien words are the audible signs of the opacity of his heart.

In the end it is illness, not drink, that loosens Yanko's tongue and shows him to be ineluctably alien. But before this bleak crisis, he has already alarmed his wife by crooning to their child a song from his own country, having boasted to the doctor that he now had a son to whom he could sing and talk in his own language. His return to Polish (if it is Polish) shows his subjectivity alive but forever dark to Amy.



This stubborn assertion of his native tongue makes him increasingly an object of incomprehension and therefore fear to his wife. His heart is becoming dark to her, she loses her trust in him (might he be feigning his illness?) and his passionate and opaque speech is the sign of that hinterland from which she is excluded, which he now proposes to share with their child, in effect making the boy a changeling.

Derrida asks: 'What in fact does language name, the so-called mother tongue, the language you carry with you, the one that also carries us from birth to death? Doesn't it figure the home that never leaves us?'<sup>26</sup> Amy sees this as a linguistic kidnap or rapture, an attempt to make the child as alien and outlandish and incomprehensible as, she starts to understand, his father has always been to her. Trust breaks down, and in his heart she reads no longer innocence but an intention to make her own child a stranger to her. As Yanko descends into fever, muttering unintelligibly, he begins to become invisible to her: 'her dumb eyes that once in her life had seen an enticing shape,' says Kennedy, now seem 'to see nothing at all'. He shouts at her - 'he may have thought he was speaking in English' - and she scoops up the child and runs away, leaving him to die ('AF', 173, 174).

We must suppose that in the end Amy Foster feels she has made a mistake, a misreading of Yanko Goorall's heart. Others feared him. She felt she could see and reach the goodness in him. But in the end he reveals himself to be beyond her. In his heart he is and always has been resident of a place she could never access. Yanko

had acknowledged to Kennedy that he could never return home, but every word uttered in his native language shows his deep links to a lost community unknowable to the people among whom he is living and, now, dying. Amy's belief that the stranger could be understood, trusted, welcomed, and loved was wrong, it seems, and she comes to agree with her neighbours: the immigrant is incomprehensible and dangerous, a barbarian.<sup>27</sup> Realizing her vulnerability to this man she does not know, she closes her imagination to him, and takes steps to withdraw his rights as husband and father, escaping with the child. Yanko dies with the English word 'Merciful' on his lips. What can it mean? The verdict of Amy Foster's father - 'I don't know that it isn't for the best' - is both a Sophoclean summation and an expression of relief at finally getting rid of an unwelcome guest ('AF', 175). Amy herself quickly begins to forget Yanko Goorall, and neither she nor the child bears his name.<sup>28</sup> It will be for Kennedy to perform the labour of memory and commemoration.<sup>29</sup>

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There is some reason to believe that Conrad might have endorsed Amy's bleak conclusion. He described the story to his translator H.-D. Davray as an 'histoire lugubre' and glossed it: 'Idée: différence essentielle des races'.<sup>30</sup> But when it came to unbridgeable differences and distances, Conrad did not stop at races. Said objected to the universalisation of the theme of exile in modern writing, but he could have

found a much bigger target in the theme of the alien, which is thoroughly pervasive in modern and modernist literature, and omnipresent in Conrad. In his fiction, full of intercultural encounters, it is not only strangers who are alien to one another and speak to each other in foreign languages. We are all castaways like Yanko on an alien shore. ‘Life knows us not and we do not know life,’ Conrad exclaims in a famous letter to Cunninghame Graham: ‘we don’t even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit.’<sup>31</sup> In ‘An Outpost of Progress’ (1897), Kayerts and Carlier speak the same language but are helplessly unable to understand each other, anybody else, or even themselves. ‘Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing. [...] Nobody knows what suffering or sacrifice mean – except, perhaps the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions.’<sup>32</sup> We could multiply instances of linguistic solipsism from every Conrad story, with examples of the unknowability of other people, and the inadequacy of language as a means of discovering what lies in people’s hearts, and even in our own. In this case, Yanko’s actually foreign language is just an overdetermination of a general predicament, and the spasm of imagination that seemed to give Amy Foster access to the stranger’s heart, and was the basis for her welcome of him, seems to have been a dangerous error, though one immediately

reciprocated by Yanko, leaving each vulnerable to the other, and set for tragedy. 'We live, as we dream, alone,' as Marlow tells his companions in 'Heart of Darkness'.<sup>33</sup> Intersubjectivity, that opening gesture of hospitality and vulnerability whereby we make a claim to see and share the inner life of another and offer our own, is an illusion. We may guess but we cannot see.

This unsentimental and unromantic coolness, sceptical of intimacy, may have roots in Conrad's biography, his childhood bereavements, a certain aristocratic haughtiness, the vagabondage of his career at sea, his reading of Schopenhauer, or the reticence of the talk of men.<sup>34</sup> But in other ways we recognize it as being far from unique. Here, with a sharp awareness of difference, the unknowability of others, and the limits of language and sympathy, we are on familiar ground that Conrad shares with the great modernists, Kafka and Lawrence, Proust and Brecht. It is an art of strangers, an art of scepticism. In the late nineteenth century, as Rachel Hollander and others have persuasively argued, we can see a shift away from a practice of fictional realism and an ethics devoted to knowing and sympathizing with the experience of another, towards an aesthetics and ethics that acknowledge the limits of sympathy and knowledge, and the impossibility of fully comprehending the human scene or bridging the distance between self and other.<sup>35</sup> When Amy Foster imagined sympathetically that she could see the heart of Yanko Goorall, she was

acting like a Victorian novelist revealing authoritatively the interiority and authentic moral life of a character. It was as close as can be to an act of unconditional hospitality (though one later to be rescinded). But modern writers are more sceptical of the faith on which such a claim must rest. We cannot really claim to know the guest, and in any case a fully open hospitality is almost unimaginable – ‘We do not know what hospitality is,’ Derrida repeatedly insists<sup>36</sup> – and to offer someone hospitality is to have already asserted a claim to authority over them. Here there is a passage in a letter from Conrad to John Galsworthy that is of extraordinary interest.

One must explore deep and believe the incredible to find the few particles of truth floating in an ocean of insignificance. [...] The fact is you want more scepticism at the very foundation of your work. Scepticism the tonic of minds, the tonic of life, the agent of truth – the way of art and salvation. In a book you should love the idea and be scrupulously faithful to your conception of life. There lies the honour of the writer, not in the fidelity to his personages. You must never allow them to decoy you out of yourself. As against your people you must preserve an attitude of perfect indifference – the part of creative power.<sup>37</sup>

Conradian scepticism is a name both for mastery and for critical distance. Conrad is never inhospitable to his characters, and indeed as he repeatedly says, the basic

motive for telling stories about them is solidarity, an attitude which might be described as hospitality at a distance. In *A Personal Record* (1912), remembering the writing of his first novel, he asks: ‘Why should the memory of these beings seen, in their obscure sun-bathed existence, demand to express itself in the shape of a novel, except on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on this earth?’<sup>38</sup> But his hospitality to them is not absolute: ‘the part of creative power’ depends on a refusal to surrender to them, to allow them to decoy him out of himself, to become their hostage, as he thought Galsworthy had become the hostage of his characters.<sup>39</sup>

We have arrived, by an admittedly long and laborious route, at the form of aesthetic hospitality that is most relevant to the self-referentiality of the story ‘Amy Foster’.

The tale seems to show that absolute hospitality is as impossible as Derrida says, and that the magnificent gesture of openness performed by Amy rested on a false belief that she could see into the heart of Yanko and that there were no borders between them - that, at some level, they spoke the same language. The boorish inhospitability of the neighbours is certainly not held up as a preferable model for dealing with others. But a more conditional, modest, and viable hospitality is enacted by the narrative itself, on conditions of disinterest and distance, mediated as we have noted through two or more frames of observation and utterance, making no absolute claims to knowledge or possession of the guest. This aesthetics of distance - Conrad

named it ‘indifference’ in his letter to Galsworthy, but ‘disinterest’ might have been a better word – is indeed ‘the part of creative power’ for him. It is instantiated not only in observation of the chronic and often comic inability of his characters to fathom one another or to become transparent to outside observation, but also in a whole battery of rhetorical devices that eschew the sympathetic romantic comprehensive intersubjectivity of classic nineteenth-century realism, and instead carefully remove the reader to a distance from the characters.<sup>40</sup> These devices include the double or multiple narrative frames in a story like *Lord Jim* (1900) or *Chance* (1913), the anonymous participant-observer on board the ‘Narcissus’, the arrhythmic temporality of *Nostramo* (1904), the vaunted ironic method that holds the Verlocs at arm’s length in *The Secret Agent* (1907), the remote and thoroughly shifty teacher of languages who narrates *Under Western Eyes* (1911), and, in this case, the removal of the story of Amy Foster and Yanko Goorall from the reader through two frames of narration, Kennedy’s and that of the entirely uninvolved primary narrator. All of these ways of representation maintain an ethical recognition of the distance between self and other, and respect the fundamental opacity of the heart, while performing in the disinterested (risk-free) aesthetic sphere of imagination an act of hospitality that cultivates that sense of human solidarity that motivated all Conrad’s work.

These are, I think, some of the aesthetic implications of the drama of hospitality enacted and embodied in ‘Amy Foster’. As for its political implications for our

times, recent developments have only confirmed Edward Said's recognition that the story's theme lies at the heart of much modern history, and, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, on a scale that even Said might not have anticipated. After due allowance is made for its unique fictional specificity, this troubling and enigmatic story provides a map of the emotional landscape confronting both sides – guest and host – of the immigrant experience. It does not, of course, tell us how to be, or how to treat, an immigrant. The drama of hospitality in 'Amy Foster' is, like any other literary text, actually a rehearsal.

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How can we see Yanko Goorall, since that above all is the task Conrad sets himself and his reader? The Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, written in 1897, a few years before 'Amy Foster', contains in embryo a statement of this aesthetic and ethics of distance and solidarity, and also recommends it as a way of reading. At the end of that document, Conrad makes a graceful apology for taking up his readers' time explaining these matters, the aim of art as he sees it, with the justification that it may add to our interest to be helped to understand what somebody is up to in their labours. I said earlier that there are few portraits of the artist at work in Conrad. Here is a strange one.



Sometimes, stretched at ease in the shade of a roadside tree, we watch the motions of a labourer in a distant field, and after a time, begin to wonder languidly as to what the fellow may be at. We watch the movements of his body, the waving of his arms, we see him bend down, stand up, hesitate, begin again. It may add to the charm of an idle hour to be told the purpose of his exertions. If we know he is trying to lift a stone, to dig a ditch, to uproot a stump, we look with a more real interest at his efforts; we are disposed to condone the jar of his agitation upon the restfulness of the landscape; and even, if in a brotherly frame of mind, we may bring ourselves to forgive his failure. We understood his object, and, after all, the fellow has tried, and perhaps he had not the strength—and perhaps he had not the knowledge. We forgive, go on our way—and forget.<sup>41</sup>

It is a prosaic and comically modest, even absurd picture of the labours of the artist. It is also an instance of the Conradian practice of alienated representation, here both mediated and distanced, as in ‘Amy Foster’, through the eyes of an imaginative but detached leisured observer of the scene.<sup>42</sup> Ian Watt commends the ‘serene metaphorical distance’ of the exemplum of the labourer.<sup>43</sup> We are invited to watch the exertions of that faraway figure, whether he be author or character, as he struggles in his earnest if doomed exertions. If we can see what he is about, this may ignite in us a brotherly frame of mind, so that we welcome him for a brief while into

our hearts. We may know little about this labourer seen across a distant field, but at least now perhaps we can guess his name.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge MA, 1966), 113-14.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA, 2000), 179. In this essay Said sees ours as the age of the exile and refugee. ‘Against this large, impersonal setting, exile cannot be made to serve notions of humanism. On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible....’ (174).

<sup>3</sup> Said, *Reflections*, 555.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Conrad, ‘Amy Foster’, *Typhoon and Other Tales*, ed. Cedric Watts (Oxford, 2002), 154, 158. Further references to this edition, abbreviated as ‘AF’, are given in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to John Galsworthy, 15 September 1907, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1988), 475.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Marguerite Poradowska, 24 April 1894, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, 153-54.

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<sup>7</sup> Wiesław Krajka adduces anthropological authority for the tendency of ‘traditional cultures’ to view strangers as dangerous and magical, and to avoid contact with them ‘in order to prevent a transfer of evil power, or a contamination of familiar values’.

Wiesław Krajka, ‘The Alien in Joseph Conrad’s “Amy Foster” and Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, *Conrad and Poland*, ed. Alex S. Kurczaba (Boulder, Col., 1996), 195-215; 209.

<sup>8</sup> There are unsettling correspondences between ‘Amy Foster’ and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), one of the less important being the temporary settlement of the alien creature in a wood-lodge.

<sup>9</sup> Yanko often refers to Amy as an angel. Coventry Patmore’s poem about his conjugal ideal, ‘The Angel in the House’, was published in 1854.

<sup>10</sup> For the hostess as a figure of difference in the domestic drama of hospitality, see Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner ... but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other ... without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.’ Jacques Derrida & Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, tr. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, 2000), 25.

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<sup>12</sup> A search of this story of some 12,500 words reveals the word ‘heart’ or ‘hearts’ occurs seventeen times, not counting its embedded presence in ‘hearty’, ‘heartbroken’ and ‘hard-hearted’.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh, 2010), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Hostipitality’, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5:3 (2000), 3-18; 9.

<sup>15</sup> From his Celtic name, Kennedy may be of Scots or Irish origin: he is not a Kentishman. Keith Carabine discusses Kennedy’s experience of his own strangeness, and notes that, like Marlow, Kennedy seems ‘un-English’. Keith Carabine, “‘Irreconcilable Differences’: England as an “Undiscovered Country” in Conrad’s “Amy Foster””, *English Literature and the Wider World vol. 4: The Ends of the Earth 1876-1918*, ed. Simon Gatrell (London, 1992), 187-204; 191.

<sup>16</sup> The situation has some similarity to the one in which, in *A Personal Record* (1912), Conrad imagines his apology to the ghost of Almayer, fictionalized in his first novel. ‘Your name was the common property of the winds: it, as it were, floated naked over the waters about the Equator. I wrapped round its unhonoured form the royal mantle of the tropics and have essayed to put into the hollow sound the very anguish of paternity – feats which you did not demand from me – but remember

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that all the toil and all the pain were mine.’ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, ed. Zdzisław Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge, 2008), 84.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad’s reading of English poetry is under-explored, but it is possible that somewhere behind the portrayal of Yanko as swain lies a memory of the most famous of all English poems, Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1751).

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy’s liberal tolerance has its own limits. In retelling Yanko’s story, he makes several remarks about ‘Jews’ and ‘usurers’ (157, 161) that might nowadays be construed as anti-Semitic, although conceivably he may just be relaying an attitude expressed by Yanko in his own narrative. The history of the Jewish diaspora could itself be seen as a defining instance of guests welcomed with hostility, and, as a Pole in exile, Conrad himself might have been able to attest to this personally. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who was born Wilhelm Kostrowitzky, complained of being intemperately attacked in print by people who assumed he was Jewish - “les anti-Sémites qui ne peuvent se figurer qu’un Polonais ne soit pas juif”. Letter to Madeleine Pagès, 30 July 1915, *Oeuvres Complètes de Guillaume Apollinaire*, ed. Michel Décaudin, vol. 4 (Paris, 1966), 490.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Patience, sensitivity, and sympathy were necessary qualities in gaining insight into the patient’s condition when taking a case history and listening to the patient’s

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account of symptoms experienced and pains endured.’ Anne Digby, *Making a Medical Living: Doctors and Patients in the English Market for Medicine, 1720-1911* (Cambridge, 1994), 77.

<sup>20</sup> It was in his ‘Reflections on Exile’ that Edward Said formulated this idea of ‘an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*’. *Reflections on Exile*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> In one sense what we find here is what was withheld in the account of the passengers who took ship on the *Patna* in *Lord Jim*: an account of the hinterland of the journey, the history that precedes embarkation.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida’s neologism, which conflates the Latin ‘hospes’ (guest) with ‘hostis’ (enemy), is designed to serve as a verbal reminder of the hostility latent or implicit in hospitality. See Jacques Derrida, ‘Hostipitality’.

<sup>23</sup> The obligation to offer hospitality ‘entails both the opening of the private space to outside others and, simultaneously, the host’s ownership and control of that space’. Rachel Hollander, *Narrative Hospitality in Late Victorian Fiction* (London, 2012), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Yanko’s nationality is not specified in the story and nor is his native language but it is usually assumed that he is a speaker of a dialect of Polish. In a letter Conrad

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referred to him as ‘un montagnard autrichien-polonais’. Letter to H.-D. Davray, 2 April 1902, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 399. But if Kennedy is right that Yanko’s origins are among ‘the Sclavonian peasantry in the more remote provinces of Austria’ (161), he would probably have spoken a Shtokavian dialect of what is now (South Slavic) Serbo-Croatian. (Information from anonymous *RES* reviewer.) The indeterminacy of Yanko’s language only reinforces his status in the story as an alien barbarian locked into linguistic isolation.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 89.

<sup>27</sup> Arguably this aversion or turn away from the stranger may be re-enacted in Conrad’s decisions on a title for this tale, which was originally to be called ‘A Husband’ or ‘A Castaway’ before Yanko was excluded from the final choice, ‘Amy Foster’. See letter to J. B. Pinker, 3 June 1901, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 330.

<sup>28</sup> It was probably not his name in any case. The name ‘Goorall’ is an approximation of the Polish *góral*, meaning a man from the highlands. ‘Yanko’ is a diminutive of the Polish form of ‘John’. The child grows up as Johnny Foster.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy becomes Yanko’s narrative executor, as Marlow in ‘Heart of Darkness’ becomes Kurtz’s. ‘That Conrad is at once Yanko and Kennedy cannot be doubted: pathetic action and the dramatic, interpreting imagination are merged incongruously, and eternally separated by circumstance and time.’ Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad*, 114.

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<sup>30</sup> Letter to H.-D. Davray, 2 April 1902, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 399.

<sup>31</sup> Letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 14 January 1898, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Unrest*, ed. Allan H. Simmons and J. H. Stape (Cambridge, 2012), 91. It would be a mistake to see this as a distinctly modernist opinion. ‘Though the names *Glory* and *Gratitude* be the same in every Man’s mouth, through a whole Country, yet the complex collective *Idea*, which every one thinks on, or intends by that name, is apparently very different in Men using the same language.’ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, III.ix.8 (Oxford, 1975), 479.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, ed. Owen Knowles (Cambridge, 2010), 70.

<sup>34</sup> The Conradian scepticism exemplified in ‘Amy Foster’ by Kennedy bears some relation to the topos of critical distance which Amanda Anderson, in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, 2001), finds at the heart of many Victorian aesthetic and intellectual projects. It differs, however, from what Anderson (4) calls ‘the distanced and impartial view’ in its partiality (scepticism does not prevent Kennedy from being much more sympathetic to Yanko than to his neighbours, for example) and in recusing itself from any stance



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of omniscient realism. Kennedy's version of critical distance is related to his ethnographic experience, as a former traveller and explorer, and to his professional activities and status as a general medical practitioner.

<sup>35</sup> 'Specifically, I argue that an ethics based on sympathy and the ability of the self to identify with others gives way to an ethics of hospitality, in which respecting the limits of knowledge and welcoming the stranger define fiction's relationship to both reader and world.' Rachel Hollander, *Narrative Hospitality in Late Victorian Fiction* (London, 2013), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Hostipitality', 6 and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to John Galsworthy, 11 November 1901, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2, 359.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, 23-24.

<sup>39</sup> As did D. H. Lawrence, in his argument that: 'Galsworthy had not quite enough of the superb courage of his satire. He faltered, and gave in to the Forsytes. It is a thousand pities.' D. H. Lawrence, 'John Galsworthy', in *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays* ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge, 1985), 207-220; 213.

<sup>40</sup> See the chapter 'Modernism and the Attack on Sentiment', in Michael Bell, *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling* (Basingstoke, 2000), 160-69. Bell examines various modernist solutions to what was perceived as 'false feeling' (165).

See also Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian*

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*Fiction* (Ithaca, 2000), Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford, 2007), and Rachel Hollander, *Narrative Hospitality*.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition (New York, 1979), 147-48.

<sup>42</sup> The primary narrator of 'Amy Foster' is holidaying in Kent at the invitation of Dr Kennedy.

<sup>43</sup> Ian Watt, 'Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*', in Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* 151-67; 162.