

## J. B. Pinker and the Pseudonymous Publication of “The Nature of a Crime”

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“The Nature of a Crime,” the third and final collaboration between Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford, was first published in the *English Review* in 1909 under the pseudonym Baron Ignatz von Aschendorf. Responsibility for the pseudonymous publication is generally assigned to Ford. Not only did Ford use a succession of different pseudonyms in the course of his writing career (Max Saunders lists nine in his biography [2012 (II), 463]), but as the editors of the eighth volume of Conrad’s *Collected Letters* observe, the name “Aschendorf” “combines Ford’s name backwards with the German word for ashes” (*Letters* VIII, 216). (As Ford was to change his surname from “Hueffer” to “Ford” only in 1919, the pseudonym hid Ford’s given name.) Conrad’s own decision not to publish under his birth name does not appear to have involved a desire to conceal a connection between the man and the work; “Joseph Conrad” is more helpfully understood as a pen name than a pseudonym. With regard to “The Nature of a Crime,” however, the rôle of James Brand Pinker in ensuring that the story was not published under the authors’ names has some puzzling aspects to it.

On March 6, 1906, in a letter to Elsie Hueffer, Ford described a work comprised of “a series of letters from a man about to commit suicide! – wh. Pinker wants me to publish anonymously. I think it will ‘go’. It’s awful piffle” (Saunders 2012 [I], 211). The date and the description make it almost certain that the work in question is “The Nature of a Crime” in embryo. Pinker had been Ford’s literary agent since 1901, a year after the association between him and Conrad had begun. Two years after writing the letter to Elsie, on 16 October 1908, Ford wrote to Pinker about the story, now formally a collaboration between himself and Conrad rather than one for which he was

solely responsible.

My cousin Baron Ignatz von Aschendorf has been in communication with me about the M. S. called "The Psychology of Crime" which you forwarded me. I have let him know that I may probably publish it in a later number of the Review, upon the same terms as H. G. Wells gets, & he agrees to this. He is also willing that you should act as his agent. (Ludwig 1965, 26)

Although this letter may appear to be a bit of playfulness on Ford's part (Pinker must have known who the actual authors were), it might have had a more serious purpose, as Pinker would have been able use it to negotiate with publishers for foreign, and book, publication of the novel. Such publishers would doubtless have been less impressed by the generous terms the baron was extracting from the *English Review* had they known that these were effectively terms that Ford was offering himself.

When, many years later, Ford wished to republish the story, he wrote to Conrad on 8 November, 1923, noting that it "was published in the first number of the *English Review* under a pseudonym principally because as we were both writing in that number it would have seemed as it were tautological to publish a collaboration" (Ludwig 1965, 156). Ford's memory fails him with regard to one detail: the story was published not in the first number of the *English Review*, but in the April and May 1909 numbers of this journal – the fifth and sixth numbers, and the first and second numbers of its second volume. Ford's letter does however suggest that the pseudonym was designed to obscure the fact that an embarrassingly large amount of the content of the new periodical was written by the editor of the journal and his friend. In his reply to this letter, written 10 November, Conrad makes it clear that he had no responsibility for the pseudonym: "Why on earth did we select a German pseudonym for that? Is it because the stuff is introspective and somewhat redolent of weltenschmerz?" (*Letters*, VIII, 216).

At much the same time that Ford reported Pinker's desire that the story be published anonymously, Pinker was trying to place a novel by another of his authors, Ernest Bramah, who had joined his list in 1905 (Wilson 2007, 75). "Ernest Bramah" was again a pen name: the author was born Ernest Brammah Smith. In the course of 1906 Bramah completed a dystopian novel entitled *What Might Have Been* about the overthrow of a democratically elected Labour government by a "Unity League" joining together the middle and upper classes. Bramah's biographer, Aubrey Wilson, reports:

The manuscript was offered by Pinker to John Murray but his approach was very strange, if not positively mysterious. In submitting the manuscript Pinker claimed that he did not know the author but that he had received it through a client who was a friend of the author who wished to have the book published anonymously. It is extremely unlikely Pinker did not know that the manuscript was the work of Bramah. More intriguing is why Bramah did not want to be identified. (Wilson, 88)

Bramah had already published a book and a number of journal pieces anonymously, in addition to other works published under his own name, so it is quite possible that the desire for anonymity was his, but Pinker's fiction that he was negotiating with a middleman who had received the work from its author is so similar to the conceit that Pinker appears to have cooked up with Ford about the authorship of "The Nature of a Crime" that it is quite possible that in both cases it was Pinker, rather than Ford or Bramah (or, indeed, Conrad), who initiated the possibility of anonymous or pseudonymous publication. John Murray did indeed publish Bramah's novel anonymously, early in 1907.

In both cases, the concealment of the actual authors was abandoned on republication. Bramah's novel was republished in a cheap edition by Thomas Nelson in a slightly abridged form

in 1909 with a new title (*The Secret of the League*) and under his own name. “The Nature of a Crime” was published under the actual authors’ names (although with some alternation between “Ford” and “Hueffer” on Ford’s part) in the *Transatlantic Review* in 1924, and in book editions by Duckworth and Doubleday Page in the same year, by which time both Conrad and Pinker were dead.

Ford’s letter to Conrad of 8 November, 1923, suggests one reason why pseudonymous publication was chosen for the story in 1909. But why was Pinker advising anonymous publication in 1906, long before the idea of the *English Review* was mooted? And why, in the same year, was he complicit in getting a work by another of his authors published anonymously? Anonymous or pseudonymous publication may be chosen by an author (or recommended by an agent) for a number of reasons. There may be a desire for the work to be read without preconceptions formed by acquaintance with an author’s other works. The work may be seen as a pot-boiler (or, to use Ford’s term, “piffle”) which, were its authorship known, would damage the reputation of its creator. There may be a wish to avoid associating the author with personal attacks or political opinions in a work. And authorial anonymity may intrigue potential readers and inspire them to buy the book in order to see if they can guess who the author is. Bramah’s novel was described by one later commentator as “a gloomy, reactionary, fiercely illiberal novel” (Lethbridge 1985, vi), and Pinker may have counselled anonymous publication to avoid damaging the author’s saleability by having him associated with political views that might have offended potential readers of his lighter works. It is hard to see that any similar concern might lie behind Pinker’s wish that the story outlined to him by Ford in 1906 be published anonymously.

Whatever the case, Pinker’s complicity with regard to the concealment of the authorship of both “The Nature of a Crime” and *What Might have Been* in 1906 reveals an aspect of his professional activity that may say something about the sort of considerations included in his marketing of both authors and books at this time.

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