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Review Article
Recent Conrad Criticism

Joseph Conrad: Times Remembered. By John Conrad. New York: Cambridge Univ., 1981. Pp. xiv, 218. \$19.95

Conrad's Later Novels. By Gary Geddes. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ., 1980. Pp. x, 223. \$15.95

Conrad in the Nineteenth Century. By Ian Watt. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1980. Pp. xvii, 375. \$15.95

Joseph Conrad's insistent ghost has certainly not yet been laid to rest, as the appearance of these three works within little more than a year of each other indicates. The renewal of interest in his work, the rediscovery of his precociously or perhaps prophetically modern voice, which began in the mid-fifties, has waxed and waned in the usual rhythm of such interests, but it has never died. Conrad's alien voice continues to speak—or whisper—and perhaps more insistently as we live out the reality—the uncertainties, the paradoxes, the dreams, and the nightmares—of the century that he foresaw so much more clearly than his contemporaries. His alien voice resonates in our communal vision: in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* it reverberates from the big screen, our current medium for the expression of the communal nightmare; more quietly, perhaps, but no less insistently, we still hear it in works of piety or of scholarship.

John Conrad's book is a work of piety. Conrad is a sympathetic but Olympian figure to his youngest son, who was encouraged to write this book by Richard Curle. Conrad, who did not write revealingly about his private life because he had a horror of appearing "*en pantouffles*," as he said, need have had no worry about his son's memoirs; John apparently saw nothing slipshod, down-at-heel, or half-dressed about his father, or, if he did, he does not report it. We see a sympathetic father capable of abetting a young boy's follies by secret pacts not to let

his mother know about such escapades as tree-climbing; we see a father worried when his son takes a longer walk than expected with one of Conrad's own friends, and so forth. John's report of the one time, apparently, when he did see his father undressed may well be, in fact, an attempt to cover up an embarrassingly naked truth about Conrad. Unlike Conrad's older son, Borys, who reported having seen a bullet wound above Conrad's heart, John saw duelling scars and describes them in enough detail to make it clear that they were not the scars of a bullet. John tells us also that, upon inquiry about the scars, his father explained about duelling. Currently, Conrad scholars are inclined to the view that Conrad tried to commit suicide; Bernard C. Meyer, for instance, in his psychoanalytic biography of Conrad, feels that the evidence of a suicide attempt seems "irrefutable," and it has important consequences for his interpretation. Conrad, of course, never wavered in his story that he had been wounded—almost fatally—in a duel. Is John's account a pious cover-up, or is it an accurate report? It will undoubtedly raise the question again among Conrad scholars and biographers. Perhaps the older John Conrad remembers what he would like to have seen; perhaps he remembers exactly. It is not my place here to try to decide. His book is nevertheless of interest to students of Conrad's life, particularly for its "final phase"; it should be of interest, too, to students of Conrad's friends. Young John's view of Ford Madox Ford is particularly interesting; he seems to have conceived an intense and lifelong dislike for Ford. If Ford did in fact treat the boy in the callous and vindictive way that John claims he did, it may give us another angle from which to view the rupture between Ford and Conrad.

Geddes' book, too, is perhaps in some sense motivated by piety. His book on the later novels is an attempt to rescue them from the implications of the "achievement and decline" thesis of critics such as Moser and Guerard. I must confess that I am sympathetic to this attempt; I have my own pieties and I have never been comfortable with Moser's thesis that Conrad's later novels show a clear falling off in creative energy or with Guerard's dismissal of such a work, for instance, as *Victory* ("one of the worst novels for which high claims have ever been made by critics of standing," (*Conrad the Novelist*, [New York: Atheneum, 1967], p. 272). From my first reading of *Victory*, I have always felt it to have a peculiar and special power. The case must be made, as it is by Geddes, that the later novels deserve closer attention, that they must be examined in the light of Conrad's changing intentions, not in the light of the achievements of his major period—in *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*. However, despite my own piety, I need more convincing yet

to see *Chance*, *The Rescue*, or *The Arrow of Gold* (less so *The Rover*) as other than considerably lesser achievements.

Ian Watt promises a second book to follow his examination of Conrad's work up through *Lord Jim*; because he shows signs of antagonism to the achievement and decline thesis, perhaps in his second book he will be able to persuade me to re-evaluate the later novels. His first book on Conrad is certainly a good one. I think it is a landmark—perhaps a high-water mark—in Conrad criticism. What I like most about it is its tone and method. It is common-sensical; it neither flies too high nor digs too deep; if judgment is unwarranted, Watt is quite content to leave it in suspension. He describes his critical approach as a commitment to “the literal imagination—the analytic commentary restricts itself to what the imagination can discover through a literal reading of the work” (p. x). The approach combines biography, literary history, the history of ideas, and close reading; it brings us back, in dealing with Conrad, to the approach of the best of the New Critics, those, such as Cleanth Brooks, whose close examination of the text was informed by formidable understanding of biography and history, something they themselves took for granted but later New Critics did not always have or appreciate. Anyway, Watt presents Conrad's achievement in its context, not in isolation from its context; in doing so, he helps to inform or “light up” the imagination of the reader so that he, too, can participate in a “literal reading of the work.”

Watt reminds us about what we too easily forget, that “Conrad's basic literary and intellectual outlook was European; [that] his moral and social character remained largely Polish” (p. 8). This underscores one of the major contributions of Conrad to English literature: through his work blows an East Wind that should help sweep some of the cobwebs from the little used attic of the anglo-saxon mind. Watt's examination of the “Preface” of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is a particularly valuable exploration of the relationship between Conrad's aesthetics and the aesthetic ideas of such figures as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Flaubert, Pater, Maupassant, and Schopenhauer. Clearly, what we call his impressionism or his symbolism, his adherences and his departures, must be understood in this wider context, just as only by understanding them can we appreciate his assertion that he is free of the dogmas of any such schools.

In fact, however, Watt's treatment of this background is sometimes so cursory as to be misleading. When he suggests parallels between the aesthetics of the “Preface” and the ideas of Pater, Maupassant, and Schopenhauer, he draws on Schopenhauer's view that, “apart from death or suicide...the best available escape” from the horror of the

immersion of the will in the flux of appearances is "the attitude of detached aesthetic contemplation," a view which, he points out, joined with those of the Romantics and of Arnold to put art in the place of religion as "man's supreme source of truth" (pp. 86-87). Conrad departs from this view of art by emphasizing the personal ("the artist descends within himself") and, by faithfulness to personal memory, creates an art that evokes solidarity. What needs more emphasis is the fact that the "Preface" is Conrad's declaration of independence from the view that the artist's role is that of detached contemplation; it is his rejection of the aesthetic attitude of Schopenhauer, Flaubert, and Maupassant, which does indeed inform *Almayer's Folly*. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is presented with "aloof love," from an angle provided by the narrator, a voice of the crew which is, as Watt points out, analogous to that of "the Greek chorus," an anonymous, communal, yet personally involved voice. Friedrich Nietzsche, by the way, found in the detached but involved Greek chorus the means to overturn his own devotion to Schopenhauer in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to reject the merely spectatorial attitude of aesthetic contemplation for one of aesthetic involvement (see Sect. VII). In the "Preface," moreover, art is not "man's supreme source of truth." It is the source of meaning (which is the way in which it replaces religion). Conrad had protested against cuts that Edward Garnett wanted to make in the "Preface"; he wanted to leave in lines "conveying the opinion that in 'art alone there is a meaning in endeavor as apart from success'...there is the saving truth—the truth that saves most of us from eternal damnation" (letter of 28 Aug. 1897). This sounds very similar to Nietzsche's view of art as the healing sorceress who saves us from a Buddhistic—or Schopenhaurian—"denial of the will" and turns our "fits of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live" (Sect. VII).

I emphasize this similarity between Conrad and Nietzsche because I think it can help us understand, more fully than Watt allows, Conrad's victory over the bleaker aspects of nihilism; both Conrad and Nietzsche were drawn to but finally found remarkably similar ways to reject, in fact to invert, the pessimistic consequences of the Schopenhauerian aesthetic. It is not a question of influence; it is rather, I think, a question of convergent ideas, like those of Darwin and Wallace. Watt points out that "much of the moral perspective of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is consonant with the critical, if not the programmatic, side of Nietzsche.... Whereas Nietzsche proposes as an alternative [to the "excessively decadent" attitude of the crew towards Wait] the proud warrior morality of the Superman, Conrad does not." His evidence is that Captain Allistoun shares the potentially destructive

pity of the crew (p. 111). This is unfair to Nietzsche and misleading about Conrad; Nietzsche's alternative to decadent pity is self-overcoming. The "Supermen" he names are seldom "proud warriors"; they are men, like Goethe, Socrates, Christ, who have imposed meaning upon their lives by overcoming themselves. By doing this, they alone, in a universe without God, "give meaning to the earth." Captain Allistoun, Baker, Singleton, even Podmore when he makes his famous pot of coffee, overcome themselves and thus oppose the decadence of pity. Singleton seems entirely without pity when he tells Wait to get on with his dying.

Watt points out that "Conrad apparently disliked Nietzsche," to substantiate which he quotes a passage from "The Crime of Partition," where Conrad's reference to Nietzsche "occurs within the controlling context of the Poles' hatred of their German oppressors" (p. 111n). This is much too simple. Conrad did reject the popularized exaggeration of Nietzsche's notion of the "Superman" (i.e., "the proud warrior mentality"), but there was much not only in Nietzsche's critical but also in his "programmatic" side that he must have found congenial. I refer the interested reader to Edward Garnett's article "Nietzsche," published in *Outlook*, July 8, 1899 (later collected in *Friday Nights*, 1921). In September, 1899, Conrad wrote to Garnett: "I had letters about your Nietzsche from all sorts of people. You have stirred some brains! I don't think there is anything wrong with *your* wits." Garnett's description of "Nietzsche's ideal of a stern, hard, noble nature, with an instinct for beauty, for fineness of life [which] evolved from his innate hostility to all the cheapness, compromise, and cowardliness of average human nature..." his identification of Nietzsche's "special inspiration" as "Pain, cruel, prolonged [that] pursued, chased, and captured him, deepened the world for him..., brought out all his endurance, power of scorning, force of resistance..." must have struck responsive chords in Conrad, as must Zarathustra's cry, which Garnett quotes in his closing paragraph: "Do I seek for my happiness? I seek for my work."

Watt has done much to suggest and explore the social, intellectual, and aesthetic context in which Conrad wrote, much that is very valuable; I would suggest, however, that Conrad's relation to Nietzsche, for one, is much more complex than he suggests. It would be a useful addendum to his study should someone pursue it.

I will add only one more quibble to my reaction to what I found to be on the whole an admirable book. Watt applies his commitment to the "literal imagination" very usefully to *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* (perhaps a bit exhaustingly so to *Lord Jim*). He avoids psychological or exotically symbolic readings of either; indeed he claims—and I

wholeheartedly agree—that there is “very little in *Heart of Darkness* which cannot be understood by a literal interpretation of what is said and done” (p. 239). It is a common-sense approach that demands the best we are capable of: close attention to what is said and done, without preconceptions but with the full engagement of our imagination. Of course, not everyone will see precisely the same things or free themselves from the same preconceptions. The approach really calls for a dialogue, a sharing of views; I will offer this on one point.

Discussing the conclusion of the novel, in which Marlow lies to Kurtz’ Intended, Watt says: “At the end of the scene we are left wondering whether it is worse that the ideals of the Intended should continue in all their flagrant untruth, or that Marlow should have been unable to invoke any faith in whose name he could feel able to challenge them” (p. 249). I believe Marlow has invoked such a faith. In Watt’s catalogue and discussion of Marlow’s various lies, he omitted what I think is the crucial one, the one Marlow tells Kurtz just before Kurtz dies. This is a lie that is overlooked in almost all critical discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, yet one that, I think, the application of the method of the literal imagination reveals. Why does Kurtz cry “The horror! The Horror!” at just the moment he does? Marlow thinks this cry was “an affirmation, a moral victory...,” but, with characteristic humility, does not dwell on his own part in evoking it. He came into Kurtz’ cabin with a candle one evening and

was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, ‘I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.’ The light was within a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, ‘Oh, nonsense!’ and stood over him as if transfixed.

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again.

At this moment Kurtz cries “The horror! The horror!” A literal reading suggests that Marlow’s sympathetic lie—“Oh, nonsense!”—is what triggered the transformation in Kurtz. The transformation may have been preparing—Kurtz had been muttering “Live rightly, die, die...”—but, because of his isolation from others, he had not yet seen the abyss separating his ideals and his actions. Now Marlow’s presence and his willingness to lie out of mere human sympathy for someone whose actions he must abominate forces Kurtz to see that abyss—and he has the moral courage to judge himself (and humanity?). That is his victory; Marlow’s offer of human community was its catalyst; Marlow’s lie to the Intended is also a catalyst: it evoked the “cry of inconceivable triumph” that shows Marlow the monstrous egoism of her illusions, but, better the “flagrant untruth” of those illusions, for otherwise “it would have been too dark—too dark altogether....”

Again, it is his sympathy for the human, despite whatever is monstrous in action or motive—despite the demands of “justice”—that Marlow expresses in these lies, and, by expressing, himself achieves a kind of moral victory over the encroaching darkness. It is an expression, I would suggest, of what Watt elsewhere called Conrad’s “nearer vision” as opposed to his “further vision,” one of those perceptive distinctions that crop up here and there like diamonds in Watt’s book.

Conrad in the Nineteenth Century is a book I will make required reading for all my students of Conrad. It is a wise, nondogmatic book, a book that one can engage in dialogue, argue with, branch out from. In its tone and method it is a model of the kind of scholarship to which I would like my students to aspire.