

Conrad and History: A Review

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“**I** ALWAYS REMEMBER what you said when I was leaving Cracow,” the sixteen-year-old Józef Konrad Korzeniowski wrote to his former guardian Stefan Buszczyński in 1883: “[W]herever you may sail you are always sailing towards Poland!” These words, coming as they do from one of Conrad’s very earliest letters, have long been suggestive of the kind of circular felicity and rich inevitability with which critics have returned to Poland to contemplate both the deep foundations and broad horizons of Conrad’s fiction.

Viewed through the lens of Richard Niland’s excellent new book, however, these words read a bit differently. They are a call less to revisit Polish history *per se* than to turn to the fresh and undiscovered territory of Polish historiography: not the history of Poland so much as the *philosophy of history* through which diverse Polish thinkers – including Buszczyński, author of the sweeping tract, *La Décadence de l’Europe* (1867) – imagined history to unfold and become written on both a Polish and world-historical scale.

Such Polish meta-historical models become, in Niland’s reading, not only a primary aspect of Conrad’s Polish cultural heritage and a primary interface through which Conrad absorbs and engages other Anglo-European theories of nation and history; they also become a template through which to understand the quite extraordinary degree to which the entire arc of Conrad’s fiction turns centrally on questions of meta-history – evolving in diverse and distant ways precisely as a function of perpetually “sailing back” to foundational Polish historiographic questions.

Niland’s book consequently bridges two major traditions of Conrad scholarship: one, the kind of rigorous engagement with the history of ideas one associates with the late Ian Watt; the other, the emphasis on recovering in Polish history and culture the formative vocabularies that

invisibly underwrite the special gradient of Conrad's fiction, as shown in the works of Zdzisław Najder, Andrzej Najder, and Addison Bross. All of these critics figure in important ways in Niland's account, yet notwithstanding the proximity of such weighty precedents, Niland has written a book whose fresh terms and engaging vantage and voice are genuinely his own.

The first chapter offers a fascinating and pioneering overview of the philosophy of history as practised in nineteenth-century Poland, its conflicting efforts and complex vocabularies revealed to inform not only different contemporary Polish literary movements, but also some of the general terms and strategies through which Conrad engages with problems of representing time and history. Though the many names and individual variations are much richer than there is space to do justice to here, two basic schools of Polish historical philosophy emerge from the account here, both extending from and deeply engaged with the thought of Hegel.

The first is a pre-1863 group centring on the figure and earlier work of August Cieskowski, which, while it proceeds from Hegelian assumptions about the evolving and dialectic nature of history, also rejects the many features of the Hegelian model that Poles understood to validate the historical partitioning of Poland – such that the End of History and the end of Poland began to feel like eerily co-terminous propositions. Such objectionable features – important because these tropes recur throughout this book – include the Hegelian model's inexorable determinism, its all-absorbing universalism, its preclusion of agency through individualized deeds, its claims to Absolute knowledge, its denial of historiographic contingency, and, most especially, Hegel's dismissive attitude towards both the past (a dead letter, an unrevivable site) and the future (a purely speculative concern in itself).

In response, Polish Romantic historical philosophers like Cieskowski developed a much more mobile and plastic conception of history, one in which, against the grain of an exclusively monumentalized present, "the totality of history must [as well] consist of the past and the future," the allure of the former galvanizing through the "deeds" of the present the utopic possibilities of the latter. "This attitude towards history," Niland argues, situated in the present but "with its Janus-faced gaze towards the past and future, denotes an innate tenet of Polish Romantic historiographies before the 1863 insurrection."

In itself, this pre-1863 recovered context allows Niland generally to gloss memorable elements and moments in Conrad – the nostalgic

narrative form of “Youth”; the distinction between “historical” and “primitive” conceptions of humanity in “Heart of Darkness”; Emilia Gould’s famous appeal to rendering “life” with “the care of the past and the future in every passing moment” in *Nostromo* – in ways that suggest a continuous “Polish” meta-historical sensibility. But things get really interesting when Niland complements these recoveries of pre-1863 Polish Romantic historiography with post-1863 Polish Positivist historiography: the second major school equally engaged with the Hegelian tradition but with new anti-Romantic emphases of empiricism, scepticism and realignment of political vision following the failed 1863 Uprising.

If this sounds like a familiar story, this is both true and not true. For though it is an important part of the story, something more is at stake here than a re-elaboration of Conrad’s “dual” Polish heritage from the Romantic Apolonia Korzeniowska and the Positivist Tadeusz Bobrowski; something more, indeed, is at stake than Conrad’s aesthetic legibility through competing Polish Romantic and Positivist traditions of literary writing as well. For what the author wants us to understand is that both the new Positivist tropes of “work,” “duty,” “fact,” and “nation,” and the older seminal Polish Romantic tropes, were together signs, interwoven markers, in a complex and counterpointed Polish conversation and discourse about the philosophy of history itself.

This was a discourse always rooted in Polish experience, to be sure, but it is answerable to and about more than Poland from the beginning; it was, indeed, an interdependent discourse, each side needing the other, whose contradictions become a kind of master template upon whose multiple vantages Conrad’s fiction draws to raise infinite questions about the understanding, rendering, and meaning of history. It is thus fitting that the first chapter closes with a highly suggestive reading of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* – in which Niland shows how the novel’s notorious instabilities between Romantic and realist registers, and its deep and contradictory investments in the passage of time, inscribe a meditation on historical change that enlists both sides of Conrad’s Polish meta-historical heritage – to tell a story of both multiple specific and broad meta-historical applications.

In what follows – in three long rich chapters – Niland explores the long arc of Conrad’s fiction as it witnesses Conrad’s Polish meta-historical sensibility engaging with and evolving in different contexts. These chapters explore not only how Conrad’s sensibility interfaces with other European and world traditions of historical philosophy, but also

the different kinds of meta-historical questions that Conrad's fiction raises in different æsthetic phases of his career.

The second chapter, intellectually situated among Romantic and post-Romantic historiographic discourse in Britain, concentrates principally on the period of Conrad's "retrospective" narratives, beset by questions of time and memory, that run from *Tales of Unrest* through *Lord Jim*. Elaborating and intertwining central concerns from Polish and British historical philosophy, "Youth" is revealed to ponder, in its emphasis on "precious yesterday," both the inspiration and the fragility of the recollected past; "Heart of Darkness," as it depicts Marlow's "tenebrous quest for the enigmatic Kurtz," explores both the "urge to historical narrative" and the ultimately subjective and constructed nature of any rendering of past events; and *Lord Jim* predicates its aesthetics of orality on a self-conscious sense of multiply-voiced historiography.

There is a wild digression on Herodotus in here (which I would counter with my own wild hypothesis that the bipartite structure and epic example of *Lord Jim* is modelled on the *Æneid*), and the readings of the individual texts are sometimes not quite so original as in other chapters of this book. But Niland's overall insight that this cluster of texts, the most traditionally celebrated cluster of Conrad's texts which we *thought* we knew best, is actually centrally coordinated by concerns of meta-history, is a suggestive – indeed, striking – contribution and reorientation of perspective.

The third chapter may be the strongest analytic chapter in the volume. It shifts the focus to Conrad's "political" novels, their engagement with the role of the Nation and Nationalism in modern history, and intersections of Polish, Continental European, and contemporary Latin American historical philosophy relating to these subjects.

In reading on offer here, *Nostromo's* Costaguana becomes a kind of testing-ground for all of the different kinds of narratives of national-historical possibility advanced in the "Polish" tradition, complemented by the thinking of Rousseau and Herder as well as intersections with Latin American intellectuals including Argentine writer and politician Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Costaguana is legible here both as an organically evolving and culturally "hybrid" national culture along the "diverse and plural," "embracing" and inclusive" model of nationhood emphasized by the Polish Romantics, and as a nationalized victim and by-product of forces of modernization, much more in line with imperially inclined relentlessness with which the march of history was

understood by the Polish Positivists. Similarly, Niland reads *The Secret Agent* as Conrad's attempt to defuse both the false historical visions associable with anarchism and socialism and the regressive anti-immigrant assertions of British national identity galvanized by alarmist assertions of political radicalism as a social threat.

Finally, in what may be the very best of many fine readings of individual Conrad works in this study, Niland explains how Conrad presents Russia in *Under Western Eyes* as both unhistorical and not truly a "nation" in terms that derive not simply from a conceptual opposition with Poland but also from the very vocabulary of nation and history that is integral to the defining tenets of Polish historiography.

The last chapter turns to Conrad's later fiction, arguing that Conrad's fiction during the Great War reflects his sense of marginalization at a crucial junction and transition point in both Polish and modern European history, and that Conrad's final novels demonstrate a retreat and withdrawal into the past that is nevertheless bound up with crucial rethinking of the significance of Napoleon and earlier nineteenth-century French and European history. These latter, Niland astutely argues, are historical coordinates that all the way along had been foundational to the historical imaginary of Conrad's fiction.

This chapter is filled with fresh insights and new, productive scholarship on unjustly under-discussed texts; but it also underestimates, I think (although many may agree with Niland here), the spirit of active and contemporary political engagement with which both the war-time and the final novels were both produced and consumed. Moreover, despite tantalizing suggestions on the note of Dumas, this chapter pulls up just a touch short in doing full justice to the question of how and why the historical novel in the tradition of Scott should become such a touchstone model for Conrad in *The Arrow of Gold*, *The Rover*, and *Suspense* – not simply as a reversion to "conventional fiction," but as an application, in the spirit of meta-historical inquiry that defines this book as whole, of the kinds of questions about the philosophy of history and historiography that, as the late critic Richard Maxwell has charted in his important recent study of the historical novel, so very much define the complex genealogy of this genre. But none of this, I should make clear, is to take away from the volumes of new material, especially concerning Napoleon and in serious discussion of the two final novels, that Niland blazes a trail for by advancing them for discussion in the first place.

This reminds me of one final critical concern, at a larger level, that I would suggest of this book – whose final implication is again the rich

stimulus and large, original, generative imagination that makes it an important one in the first place. This concern is that sometimes Niland's appeals to meta-history, his concentrations on discourses and intellectual trajectories of the philosophy of history, beg questions of more *critical* historicization of these meta-historical efforts than they receive.

Not everyone will agree with Niland's reading of "Heart of Darkness" as a masterwork of deconstructive critical appraisal of any attempt at writing history; not everyone will also agree with either his argument that "Costaguana *authentically* represents the hybrid and evolving identity of a South American nation" (*italics added*), or the celebratory positioning of *Nostromo* in dialectical response to the (hyper-Anglophile) Sarmiento or as a kin to Martí, Rodó, and Darío – the reason being that the history of Conrad's reception in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, itself symptomatic of the full historical conditions situating and implicated by Conrad's gestures of meta-history, suggest that the picture is more complicated than this. Conrad's significance in the world today is that his fiction implicates so much of the world whose history of contention becomes legible, re-imaginable, through the scrutiny of that fiction; if Niland's emphasis on meta-history sometimes allows Conrad to stand outside history, as its master more than its subject, any future work in this area will want to grapple with this study for both rich stimulus and insight as to how to proceed from here.