

Conrad/France: A Review-Essay

By Hugh Epstein, London

Conrad in France, edited and with an introduction

by Josiane Paccaud-Huguet.

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CONRAD IN FRANCE MAKES UP Volume XV in Wiesław Krajka's "Eastern and Western Perspectives" series. It is an interesting, provocative, but rather peculiar book, bearing both the strengths and the weaknesses of a collection of essays by fifteen commentators on Conrad's works drawn from an eighty-year period of critical consideration of Conrad's writing and its significance.

As Josiane Paccaud-Huguet makes clear from the outset in her admirably clear Introduction, the reader is not to expect any comprehensive or systematic account of French settings, characters, or influences in Conrad's work, and thus there is nothing on "The Idiots," *The Rover*, the French Lieutenant, Flaubert, or Maupassant, for instance, nor is there a narrative of Conrad's reception in France, such as Anthony Fothergill offers for Conrad in Germany in his recent *Secret Sharers: Conrad's Cultural Reception in Germany*.

The reader is prompted to consult the work of Yves Hervouet and Claudine Lesage for this sort of composite response. What *Conrad in France* offers instead is a representative series of essays that illustrate different moments in the French response to Conrad, "from the early biographical record or general appreciation, to closer textual readings under-propped by the concepts of modern literary theory."

Paccaud-Huguet has arranged the essays chronologically, in what emerges as being five groups: three from the marvellous 1924 commemorative edition of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, four of which take us from the 1960s to the 1980; three more recent essays on *The Shadow-Line*; three essays written during the past fifteen years that in different ways concern themselves with "the fault-lines of language"; and a final recently written pair on seeing, its failure and what replaces it, in *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*.

Readers of *The Conradian* will be acquainted with the names of nearly all of the writers here and, indeed, are likely to know a number of them in person. The question that the prospective reader is likely to ask is whether the volume will present a distinctively French contribution that has illuminated Conrad studies that he/she will more clearly be able to identify having read the fifteen essays. Certainly, yes, although Paccaud-Huguet does not see it as any part of the volume's task to attempt to evaluate this strikingly intellectual and surprisingly emotional commitment to penetrating "the Conradian text," or to condense it into a memorable definition.

That the 173 pages of the "*Hommage à Joseph Conrad*," with fifteen contributors, appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* within three weeks of Conrad's death in 1924, is eloquent testimony to the significance of Conrad in contemporary French literary circles, although Galsworthy, Curle, and Cunninghame Graham also made their welcome appearance.

Conrad in France opens with André Gide's unsentimental, brief memoir showing us a Conrad impatient with the seaman's tag, who "proved singularly awkward in straightforward narrative; nowhere except in fiction did he feel perfectly at ease." The praise that he exacts from Gide is that "No one had lived more wildly than Conrad; no-

one, afterwards, had submitted life to such a patient, conscious and elaborate transmutation into art.”

The examination of that art begins immediately with Ramon Fernandez’s indispensable “The Art of Conrad” (in a translation by Anne Luyat), an essay that retains its brilliance in rendering what is so striking in a first reading of Conrad: “From the beginning to the end of his patient creation, he attempts, not without difficulty but almost always successfully to gratify us with sensations, to saturate us with colours, with sounds, with human voices, with visions, with atmospheres, to leave us vibrating with the thousand emanations of a world which knows us better than we can know it.”

Nowhere has Conrad’s “complex impressionism” been characterised with such dramatic directness as in Fernandez’s formulation of “an impression of rapidity, of suddenness, of what is unexpected, an impression of the jolting and irrational unfolding of a dream.” Paccaud-Huguet, in her Introduction, inveighs against impressionism as “one of the Conradian viruses introduced long ago on the critical net by Ford Maddox Hueffer”; so it is to her great credit that she embraces this other great early contribution to that contagion. And from the same issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* André Maurois (translated by Claude Maisonnat) offers another compelling formulation of the experience of reading Conrad: “The reader is under the impression that the subject is there, available but concealed in the midst of an impenetrable jungle, and that the writer circles around it on a covered balcony which, now and then, allows a rapid glance at a few ever-changing details.”

It has to be said that these early essays have a fresh brilliance in their general appreciation that cannot be matched by the more minute analyses of modern critics. In Maurois we also find, in this volume, the beginnings of the moral commentary on the human condition as depicted by Conrad to which French critics have contributed so signally from a psychoanalytic perspective. “What really matters in Conrad’s novels,” Maurois says, is “the highly refined conviction he has of a certain form of greatness in man ... human beings fighting against forces that are more powerful than they are.”

When we turn to the next flowering of appreciation for Conrad in France, it is in the form of the more detailed and lengthy analyses that we have become familiar with in our modern journals. Paccaud-Huguet starts with an extract from Jean-Jacques Mayoux’s seminal study, “Joseph Conrad” (1960) in which Mayoux considers “loss of liberty” as the “single theme of Conrad,” “the irradiating revelation of that loss, the vain efforts to regain it, the whole thing ending in disaster.” This fits his discussion of the Goulds and Heyst, though in succinct and acute re-tellings of Jim and Razumov Mayoux explores the psychological arc that enables an escape from the irreparable to a final accomplishment of self. Mayoux asserts that “Conrad’s art owes much of its virtues to Henry James, and its most exasperating weaknesses to Ford Maddox Hueffer,” and would agree with his later editor in rejecting impressionism as a helpful term in the discussion of an art that centres on “thick opaque figures ... They are *what needs to be illuminated*.”

So “Conrad’s fragmented disclosures – this one aspect of a thing, then that one – work obstinately towards a rendering of the hidden or obscure object; they try to reveal it, to make it spring out of the shade.” This focus on how Conrad’s tales work to reveal a hidden shape in the obscuring dark is rejoined to a biographical attentiveness in the following “psychobiographical” approach to “The Secret Sharer” by Joseph Dobrinsky, which explores the way in which the writing of the story can be related to Conrad’s parlous psychological state in 1909. Dobrinsky’s “working hypothesis” is that “the symbolism of self-integration and self-mastery ... bears, as often in Conrad’s work, both on his private plight as an exile under the burden of his tragic family heritage (for the multilingual Conrad, “Leggatt” was likely to connote the French *leguer*, to bequeath), and on the artistic mode of his self-assertion.”

In the manner of all of these more recent French Conradians, prompted by Freud and later by Lacan, Dobrinsky is good at getting us to consider the resonances of particular words (so, “secret” in the title, apparently offered as an adjective can, of course, be read as a noun, leading to the realisation that “a secret of some kind will be shared in whispers”). Also good on voice and voicing in the tale generally, this reading sees the story as a pro-Apollo, anti-Bobrowski venture, with Leggatt’s whisperings prompting the “mutually sustaining alliance between the man within and the self-reflexive writer,” the artist who “must bare his head, come into his own” by leaving behind the floppy captain’s hat and the shelter it offers as a yarn spinner living off his exotic sea years. This distinctively French latitude in the insistent reading of language symbolically makes itself increasingly visible in *Conrad in France* from this point, and readers will divide into those who find it brilliant and exciting, and those who find it clever and questionable.

It is also at this point that something of a sustaining coherence in the volume, though it has not quite been a dialogue, begins a little to slip from the editor’s grasp. I would conjecture that this is because of the plethora of diverse articles that become available for her choice as *Conradiana*, *The Conradian*, and *L’Époque Conradianne* enter the scene. Whilst there is still plenty of good material to come, the cohesion within some of these later articles is not quite as telling as formerly and, despite the groupings created, the choice can seem somewhat arbitrary rather than compelling.

It is not clear how to construct connections between what we have read so far and Bertrand Saint-Sernin’s essay on “Destiny in the Work of Joseph Conrad” and Anne Luyat’s essay on “Conrad’s Feminine Grotesques.” Saint-Sernin advances the idea that “Conrad places his heroes in situations where in fact they do not know – and the reader even less so – whether they are submitting to or controlling their destiny.” Rather bluntly, he then goes on to examine the four ways in which destiny is manifested: “by chance meetings; by the interactions with others; through the darkness of human nature; through the relationships between men and women.” *The Shadow-Line*, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, *The Rescue*, and *Nostramo* receive the fullest treatment among brisk references to a number of other works. Saint-Sernin’s conclusion is that “what Conrad suggests is that lives are ruled by external and internal influences that individuals cannot control, without these influences being incomprehensible if analysed.” So, “Conrad’s universe is not one of despair. In the places where destiny sets its traps there also exists the possibility of escape, with (and through) honour and through love.”

Taking quite a different tack, in a clear and elegant essay that first appeared in *The Conradian* 11.1 (May 1986), Anne Luyat unusually turns her attention to Conrad’s comedy by examining the feminine grotesques of *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance*, and *The Arrow of Gold*. By using “two grotesque traditions simultaneously, the romantic grotesque of *The Hoffman Tales* as well as aspects of the more whimsical nonsense tradition epitomized in England by Lewis Carroll” Conrad creates fantastic figures who “menace the security and peace of mind of three of his idealistic female heroines, Nathalie Haldin, Flora de Barral, and Doña Rita de Lastaola,” the comic, yet also disturbing, effects of which Luyat depicts to raise the question, “If the absurd nature of human experience is shared through laughter, does it provoke or prevent tragedy?” In reminding us that “fantastic” is derived from the Greek word *phantastikos*, meaning able to represent or present to the mind, and *phantazein*, meaning to make visible, she extends our thoughts about how an artist makes visible shapes in the darkness, which is, perhaps, one of the defining concerns of the volume.

Although it is not made clear quite why *The Shadow-Line* should have such pre-eminent significance for French readers as to warrant three essays uniquely devoted to the story, some hint of this might be gleaned from Yannick Le Boucicault’s statement

that “the shadow-line also represents the fuzzy, complex and frustrating gap separating thought from language, language from reality, and reality from facts,” which is certainly a territory, or a no-mans-land, into which nearly all of these essays venture in one way or another.

These are also essays that enjoy making large claims (no bad thing!), and “To Cross or not to Cross the Shadow-Line” is no exception: “The author, *homo duplex* himself, spent his whole writing career straddling those shadow-lines, walking the borderlines of sanity, of truth, of language.” Finding shadow-lines in a great number of Conrad’s novels and short stories, the essay becomes a little diffuse but retains the sense that “In Conrad, very few things, either in the development of the stories or in the treatment of the settings, are deprived of symbolic value.”

Somewhat in keeping with this view, and drawing upon what Deleuze writes about the power of acting and the power of being acted upon, Christine Texier-Vandamme sees the novella as “not so much an autobiography as a symbolical allegory of a certain ‘affection’ everyone will go through ... crossing the shadowline between innocence and maturity, carelessness and responsibility and maybe also, life and death.” She examines in some detail how, in the opening of the novel, the reader is drawn into participation, sympathy and the “capacity to be affected,” states that will also be the subject of the searching exploration of the narrator/protagonist to come. Reading the progress of the plot effectively against intertextual references to *Hamlet*, Texier-Vandamme steers towards the uncontentious but well-expressed conclusion that a “courageous attitude towards death and the death-drive is paralleled by a final giving up of the fantasy of mastery and the magical power of ‘command’ in favour of an acceptance of events, death included, with fortitude and dignity.” Why she needs to rely so much on Deleuze in this critical journey is unclear to me, but her closing quotation from Malcolm Lowry is a good find.

In contrast, Muriel Moutet grounds her close examination of *The Shadow-Line* and the captain’s need for an ethical framework in late-Victorian literature and ideas of masculine initiation. She is admirably explanatory in her use of the “Lacanian notions” (as she so honestly puts it) of the Other, the Symbolic and the Real that play quite a large but not, I feel, a determining role in her engaging examination of the captain’s problem, that he “acts and reasons as if he was alone on board the ship, as if he was already commanding ‘a floating grave.’” Moutet is especially good in her discussion of the use of the diary in the text and illustrates convincingly just how it “mingles solipsism and some kind of desperate address,” exactly the condition that needs to be resolved for the captain’s release into a fuller manhood that acknowledges the nature of his dependence upon his fellow men. In her reading, *The Shadow-Line* challenges “the belief in a sovereign individual” and becomes “a brand new kind of apprenticeship story in which the subject of 19th century’s liberalism and his representations [*sic*] will be deconstructed.”

It is in the next three essays, which Paccaud-Huguet has characterised as concerning themselves with “the fault-lines of language” in Conrad, that we see how much more embedded is the psychoanalytic criticism that arises from Freud and Lacan in French writing about Conrad than is usual in English responses, even when “theorised.”

In his consideration of “Typhoon,” Claude Maisonnat is concerned to go beyond a debate as to whether MacWhirr or Jukes “deserves pride of place as the hero of the tale” to discuss “the way textuality prevents the reader from answering the question as formulated by this binary opposition.” He goes on to dispose of MacWhirr as hero, and more briskly of Jukes, en route to his major point that “the proliferation of viewpoints and the multiplication of diverging narrative levels ... ensure that no clear interpretation can be established, that we are again faced with one of Marlow’s “inconclusive experiences.” The ethics of interpretation is Maisonnat’s real quarry here, and, some

excellent textual discussion notwithstanding, as with many essays that lament/glorify the inadequacies of language, the deep desire of the critic is revealed, *au fond*, as wishing to be released from the fiction the author has created in words into a realm of extrinsic relations: “What I would like to argue is that these textual holes are the locus where the irruption of the Real can occur. In this perspective I wish to maintain that the holes in the text are therefore traces of something missing in the Other. They testify to the emergence of *la langue* within the text, the point where language breaks down.” Readers who find something substantive in these personified concepts will appreciate the succinct way in which Maisonnat’s discussion of the “inconclusiveness and indecisiveness ... inscribed in the very texture of the narrative” leads to a contemplation of the psycho-structural dynamics being played out in its guise.

Language, in the guise of Marlow’s vocabulary in “Heart of Darkness,” is even more directly the subject of the essay that follows from Reynold Humphries, which takes Leavis to task for his oft-quoted insistence on Conrad’s “adjectival insistence,” perhaps a rather old horse to flog, but certainly an enduring one. Categorizing the language of “Heart of Darkness” as the dreamlike, the enigmatic, and the supernatural (“this is the most substantial category by far: its relative neglect by critics is eloquent”), Humphries finds Freud on “The Uncanny” and Lukacs’ idea of reification to be the truly useful guides in explaining how objects and routines are given more bodily substance than people in the text. He views the accountant as “a *writer* ... another version of Bouvard and Pécuchet. That the text says ‘He wrote, he wrote’ can but remind us of Kurtz: ‘he spoke, he spoke,’ where the repetition serves to make a link between the two men to reproduce that ‘mechanical’ aspect of labour already mentioned.” He concludes his case that “The ‘adjectival insistence’ deplored by Leavis is thus a resolutely historicized case of ‘the insistence of the letter.’” I am not convinced that the “is thus” has quite been shown in the essay, though there is a great deal of clever interpretation of The Accountant, Marlow and (a somewhat exonerated) Kurtz on the way.

Josiane Paccaud-Huguet also cites *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as an initiating impulse in the composition of “An Outpost of Progress” in her elegant delineation of “the master’s discourse” as played out by Kayerts, Carlier, and Makola in which the Lacanian references are lucidly explained for the non-specialist. She is very stimulating in her discussion of the attention paid to language in the story, especially when examining the ambiguities that arise from free indirect discourse and the ways in which the master/servant relationship is disrupted at the linguistic level. Sometimes extravagance overtakes the writing, as when a brilliant discussion of “the long speech” of the leader of the coastal tribe (“one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams”) draws the tag “yet unmistakably loaded with some sort of, literally, ob-scene (etymologically, off the stage) *jouissance*,” where I would have to protest that there is no stage metaphor in the etymology of “obscene,” which is derived from the Latin *obscenus*, ill-omened.

The essay is much more convincing in its exploration of the metonymy of “tongue” in the story and the transfer through the text of “yell” from the wilderness to those who think they represent civilization. Yet the claim, and, indeed, the achieved scope of this, the most ambitious modern contribution to *Conrad in France*, is much larger, to show Conrad as an artist still early in his career who is “a true contemporary of Joyce, Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence” as he “acknowledged his affiliation to the unconscious.”

The two remaining essays are about *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*, and focus, in a manner that has become familiar in contemporary Conrad criticism, on the representation of space and what vision represents. In her reading of both of these novels, Nathalie Martinière acutely comments that “Sight is solicited and found wanting.”

She enjoyably shows us how Costaguana and London resist depiction through visual scanning and, indeed, through common sense, as the famous “topographical mysteries” of Chesham Square proclaim, thus requiring “a new mapping method,” “another type of (de)ciphering of the organisation of space ... so that misty landscapes and unreliable street maps are replaced by systematic geometric patterns.” And Martinière is excellent at showing how extensively these straight lines, parallelograms, and circles extend their geometric domain in the narrative of both novels. Her distinctions between the two novels are useful too. In *Nostramo* “what the narrator wants to ‘make (him, the reader) see’” is certainly not a realistic setting but a pattern of artificially organised images which are laden with metaphorical meaning.” In *The Secret Agent*, however, “the geometrical constructions never lead to a metaphysical or meaningful architecture, since they are systematically blown up, destroyed.”

Christophe Robin focuses intently upon the opening “realistic setting” in *Nostramo* and, more broadly, on the “phantasm of a totalizing vision” as experienced by several of the characters in the novel. He offers an acute discussion of Giorgio gazing at the lithograph of Garibaldi, and also gives a welcome attention to the character of Nostromo, so often relatively neglected, and in particular to moments of deception and deceived vision. Robin’s subheadings – “Specularity and the Mirror Stage,” “The Representation of the Blind Spot and the Logic of De-presentation,” “From Default to Excess: The Power of the Simulacrum” – convey the theoretical orientation of the essay, which ensures that he is never merely descriptive but always interpretative. In a strikingly parallel move to Martinière, he asks “What does the text ‘make (us) see?’” and answers, “a new aesthetic world no longer revolving around a fixed centre but based on a circulation of new energies irrigating a surface, the surface of a text which keeps displacing some traditional frontiers of literature.”

As this last quotation suggests, *Conrad in France* reveals the romantic, even more than the intellectual, nature of French Conrad criticism. The absence of Tzvetan Todorov is perhaps surprising, and the great scholarly contribution coming from France has been underplayed by the omission of work by Yves Hervouet (recommended in the Introduction) and the late Sylvère Monod (although he is represented here through his translations of Gide and Mayoux). Gide writes, “Conrad loved France so dearly that he valued the opinion of the French about his work immensely.” There is no doubt, from this volume, that French Conradians for the past eighty years, perhaps more passionately, cerebrally, and expansively than their English (and American?) counterparts, have found him “worthy of (their) undying regard.”

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