

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## *Conrad in the Public Eye: Biography / Criticism / Publicity* edited by John G. Peters (Rodopi, 2008)

The Joseph Conrad who was described by Bernard C Meyer as ‘a creature of sharp contradictions and inconsistencies’,<sup>1</sup> a lonely, pathetic, and ill-tempered man and a grudging father, appears with a new aura in *Conrad in the Public Eye*. This edited volume offers a broad spectrum of opinions about the famous mariner and writer, carefully crossing the well-trodden threshold of Conrad’s biographical details. It is not a critical analysis of the life of Conrad, but a focus on how he was viewed and evaluated by his contemporaries. Under the division of four broad sections – Biography, Appreciations, Early Criticism and Publicity – the subsections include news and views about Conrad’s life and writings from America, England, Ireland, Wales, France, South Africa, but regrettably nothing from Poland, Conrad’s native land. Had Poland been included, the reader would have experienced a sense of completeness together with fascination.

The most vibrant section of the book concerns Conrad’s meeting with the reporters in New York, written by Christopher Morley, titled *Conrad and the Reporters*. From these accounts many facts about Conrad, the man, can be gathered. In place of a burlier, dour, austere, and remote personality, the American reporters got ‘the long-thoughtful Ulysses’ (8) with a tender, affectionate, gentle and friendly disposition who was not even irritated at the persistent requests by the photographers to take different poses. Though Conrad realised the disadvantages of being famous – he looked perplexed and became tired due to his sickness and the interview process, he preserved his characteristic reserve during the interview. Moreover, when he was requested to say something about American writers, he regrettably admitted that he did not have a critical mind, nor did he have much time to read. Writing came to him spontaneously in the strange and unstable events of his sea-life. This information, together with a poem about his reluctance to deliver a public lecture and epigrammatic sentences about ‘the journalistic profession’ (8) such as ‘Interviewing is a dangerously ticklish art’ (11) or ‘Interview is really one of the most rarefied and sentimental arts; there is no formula but intuition’ (20), makes this part of the book enjoyable.

Florence Doubleday’s memoir of Conrad’s days at her home, Effendi Hill, during his visit to New York is kaleidoscopic in nature. This lady, the second wife of Conrad’s American publisher, F.N. Doubleday, in her *Episodes in the Life of a Publisher’s Wife* remembers many fragmentary events, both funny and grave, with compassion. For example, when Conrad disembarked from the *Tuscania*, she met a lovely lady, a fan of Conrad, who touching the writer’s hand, was crying silently. Conrad asked her one day to call him Joseph, and later on he sent a letter to his wife containing a false excuse that angered Florence very much. As she promised that she would not tell anyone, he informed her when he had stopped and then had resumed writing *The Rescue*.

In this section the comment on Conrad by Sir Hugh Clifford touches the heart. It gives an impression of Conrad’s theme, styles, and expertise in using the English language as well as his mariner-like physical beauty and mental disposition. Clifford writes, ‘he was most distinctively and unmistakably a seaman. None could ever have mistaken him for a member

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967) 10.

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of any other profession. ... There was something in the whole character of him ... which remained with him until his death, and was so stamped in as to mark him to the end as a “son of the sea” (33), and ‘there was a certain exotic flavor about his English. ... It was as intangible as the *timbre* of a voice’ (29).

Two memories about Conrad – one is Roditi’s meeting with Conrad at Elstree School and the other is James Whitaker’s account of his life in Essex – are also interesting. The first one is Roditi’s vague effort to remember his meeting with ‘a live representative of English literature’ (59) in his school. It reminds us that many great events can take place in our lives unknowingly! The other one is a period of intense tension when Conrad was attempting to be a professional author in Stanford-le-Hope, where he wrote his magnum opus *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, with the help of his beloved helpmate Jessie, in ‘a damned jerry-built rabbit hutch’ (70). This essay presents the viewpoint of Jessie Conrad who, in spite of her husband’s temperamental behavior at home, does all she can to nurture his genius. I salute this lady for her dedication to a great writer.

The next two sections are scholarly in approach. These can benefit teachers, students and researchers of Conrad. Liam O’Flaherty appreciates Conrad’s novels as a sort of ‘fairy tale’, wrought out of ordinary incidents, that transports adults to ‘a magical place’ of ‘ships and golden, silent sunlight or magnificent storms’ (88), and their success in engaging the reader. Comparing Conrad’s love for the God of the Empire with the sinner-like fearful revolt of Shelley, he warns the reader of the danger of drinking from the fountain of Conrad, although it is sweet. Like a person on a heavy march who drinks too deeply, the reader may be confronted by the steep road of a horrible death.

The Welsh writer John Cowper draws upon a common analysis of Conradian psychology from an unusual point of view. Setting Freudian philosophy of the human consciousness aside, he highlights the fact that Conrad works with the margin of the mind. He defines this region as ‘mid-way between known and unknown’, ‘where memories gather’ and ‘emotions float by and waver and hover and alight’ (91) and which exists in all human beings. Suddenly at any ordinary moment of gazing at natural objects ‘the strange and subtlest feelings’ (93) can appear in this subconscious borderland of the mind. Yet the most attractive discussion concerns the issue of women’s psychology. He identifies women in Conrad’s novels as unique, because of their withdrawn and reserved silence. He suggests that in the volubility of women everything is expressed but actually nothing is expressed. Conrad hence uses reserve as a device to portray women characters and assigns to them ‘a look, a gesture, a sigh, a whisper’ that discloses ‘the ocean-deep mysteries of the soul’ (94-6). For this reason his women are womanly, not like ‘vicious boys’. ‘They love like women and they hate like women’ (99). This essay also speculates on Conrad’s language and style and his deep thoughts like those of a true European philosopher, and like Cowper expresses uneasiness at the violence in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

While Richard Curle deals with the ‘History of *the Nigger of Narcissus*’ from a ‘Human, Literary, Bibliographical’ viewpoint, V. Walpole treats the formal aspects of the format of Conrad’s novels. Whereas Curle offers an arresting commentary on the book that ‘held the first place in Conrad’s affection’ (140) and of which Conrad declared, ‘by these pages I stand or fall’ (127), Walpole attempts to clarify Conrad’s narrative method for confused and lost readers. As a defender of Conrad the writer, Curle asserts that he was not merely a portrayer of seamen but a writer about human life and its mysterious allure and terrible pathos. To draw that picture of human life Conrad used as his basis the real human

beings found in his sea-life and on that ‘inspired reminiscence’ (135) he constructed his own fictional world. He compares Conrad with Herman Melville as the writer of the sea and with Gustave Flaubert for his writing style. John Herman Randall’s excellent description of Conrad’s outlook on life is of great interest. His evaluation of him from his origin as a simple Pole with no knowledge of the English language, to the analysis of his consideration of sea as a symbol of life and of life as tragic, very different to Hardy, is thought-provoking. We come to know Conrad’s philosophy of life in which human beings are struggling against pessimism through the tragic irony of illusion leading to despair. But that despair is not a hopeless force that denies a humanistic approach to life. Conrad was ‘the loving, pitying, tender-hearted pessimist who persists in “cherishing an undying hope”’ (122). Thus he became ‘an aesthetic moralist, or a moral aesthete’ who believed in ‘neither “Art for Art’s sake”, nor “Art for Life’s sake”, but ‘Life for Art’s sake”’ (123).

The last contribution to this book describes the commercial enterprise that Conrad’s publishers undertook, before and after his death. Without this, works of genius may have been lost in an abyss. The pamphlets the publishers used to promote Conrad’s works contain highlights of the life and works of Conrad and valuable comments on him. Those who have read Conrad, yet who know very little about the ins and outs of his writings, will benefit from this section if they are patient enough not to be deterred by the many numerical details.

I cannot resist the temptation to include a line or two about the frontispiece. It contains a portrayal of ‘the nigger of Narcissus’ and three photos of Conrad. Is this an indication that this shy, reserved, melancholic, thoughtful, sombre and moderate man of extraordinary talent stands or falls by this novel? Undoubtedly this suggestion enhances the appeal of the book.

Thus, with the amalgamation of various elements – from photographic and cinematic scenarios to thought-provoking arguments concerning Conrad’s theme, style and language, and the publicity through pamphlets – the book becomes a smorgasbord of knowledge about Joseph Conrad.

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