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Critical Responses: 1950-1975

Following his positioning as a major English novelist by F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (1948), Conrad became a central figure in academic literary criticism in the 1950s and 1960s with the publication of a series of seminal works on the writer. With studies by Thomas Moser, Albert Guerard and Edward Said, the period saw the beginning of the Conrad industry in international academe, with several biographies undertaken or written and the hunt for every possible scrap of extant Conradiana under way. This resulted in societies and journals dedicated to Conrad's life and works in the USA, Britain, France, and Poland, the first steps in the daunting but now completed collected letters of Conrad, and a stubbornly unassailable interpretation of Conrad's literary career, captured in the title of Thomas Moser's influential *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (1957). The period between 1950-75 also saw groundbreaking work on Conrad by Polish scholar Zdzisław Najder, and with the unprecedented attention given to his life and works by gifted international scholars, these years constitute a true golden age of Conrad criticism.

In the aftermath of WW2, philosophical and political criticism, conscious of the catastrophic results of nationalist and supremacist ideologies throughout the world, adopted Conrad as a writer transcending national boundaries, one representative of a sceptical voice on international politics. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), 'written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair' (Arendt, p. vii), isolated 'Heart of Darkness' as 'the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa' (Arendt, p. 185), with Arendt frequently citing Conrad's vision of Imperialism as 'the merry dance of death and trade' in her overview of repressive political power. Written before the widespread growth of post-war prosperity in the Western world, Arendt foreshadowed the emergence of later criticism acknowledging Conrad as a prophetic voice on the disasters of the first half of the twentieth-century. The same year saw Robert Penn Warren deem *Nostromo* Conrad's 'supreme effort' (Penn Warren, p. 32), and the American poet/critic argued that Conrad should, against the view of F.R. Leavis and E.M. Forster, be considered a 'philosophical novelist,' whose masterpiece was 'one of the few mastering visions of our historical moment and our human lot' (Penn Warren, p. 58). Albert Guerard's *Conrad the Novelist* (1958) also registered the importance of contemporary history in evaluating Conrad's psychological and political immediacy: 'It has taken the full aftermath of the Second World War to make me recognize the political insights of *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*, and their pertinence for our own time' (Guerard, p. xi).

Thomas Moser's *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* emerged from the writer's research at Harvard University alongside Albert Guerard, and it represents a pivotal moment in Conrad studies, pointing forward to later academic/departmental studies of Conrad, while sharing aspects of an earlier tradition of *belles-lettres* criticism. Unburdened by the extensive cross-referencing of subsequent monographs, Moser engaged with the relatively small contemporary field of Leavis, Guerard, Douglas Hewitt, Edward Crankshaw, and Morton Zabel, forwarding archetypal interpretations of the intricate psychology of Conrad's stories. Conrad was 'England's most complex novelist,' and Moser aimed to 'give insight into a great writer's creative strengths and weaknesses' (Moser, p. 1). In an influential but hardly novel interpretation (Moser noted Guerard's 'account of Conrad's "anti-climax"' and John Galsworthy's selective praise of Conrad), 'Love's Tangled Garden' emerged as Conrad's 'Uncongenial Subject.' The writer's career journeyed from early achievement to 'The Exhaustion of Creative Energy,' and Moser sought to explain 'the degeneration of Conrad's prose style' (Moser, p. 2), believing *Chance* to be 'the first clearly second-rate work that pretended to be of major importance' (Moser, p. 8). Contrary to later critical perspectives, after theoretical schools reliant on

contemporary European philosophy emerged in Anglophone universities, Moser eschewed exhaustive, overly ingenious analysis in favour of an opinionated evaluation, a critical style that would gradually disappear in coming years. For example, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* were 'clearly serious, respectable novels, but they seemed to lack that particular magic one thinks of as "Conradian"' (Moser, p. 2).

In *Conrad the Novelist* (1958) Albert Guerard sought 'to express and define my response to a writer I have long liked and admired' (Guerard, p. ix). Following Moser's trajectory, Guerard adopted a psychoanalytic reading, with Conrad's characters becoming manifestations of the writer's psyche. However, influentially, and contrary to Moser, Guerard believed *The Shadow-Line* stood as 'Conrad's last important work of fiction' (Guerard, p. xiii). Guerard commented on Conrad's recent adoption as a student-friendly author, his short fiction now the subsistence diet of the undergraduate. Exploring 'spiritual and moral isolation' in 'The Secret Sharer,' he noted that 'These matters (the preoccupation of so many college freshmen today) were then unfamiliar enough, and it is safe to say that in 1947 the large majority of critics in America did not read Conrad at all. [. . .] The ten years have brought a more substantial rediscovery than I dared hoped for' (Guerard, p. xi). Praising recent scholars such as Morton Zabel, Penn Warren, Moser, Dorothy Van Ghent, Douglas Hewitt, and M.C Bradbrook, Guerard also signalled the departure of the first generation of Conradians. Guerard highlighted the unreliability of G. Jean-Aubry's *The Sea Dreamer* (1957; a translation of his earlier *Vie de Conrad*), 'because it takes almost no notice of work done in the last twenty-five years' (Guerard, p. xii), and he lamented the textual irregularities of *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (1927), thereby challenging prospective biographers.

A more scrupulous approach to documenting Conrad and his works led to the first modern life, Jocelyn Baines' *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (1960). Indebted to the pioneering research of Zdzisław Najder, Baines brought Conradian biography to an authoritative and objective level, writing with the required temporal and emotional distance from his subject. As J.H. Stape notes, Baines was 'self-consciously writing the life of a man whose work was attaining "classic" status' (Stape, p. 59). Baines marked the beginning of a decade that produced an outpouring of research and detailed documentary evidence contradicting Conrad's maxim to Richard Curle that explicitness is fatal to all glamour. Norman Sherry, in *Conrad's Eastern World* (1966), and later *Conrad's Western World* (1970), along with Jerry Allen's *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (1967), launched a trend for following in the biographical footsteps of the writer, tracking real-life sources for characters esoterically mythologized in contemporary/post-modern academic criticism, and later in popular film, notably Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Sherry also presented a selective grouping of contemporary critical responses to Conrad in *The Critical Heritage* (1973), while bibliographical works on writings about Conrad materialised in the shape of Theodore G. Ehrsam's *A Bibliography of Joseph Conrad* (1969) and Bruce E. Teets and Helmut E. Gerber's *Joseph Conrad: An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About Him* (1971). Significant critics of the history of English literature also turned their attention to Conrad. Ian Watt, author of the seminal *Rise of the Novel* (1957), wrote extensively on Conrad's intellectual background throughout the period, culminating in his important study *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979).

As Tony Judt notes, the 1960s were 'the great age of Theory,' and in an 'age of vastly expanded universities, with periodicals, journals and lecturers urgently seeking "copy," there emerged a market for "theories" of every kind – fuelled not by improved intellectual supply but rather by insatiable consumer demand' (Judt, p. 398-99). Between 1950 and 1975, close to 3000 books, essays, or articles were published on Conrad. Conrad's work, with its striking engagement with colonial and postcolonial political contexts, and its Flaubertian concern with the *mot juste*, invited and challenged new

critical schools. In 1968, Bernard C. Meyer unveiled his *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*, which, as Chinua Achebe later noted, followed ‘every conceivable lead (and sometimes inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad’ (Achebe, p. 10), while Paul Kirschner’s *The Psychologist as Artist* (1968) conversely sought to systematise Conrad’s psychological reflections. Conrad’s writings seemed adapted for theoretical readings, with the author’s tri-lingual, tri-cultural heritage an open field for critics eager to perform semantic acrobatics. Previously condemned features of Conrad’s literary and philosophical style, captured in E.M Forster’s critique that Conrad made a virtue out of incoherence, acquired a new value, as English literary and cultural criticism of the sixties and seventies believed ‘Difficulty became the measure of intellectual seriousness’ (Judt, p. 480). Conrad’s experimental use of narrative proved a convenient resource for critics exploring the emerging discipline of narratology, given a working vocabulary by the publication of Gérard Genette’s study of Proust, *Figures III*, in 1972. Increasingly, Conrad was removed altogether from studies of his texts. The period, which had opened with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *What is Literature?* (1948), and now influenced by the structuralist perspectives of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault, questioned ‘What is an Author?’ looking with supercilious scepticism on ‘man-and-his-work criticism’ (Foucault, p. 101), ultimately leading to a post-structuralist insistence on the subjectivity and socially/politically constructed nature of all perspectives. However, major studies of Conrad’s politics by Avrom Fleishman and Eloise Knapp Hay remained traditional in their political focus, and later conspicuous in their lack of engagement with contemporary theory, locating Conrad’s politics in a tradition of European thought indebted to Burke and Rousseau.

A generation of critics who would become important voices in Derrida-influenced deconstructionist theory also began to investigate Conrad’s work. J. Hillis Miller’s *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers* (1966) devoted considerable attention to Conrad as a writer who pointed ‘the way toward the transcendence of nihilism by the poets of the twentieth century’ (Miller, p. 6). Conrad was a novelist ‘of imperialism,’ one connected by Miller to a nihilistic tradition of European literature including Dostoevsky, Mann, Gide, Proust, and Camus, but also grounded in ‘the narrower limits of the English novel’ to a ‘native tradition’ following Dickens, George Eliot, Trollope, Meredith, and Hardy in his representation of reality (Miller, p. 6). One of the most influential literary and cultural voices of the twentieth century, Edward Said, published his doctoral work as *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), and Said continually refined his interpretations of Conrad, using *Nostromo* as a central text in his reflections on writing and textuality in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975). Said captured the evolving approach to literature of the period and its pertinence to Conrad’s multi-layered narratives: ‘A text, then, seems more essentially just itself – a text, with its own highly specialized problematics – than a representation of anything else’ (Said, p. 11).

Alongside a flowering of theoretical criticism on Conrad appeared a concerted drive by Polish literary scholars to reposition the importance of Conrad’s Polish heritage. While Conrad was given increased attention in Polish literary journals since his death, and not forgetting that he remained a cult writer in Poland during the Second World War, the process of bringing the full complexity and extensive documentary evidence of Conrad’s Polish background to an international readership began in the 1950s. In November 1957, the international face of Polish literature and opposition to Communism, Czesław Miłosz, wrote on ‘Joseph Conrad in Polish Eyes’ in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The issue also featured an essay by Conrad critic Edward Crankshaw on ‘Russia’s Imperial Design,’ arguing that Russian foreign policy was in fact exhausted. Miłosz focused on Conrad’s anti-Russian credentials, noting intellectual and political continuity between Apollo Korzeniowski and his son. While Miłosz asserted that

‘Conrad is an English writer and the Poles have never tried to assimilate him into their literature’ (Miłosz, p. 224), Conrad nevertheless emerged as an international reminder of the culture of prostrate Poland lying behind the Iron Curtain. For Miłosz, the ‘Polish reader, then, has a strange feeling as he trips constantly over things that have a familiar ring. Certain themes, and even the rhythms of certain passages in his novels, are reminiscent of verse lines very close to him, whose sources, upon reflection, can be named. What happened in Conrad was the perfect fusing of two literatures and two civilizations’ (Miłosz, p. 226).

Conrad undoubtedly proved a magnetic figure for the politically dissident critic Zdzisław Najder. The scope of the material Najder presented to English language readers and the authority with which he assessed Conrad’s relationship to the culture of nineteenth century Poland was of monumental importance for understanding Conrad’s early life, and Najder’s contribution to the field is unlikely to be superseded. *Conrad’s Polish Background* (1964), in its magisterial unveiling of primary documents, signalled that Conrad now belonged to a second generation of critics and thinkers; further removed in time, yet his complexities somehow better known. The reluctance of Conrad’s own remaining contemporaries to release their guarded proximity to the writer was revealed in Richard Curle’s review of Najder for the *Contemporary Review*. Noting the increasing ‘outflow of books’ on Conrad, Curle praised Najder’s ‘masterly’ introduction to this seminal volume, but appeared to considerably downplay its importance. Condemning the prolixity of Tadeusz Bobrowski’s ‘decidedly tedious’ letters (Curle, p. 552), Curle appeared dismissive of one of the emerging stars of Conradian biography and scholarship, namely Bobrowski himself, who would feature greatly in Najder’s later *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (1983), and whose wonderfully translated voice illuminated aspects of Conrad’s Polish past previously beyond the reach of the Anglophone critic. As Bobrowski and his cultural milieu assumed centre stage in Conrad studies, the field saw an increase in work devoted to the political, cultural, and literary arena of Conrad’s Polish youth. Important voices in this respect were Andrzej Busza, especially his *Conrad’s Polish Literary Background* (1966), and Adam Gillon, who refined the earlier work of Gustav Morf (who would re-enter the fray in 1970), and challenged the overwhelming Anglicisation of Conrad’s achievement.

While detailed feminist readings and Frederic Jameson’s major Marxist interpretation, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) would come later, the period closed with the rise of Postcolonial perspectives on Conrad. These years witnessed the dismantling of the British Empire, highlighting the difficulties of bringing civil and political order to the real world settings of Conrad’s fiction, most of which gained political autonomy between 1960 and 1975. Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe’s Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts in February 1975, later published in the *Massachusetts Review* (1977), embodies, alongside Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), the academic post-colonial explosion, a reordering of centuries of control by the Imperialist voice over stunted indigenous vernaculars. Achebe outlined the tendency in ‘Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar.’ ‘Heart of Darkness’ was ‘constantly evaluated by serious academics’ (Achebe, p. 2), but Achebe accused Conrad of ‘inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery,’ ultimately ‘playing the role of purveyor of comforting myths’ (Achebe, p. 3). Apparently unveiling supremacist views on Conrad’s part, Achebe rather coyly avoided treatment of the larger implications of Conrad’s tale. Achebe’s reading of the dispossession of language from Africans, Marlow’s perception of grunts and noises, has become increasingly misguided; social developments in a monolingual British culture a hundred years after Conrad’s time mean that the average Englishman – if such is what Marlow

represents – would have the same perceptions today not just in darkest Africa but in Paris or Rome. Achebe discounted Conradian irony, believing ‘Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist’ (Achebe, p. 8), and English departments in American universities were attacked for prescribing a work ‘in which the very humanity of black people is called in question’ (Achebe, p. 10). Achebe’s overall assessment of ‘Heart of Darkness’ was perhaps credible: ‘Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth’ (Achebe, p. 13). However, it is important to attribute to Achebe a strong degree of post-colonial *ressentiment* towards the departed Colonial *other*, as states, such as his native Nigeria, which experienced civil war between 1967-70, a series of military dictatorships, and a scramble for newly-discovered oil wealth, disintegrated and suffered ethnic and civil strife sometimes beyond the brutal excesses of the coloniser. Falling prey to corrupt governmental practices and an inability to adopt the alien European tradition of the nation-state, indigenous abuse all too easily matched the inhumane control of former empires. Conrad’s work, an obvious critique of Imperialism and inhumanity in its original context, was dragged into the postcolonial era as an example of the pervasive and irredeemable malignity of the colonial enterprise. Nevertheless, Achebe brought some controversial attention to a writer whose biography refused to throw up any salaciously marketable revelations, and Conrad’s racial and political views proved a cornerstone of literary debate during the next quarter century.

The International Conrad Conference in Kent in 1974, the papers of which were edited by Norman Sherry, captured the breadth of critics working between 1950-75 (Sherry, 1976). Conrad now represented a stable sub-industry with international academe, evidenced by the foundation of the *Joseph Conrad Society UK* (1973), the *Joseph Conrad Society of America* (1974), and the *Société Conradienne Française* (1975), with their respective journals, *The Conradian*, *Conradiana*, and *L’Époque Conradienne*. Present at the 1974 international gathering were Guerard, Tony Tanner, Ian Watt, Eloise Knapp Hay, Edward Said, Zdzisław Najder, Edward Crankshaw, Andrzej Busza, Avrom Flieshman, Frederick R. Karl, Thomas Moser, Ugo Mursia, and Adam Gillon. Following diverse methodologies and interpretative strategies, the conference embodied 25 years’ achievement in recognising Conrad’s position as a major European writer.

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