

Twenty-First Century Conrad Studies.

Twenty-First Century Conrad Studies

Journal article by Michael Lackey; *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 39, 2007.

by Michael Lackey

COLLITS, TERRY. *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 208 pp. \$97.00.

CURRELI, MARIO. *The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2005. 315 pp. \$35.00.

KAPLAN, CAROLA, PETER LANCELOT MALLIOS, AND ANDREA WHITE. *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 288 pp. \$85.00 cloth; \$25.95 paper.

That the collection of essays in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* would conclude with a stunning and remarkable interview with Edward Said is only fitting. After all, Said has, in large measure, determined the critical trajectory of literary studies over the last twenty years, and since he admits that it was Conrad who took possession of him intellectually from the time he was about 14 years old (283), being a contemporary Conrad scholar implicitly places one at the center of literary studies as practiced in the academy today. And yet, while the recent essays and book give Said his rightful due, they also herald what promises to become a new paradigm, a paradigm that uses Said's postcolonial, humanist, democratic, and philological criticism to implicitly challenge Said's representation of Conrad as a political fatalist. Put more concretely, new-millennium Conrad is a man who embodies modernist fragmentation, a brokenness so severe and intense that only trauma theory could begin to account for his fractured subjects. But contrary to Said, who duly notes Conrad's philosophy of brokenness and fragmentation and therefore concludes that the displaced Pole "is incapable of ... constitutive hope" (292), many twenty-first century scholars suggest that Conrad's uncompromising brokenness is the basis and foundation for a more hopeful, compassionate, tolerant, and humane political agenda.

What, in part, makes the Said interview so valuable is the interviewer, Peter Mallios, who poses relevant, insightful, and probing questions and elicits substantive responses. If Said holds that Conrad is "a man who believes in no political action" (Conrad 290), and if we know that politically-engaged criticism is one of Said's major contributions to literary studies, then how can he maintain that Conrad is one of the "two great presences in my life" (289)? Throughout his career, Said has had an ambivalent relationship to Conrad (alternately charging him with being complicit in the hegemonic project of Imperialism and praising him for exposing the pernicious and deadly logic of colonialism), and in this final interview, Mallios has been able to bring some needed clarity to Said's postcolonial approach to Conrad the writer and Conrad the man.

Like Conrad, Said accepts the modernist view that fragmentation and brokenness are distinctive marks of the human condition. Having rejected a harmonizing synthesis in an imagined afterlife, a redemptive reconciliation in a utopic future, and personal freedom in monastic isolation, there is only one cosmic fact on which we can depend: we are "living in an impossible situation" (Conrad 301). As a university professor and a political activist, Said acknowledges that "there is a problem of irreconcilability" (298), and like Conrad, he accepts and even embraces the "compound of impossible elements" (301). Or, to state this from a slightly different angle, Said and Conrad waste no time on the project of reconciling or transcending the "many opposing positions and irreconcilable frames of experience," but choose instead "to learn ... how to survive 'in the destructive element.'" This philosophy of irreconcilability figures centrally in Said's life, for he acknowledges or perhaps concludes: "I've never been able to reconcile my two lives with each other" (298). Conrad may have, according to Said, seen it all, "understood it, impressionistically but in a sense more profoundly, as part of some conjunction between nature, the human mind, and more abstract forces like 'will' and the 'unconscious'" (288), and this frighteningly comprehensive vision may have led Conrad to adopt a fatalistic philosophy of political action. But consistent with his philosophy of irreconcilability, Said feels no obligation to reconcile his modernist view of life as a heap of broken perceptions and his personal commitment to active political engagement: "Why should you reconcile? Why should you try to assume wholeness when, as Adorno says, 'the whole is the false?'" (298).

Many new-millennium Conrad scholars, while they have basically internalized Said's postcolonial and/or democratic approach to literary studies, have resisted Said's suggestion that Conrad's fiction leads to or embodies "a kind of [political] nihilism" (Conrad 285). These writers, rather, suggest that Conrad is "an anti-political political ironist" (153), as Anthony Fothergill cleverly remarks. Far from leading to a view of political actions as a "futile procession" (293), Conrad's fiction provides readers, Robert Hampson claims, with "a form of resistance" to global imperialism (135), a strategy, Mallios argues in his essay, for undermining the "profound symbiosis of press and politics" (161). Contributors to Mario Currelli's *The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures* agree: for Cedric Watts, Conrad's novels are "fully political" literary forms that invoke "moral and aesthetic perspectives which mock the political" (Ugo 119), while Andrzej Busza describes Conrad's legacy as a form of writing that is "intrinsically a mode of communication and a form of action" (39). In short, Conrad's fiction not only inspires but implicitly calls for political action, though political action, these writers would agree, cannot emanate from a naively idealistic view rooted in utopian thinking. Rather, productive political action must--paradoxically--spring from disillusionment and be rooted in irony.

In his book, *Postcolonial Conrad*, Terry Collits does a first-rate analysis of *Victory* that emblemizes the new political approach to Conrad. Central to Collits's argument is Conrad's conscious and strategic disruption of genre. On the surface, the 1915 novel belongs in the tradition of "popular romance," and as such, the "mainspring of *Victory*'s narrative developments ... is not politics but the psychological drama of Axel Heyst" (*Postcolonial* 163). The problem with the popular-romance interpretation, however, is the way the novel strategically thwarts the Heyst-Lena love affair, thus undermining one of the basic requirements of the popular romance genre. Based on this generic disruption, Collits convincingly argues that the novel subtly but decisively becomes an anti-colonial novel. *Victory* does this by making the reader identify with "the Chinaman" (*Postcolonial* 171), Wang, an identification that ultimately makes the reader become increasingly critical of Lena and Heyst. As Collits observes, Lena and Heyst consider their island hideaway "a nameless non-place, a simple setting for life's romantic adventure" (171), and it is from their "Eurocentric world-view" that they treat Wang as an insignificant subordinate. But as Collits argues, the novel--unexpectedly--humanizes Wang by giving readers "a sympathetic view" of him "that is damningly critical of Heyst's existence" (172). It is this shift in identificatory perspective from the colonizer to the colonized that undermines the popular romance genre and implicitly transforms the novel into an anti-colonial text: "Heyst and Lena are sympathetic characters only for as long as *Victory* remains a love-story. As soon as it moves on to the suppressed narrative of colonialism, they must be unmasked, unfortunately, as among other things unconscious racists" (171).

Collits's analysis and interpretation of *Victory* have much more power than I can convey in this brief synopsis, and what accounts for his insightful explication is his extensive analysis of Conrad scholarship. By tracing the interpretive strategies from F. R. Leavis's liberal-humanist apolitical readings, in which "the 'merely' political had to be evacuated from appraisals of his novels" (*Postcolonial* 16), to the overtly political readings of Jameson and Said, Collits rightly and brilliantly demonstrates how scholars have either ignored or overlooked the subtlety and power implicit in Conrad's politically inflected aesthetic. Moreover, he explains how apolitical readings have failed to grasp the intensely focused political critiques found in the later works, a failure in interpretation that has led many scholars to claim that the later works are aesthetically flawed. It is Collits's commanding grasp of the history of Conrad scholarship and his politically imbricated analysis of *Victory* that has enabled him to offer a new and compelling interpretation and to rethink and revalue Conrad's later work.

On the basis of his interpretation of Conrad and Conrad scholarship, Collits develops a hermeneutical model, which he argues should be the humanities' most important contribution "to political practice." For Collits, "a depth and precision in the interpretation of difficult texts that does not prescribe specific agendas" would have the politically desirable effect of inculcating "habits of mind that are essential if politics is to avoid the disastrous blind spots that disfigure history" (*Postcolonial* 192). Only by empathetically understanding and vicariously experiencing the intense suffering of "the unprivileged of this earth," who have been strategically marginalized because of simple-minded reading practices, would we be able to construct a healthier functioning body politic. In short, Conrad does not just invite but demands that his readers engage in the kind of reading and thinking so central for creating the conditions for a more humane body politic.

But it is important to bear in mind that such careful and attentive reading is not calculated to resolve life's irreconcilable antagonisms, illuminate the human condition, or harmonize systems of thinking; to the contrary, such reading thrusts us into the "many cruel and absurd contradictions"

(Personal Record 92) that make up our being. Such a view of knowledge and life is what has led so many scholars and critics to characterize Conrad as a prototypical modernist, who eschews political action as frivolous and irrelevant and embraces an "apocalyptic nihilism" (Ciompi, Ugo 235). Fausto Ciompi, in his excellent survey of Conrad scholarship found in Mario Curreli's *The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures*, intelligently defines this approach: "For Conrad, life and the world are irremediably fragmented. The bits and pieces in which they offer themselves to the eyes of the baffled perceivers represent the disorder, the contingency, the puzzling multi-facetedness that characterise the Modernist approach to the notions of truth, understanding and experience" (223). This view of Conrad as the "ironic beginner of the literature of exhaustion which spans from Decadentism to Samuel Beckett" (234) implicitly renders political action irrelevant and meaningless. Such an interpretation of Conrad is not totally absent from twenty-first century studies, for William W. Bonney argues that Conrad's "political novels" "dramatize little more than recurring personal demise amid social inertia," which leads Bonney to question "whether they have anything to do with politics at all" (Conrad 192). And yet, the majority of the new millennium scholars reverse the standard modernist formulation; instead of positing an irreconcilable division between modernist fragmentation and political action, as Said does, they suggest that modernist brokenness and disillusionment lead to productive political action.

In a wonderfully suggestive essay from *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, Jennifer Margaret Fraser sheds considerable light on the political value of modernist melancholy by insightfully arguing that "Conrad strives to mobilize mourning" (257) in *Under Western Eyes*. Grief indicates the capacity to hear "the sound of weeping," to identify with the victims of life. Conversely, suppressing grief brings on madness, and, taken too far, destroys a person's capacity to feel for and with others. In order to betray Haldin, Razumov had to hide his emotions and ultimately crush his capacity for compassion (259). But the novel does offer some hope, according to Fraser, in the form of grief, which by the end of the novel "dismantles the cool, collected self" (254) of Razumov. When Razumov finally acknowledges the crime he has committed against Haldin's person, after his collected self is totally broken through unfathomable grief because of what he has done, he is finally able to feel for and perhaps connect with fellow humans. In short, "the novel's tragic force lies in revealing that without the work of mourning, all other work becomes meaningless" (263). From a political perspective, the grief that undoes a human is what makes compassion for other humans possible, and for many of those who have not experienced such dismembering grief, committing horrid crimes against others becomes not just possible but probable.

Instead of seeing disillusionment as the conclusion to the modernist tale of brokenness and fragmentation, therefore, these writers see it as the beginning of political hope. In what is perhaps the strongest essay in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*, Geoffrey Galt Harpham convincingly argues that Conrad converts "his own painful experience of profound solitude into a basis for universal kinship" (19). Modernist alienation, the result of discovering that identity "is a deeply unstable configuration" (20) and that language leads to an "intense ... solitude and isolation" (33), is a universal experience, which means that we can experience a profound unity with others in and through our "subjective and linguistic isolation" (37). Based on this idea of universal kinship through modernist isolation, Harpham develops a theory of the surconscious, "a domain of meaningfulness that exists ambiguously among people," and for Harpham, this theory of "surconsciousness might turn out to be Conrad's contribution to the ethical and political thought of the twenty-first century" (34).

In one way or another, many twenty-first century scholars revise Conrad and modernism in light of the view that alienation, isolation, and disillusionment are the beginning of political hope and meaningful political action. So Carola M. Kaplan in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* sees Razumov's thwarted "worldly ambitions," which lead to an intense feeling of disconnectedness, as the beginning of a "sentimental education" (273) that ultimately humanizes him (276). Since it is "four strong women" who re-educate the patriarchally dehumanized Razumov into feeling, thus challenging "the conventions of male-centered narrative" (273), "the novel argues for openness and indeterminacy" (278), specifically with regard to gender roles. For Brian Richardson, an overlooked dimension of Conrad's fiction is "his positive and verisimilar portrayals of working-class characters" (Conrad 213). In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, the sailors, during a fierce storm, experience solidarity in their effort "to free Wait from his berth below deck" (217); to signal the "powerful collective identity" (222) of the men, Conrad produces what Richardson sees as "the first sustained example of 'we-narration' in literature" (220). In other words, Conrad makes use of a narrative device that would become central in "feminist and postcolonial works" (222), and it is his focus on the travails of working-class characters that led him to develop this device. For Laurence Davies, a politically fortifying position can be found in Conrad's irony. Irony implicitly disables all utopian systems founded on absolutes, so that the most ironists can hope for is to engage in "a

debate between power and skepticism that never ends" (Conrad 227). While such a view would certainly dash the hopes of those in pursuit of totalizing truth systems, Davies convincingly demonstrates that irony in Conrad's work has "a restorative power, a power to remember what the mighty want us to forget, to ask what's in the shadows, to redress unequal balances" (235). For Davies's Conrad, therefore, irony does not lead to immorality, decadence, or nihilism; it inspires us to question and think and to be tolerant. Anthony Fothergill takes a similar approach, though he focuses on Conrad's political aesthetics of anarchism. Instead of presenting the Professor in *The Secret Agent* as some sort of moral monster, "Conrad's political sensitivity" (Conrad 152), Fothergill argues, compelled him to examine the alienating political systems that made someone like the Professor possible. Within the context of his anarchist tales, "Conrad effectively positions the reader to accept the transgressive and 'criminal' as normative and the bourgeois norm as contemptible" (149). Such an approach to *The Secret Agent*, however, is an interpretive possibility only if we attend to "irony's doubled aesthetic effect," which holds "contradictions in suspension, resolutely defending the no-man's land from both sides." And as Fothergill insists, this ironic approach is "destructive and constructive at once" (153).

In *The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures*, which consist of the 2004 International Conrad Conference papers delivered at the University of Pisa to commemorate the Italian publisher, scholar, and translator Ugo Mursia, political analysis of literary texts differs considerably from the essays in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century*. As Cedric Watts claims, there is a "proper subordination of the political to the aesthetic [that] is hard to achieve, but it is a goal to be kept in mind when we judge works of fiction" (Ugo 118). On the surface, it might seem that Watts completely rejects the political approach to literary texts, because he claims that "*Nostromo* is not a political tract but a work of intelligent entertainment" (118). But he concludes the essay by claiming that the novel is "fully political" because it enables the reader "to see" and "to see through" (119) the political. In a certain sense, these conference papers implicitly challenge a view of literary analysis that has become commonplace among those in the United States and Great Britain with a political orientation. Adam Hochschild articulates this view in his brilliant study *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). When researching the horrors of Belgian's colonization of the Congo, he recalled *Heart of Darkness*. "However," Hochschild concluded, "with my college lecture notes on the novel filled with scribbles about Freudian overtones, mythic echoes, and inward vision, I had mentally filed away the book under fiction, not fact" (3). The implication is that studies about myth and depth psychology implicitly cancel out the political, so if a person does political criticism, then he or she could or even should ignore mythical allusions or the inward vision.

Zdzislaw Najder addresses this critical misconception directly in his excellent essay on "Conrad's relation to classical antiquity" (Ugo 19). Conrad's work has a symbolic character, but Najder insists that "Conrad differed from other contemporary practitioners of symbolism," because "he did not try to suggest the existence of some other, ethereal reality hidden behind the veil of the visible world" (23). For Najder, Conrad is thoroughly secular and empirical, so if we are going to understand his symbolic or mythic allusions, we must see how they function within their "historical and cultural contexts." This explains why Najder rejects Freudian interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*, which implicitly minimize "the role of the concrete description of and protest against a concrete colonial reality" (24). Understanding symbolism and myth in the way Najder suggests does not undermine the political interpretation; it significantly enhances it.

David Lucking uses this "myth paradigm" to excellent effect in his analysis of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. Central to this novella is the "subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that ... binds together all humanity," as Conrad claims in his justly famous Preface. Within the context of the ship, which emblemizes "a social organism" (Ugo 50), there are distinct psychological orientations that either unify or divide that organism, and Lucking uses the myths of Narcissus and Orpheus to illuminate the unifying and divisive psychological frames of mind. Myth, in this case, can be used to identify Narcissus's quest, which is "a purely egocentric" (46) venture that divides people, or "an Orphic quest culminating in the rediscovery of the value of the community and corporate activity" (53). In other words, the mythic paradigm can be an extremely useful tool for illuminating the constructive and destructive structures of mind within the body politic. Such is the approach of Mario Curreli, whose intertextual analysis of myth enables him to shed light on "Jim the coloniser, who ... calls [Jewel] 'by a word that means precious, in the sense of a precious gem-Jewel' (Lord Jim 277), thus fueling (as will happen with Heyst in *Victory*) the legend of his possession of a mythical treasure, a gem of extraordinary value" (Ugo 130). Andrzej Busza follows suit by examining how Conrad's *Peyrol* from *The Rover* is the antithesis of "Dante's and Tennyson's self-centered and self-seeking Ulysses" (Ugo 35), an analysis that enables him to shed light on "the importance of the social role of the artist" (39), according to Conrad.

Perhaps most refreshing in these conference papers is the truly global approach, which is only appropriate in studies about Conrad. As Laurence Davies claims in his discussion of *Nostromo*, "The politics" of the novel "are international," and the global focus is on "economics." Therefore, Davies suggests, to think of *Nostromo* in terms of an "insurgent bourgeois nationalism" (Ugo 80) is to underestimate Conrad's massive, politically-inflected aesthetic project. Within the context of this international approach, Myrtle Hooper does a first-rate analysis of the political and ethical representations of torture in *Nostromo*. She uses J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is responding to the political situation of late-apartheid South Africa, to "set out some of the ethical parameters of writing about torture; of bearing witness; of representing the position of being in the presence of a person upon whom pain is deliberately inflicted" (Ugo 98). Hooper convincingly argues that "Conrad's suppression of a narrator" (107) in *Nostromo* effectively forces readers to generate an ethical basis for their own response to the implied and represented scenes of torture. Jean M. Szczypien, in an essay overburdened with quotations and underburdened with analysis, gives her readers nevertheless compelling reasons for thinking of *Nostromo*'s General Barrios as a Polish Nobleman, a reading that implicitly invites us to interpret the novel in relation to "the failures of the Polish insurrections against the Russians in 1830 and 1863" (Ugo 91). In a tediously repetitive essay, Mario Domenichelli insightfully and intelligently analyzes *Heart of Darkness* in relation to Ennio Flaiano's *A Time to Kill* in order to illuminate the infectious politics of Empire, and specifically what he considers Italy's underexamined colonial past. Excerpts from Flaiano's *African Diary* of his time "in the Italian War on Ethiopia," which Domenichelli compares with Conrad's "Congo Diary" (Ugo 135), are truly horrifying and certainly invite comparison with Conrad's traumatic experience in the Belgian Congo. In a fine essay that explores Conrad's reluctance to critique England, Carola M. Kaplan shows how the negative representations of Italians in many of Conrad's works are really pictures "of something very wrong in English life" (Ugo 276), but as a foreigner, Conrad had to disguise that critique, which he did by enlisting Italians "to represent various aspects of injustice or immorality he hesitated to attribute to British subjects, even by implication" (277). Robert Hampson does an excellent historical analysis of European anarchism, which was centered in London in the 1890s, to shed light on the political debates and events that gave birth to *The Secret Agent* and *The Informer*. Extremely useful for Conrad scholars will be Hampson's insightful discussion of *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, a memoir that Conrad likely read and that was written by Olivia and Helen Rossetti (Ugo 295).

While we can certainly say that these recent publications make significant contributions to Conrad studies, there are also noteworthy problems with each book. The Ugo Mursia Memorial Lectures are certainly mixed. Yannick Le Boulcaut rehashes the "quest into the ... soul" (Ugo 64) theme in Conrad's works, a few essays never get beyond superficial compare and contrast observations, and one essay, by Michel Arouimi, is poorly written (grammatical errors, incomplete sentences, incoherent claims, etc.). Terry Collits's book will certainly be extremely valuable for postcolonial Conrad scholars, especially because of his careful and astute survey of Conrad criticism and his exceptional reading of *Victory*. But Collits's interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo* are underdeveloped and not entirely convincing--after his patient and thorough analyses of the development of Conrad criticism, his brief analyses of these novels strike one as rushed. *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* contains many extremely valuable essays that scholars will certainly want to reference for many years, but the editors certainly wore their ideology on their sleeves when they put together the index. In the index, you can find references to Christian fundamentalists, weapons of mass destruction, World Trade Center attacks, and George W. Bush, but absent are references to Adam Hochschild, Adolf Hitler, Mark Twain, Barbara Kingsolver, Hans Robert Jauss, and, most glaring, R. B. Cunninghame Graham. Said rightly notes how important Graham was to Conrad, and he even compares himself to Graham. There are many other references to Graham throughout the volume, but instead of indexing those, which are certainly more important for understanding Conrad's work and mind than the references to the "ideological villains" (Said Conrad 299) in Washington, D. C. today, we are given a random index that will appeal more to anti-conservatives than Conrad scholars. Nonetheless, this book is first-rate scholarship.

Despite these criticisms, these three works are solid studies that carry on the Conradian tradition of endless interrogation in an attempt to come to terms with the impossibility and absurdity of living. If anything, new-millennium scholars have been able to shed new light on the seeming contradiction at the heart of Conrad's work: his despairing and near-fatalistic philosophy, which nevertheless inspired him to write so passionately and compellingly about and on behalf of the "unprivileged of this earth" and has inspired so many politically active scholars to engage and embrace his philosophy and work. Conrad is not just here to stay; he continues to orient us towards who we promise to become.

WORKS CITED

CONRAD, Joseph. *A Personal Record in The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzislaw Najder. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

HOCHSCHILD, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

WELLESLEY COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, MORRIS