

# Recent Trends in Conrad Studies

Alexia Hannis  
The European Graduate School  
Saas-Fee, Switzerland

Katherine Isobel Baxter and Richard J. Hand, eds. *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2009. 165 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6490-1

Michael John DiSanto. *Under Conrad's Eyes: The Novel as Criticism*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2009. 253 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7735-3510-7

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**I**T WOULD SEEM that over the past two decades or so the call for new approaches to English literature has become increasingly pronounced, with the emergence in 1995 of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (as an alternative to the MLA), and works such as *After Theory* by Terry Eagleton (2003) and *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* edited by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral (2005). In this context, when it comes to Conrad studies we are left with questions about what lies beyond,

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ALEXIA HANNIS is  
currently completing  
her doctoral dissertation  
on Joseph Conrad  
and Aristotle under  
the supervision of  
Christopher Fynsk.

say, the well-traversed terrain of dialogism, the specialized language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, or the now-familiar tensions between critiques of and complicity with imperialism in Conrad's fiction. Three recent contributions to Conrad studies explicitly aim to open new lines of thought for Conrad readers, with mixed results.

*Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*, edited by two recently established academics, brings together work by well-known and emergent Conradians. As its title suggests, the volume is preoccupied with examining the relatively unexplored realm of performance in Conrad's writings. Only in the last decade has a pronounced interest in this area emerged, signaled in particular by Richard Hand's important book, *The Theatre of Joseph Conrad: Reconstructed Fictions* (Palgrave, 2005). The current collection—because it is so wide-ranging, drawing from elements of performance from the theatre and theatricality to cinematography—is particularly valuable as it provides some groundwork for scholars who are interested in pursuing what the editors describe in their introduction as “one of the most interesting and nascent areas of Conrad studies” (10).

The volume opens with Linda Dryden's “Performing Malaya,” an essay that explores anew the theme of imperialism in Conrad's Malay fiction, by reframing the discussion with Clifford Geertz and James Clifford's notions of culture and identity as performance. Drawing from *A Personal Record*, where Conrad uses theatrical imagery while reminiscing about his creative process in writing *Almayer's Folly* and revisiting Conrad's emphasis on fiction as a “visual performance” in the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Dryden argues that Conrad's concept “art as performance” is inseparable from the ethico-political underpinnings of his literary project. That is, if “the theatrical experience” allows for “all the cast [to be] equally present before us” (14), Conrad's theatrical imagination is consistent with his aim “to challenge the romance and adventure genre and its simplistic, reductive assumption about Eastern peoples” (12). Impressively wide-ranging, the essay offers readings of *Almayer's Folly*, “Karain,” *Lord Jim*, and *The Rescue*, following a trajectory in Conrad's oeuvre as he explored enactments of “cultural programming” at the start of his career which developed into an exploration of the arrogance and catastrophic results of European self-fashioning on the imperialist stage. We encounter in Dryden's essay the somewhat worn-out claims about the “multivocality” of Conrad's fiction, and her reading of *Lord Jim* is not, at base, particularly new. That said, the conceptual framework Dryden brings to Conrad's Malay fiction enables readers to consider anew Conrad's attempt to negotiate between cultural difference and “common human experiences and passions” (27).

Dryden's essay is followed by Susan Barras's "'Sly Civility?': Mrs Almay-er's and Mrs Willems's Performances of Colonial Resistance in *Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly*," an essay that employs theoretical work by Erving Goffman and James C. Scott to shed light on how Mrs Almayer, Joanna Willems, and Aissa manage with varying degrees of success to exercise *de facto* power through performance. The backstage/front stage metaphor from Goffman's theory and Scott's application of this notion to colonialism provides a refreshing perspective from which to read Mrs Almayer and Joanna's behaviours. Both women exploit the theatrical structure of the domestic sphere and make use through performance of *latah* and spirit possession to release "hidden transcripts of anger and indignation onto the public stage without incurring reprisals" (36). Barras's exploration of Mrs Almayer and Joanna's relative success grounds her interrogation of Aissa's failure for which Barras concludes that repetition is to blame. Aissa does not vary her performances, resulting in "satiation, boredom and ... disgust" (42). But this claim falls short of a more pointed conclusion Barras could have drawn from her discussion of Aissa's inversion of the "trope of the feminised non-European land submitting to the European male explorer" (41). Observing that "it is Aissa who gazes upon Willems as a prelude to conquest" (41), Barras suggests that this merely repeats colonialist ideology by situating Willems as a victim of exoticism. That is, Aissa is fatally caught within—and thus, yes, doomed to repeat—colonialist structures of power, a fact that may render her an altogether untenable figure of anti-colonial, feminist agency.

The third essay, Richard J. Hand's "Mixing the Masks of Comedy and Tragedy: The Popular Theatres of Joseph Conrad's Fiction," looks at intersections between popular performance and Conrad's oeuvre, focusing on "Freya of the Seven Isles: A Story of Shallow Waters" and "The Return." Previous critics identified elements of melodrama in both works, but Hand calls for more precision, contending that "Freya" exploits not simply conventions of melodrama but *commedia dell'arte*, just as "The Return" is "variously melodramatic, naturalistic ... expressionistic ... [and] proto-absurdist" (57). The key to reading "Freya" as an Italian comedy is the narrator's claim that Antonia is "like a comedy cameristra" (48), whereby Nelson/Nielsen becomes Freya's *innamorata*, Jasper Allen is an *inamorato* and Capitano character, and Heemskirk becomes two *Vecchi* characters combined (49–50); there are examples of *lazzi*, or physical comedy, in the story, as well. Most interesting, perhaps, is Conrad's subversion of this pattern, for "rather than follow this through to a harmonious conclusion, Conrad opts for the anti-comic and ruptures genre with a tragic end-

ing” (52). “The Return,” too, can be read as subversive, as Hand takes us through the story’s literary resonances, from Shakespeare to Pinter, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Beckett, to arrive at the “supreme dramatic moment” of the story: the proto-postmodern dissonance of Mrs Hervey’s sobbing and laughter (57). True, at times the essay overwhelms with a dizzying array of references not only to Conrad’s oeuvre (with brief references to “Gaspar Ruiz,” “The Informer,” “The Warrior’s Soul,” “The Idiots,” “The Duel,” *The Secret Agent*, and *Lord Jim*) but fleeting comparisons with playwrights from Molière to Edward Bond. That said, Hand generates a stimulating range of possibilities for future work on Conrad.

Just as Dryden and Barras’s pieces work well together and in succession, Hand’s essay is suitably followed by Richard Hampson’s “From Stage to Screen: ‘The Return,’ *Victory*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Chance*.” Conrad’s claim to have “a theatrical imagination” is the cue for Hampson’s reading of stage and screen conventions in the novels (59). Hampson first shows how “The Return,” an implicitly Ibsenesque and Shavian novella, is structured like a three-act play; this persuasive reading draws out “the conflict between sham sentiments and real feelings [that are] played out in Hervey’s internal monologues and in the dialogues with his wife” (62). The essay gains momentum when Hampson turns to *Victory*, where he applies James’s self-described “scenic method” (63) to Conrad’s work, illuminating the novel’s stage sets, stage directions, and its self-conscious exploration of performance and identity. Moving on to screen conventions, the second part of the essay addresses the influence of early cinema on *The Secret Agent* and *Chance*. Here, Hampson turns to work by Gene Moore and Stephen Donovan on Conrad’s encounters with film and describes the developments in early cinema in America, France, and Britain during Conrad’s writing life. Hampson’s reading of *The Secret Agent* challenges Donovan’s discernment of pre-cinematic technological influences on the novel: it is not so much the moving panorama but the film projector that shows up in the narrative with its cinematic montages, writing reminiscent of intertitles, and descriptions that mimic close-up images. Similarly, *Chance* is discernibly cinematographic. The discussion here draws useful distinctions between theatrical staging of the sort found in “The Return” and *Victory* and the non-theatrical angles of vision and attention to close-up detail, and we come to see how reading cinematographically sheds light upon “the ethics and erotics of looking” in *Chance* (74).

Suzanne Speidel’s “Post-Impressionism and the Cinema: How We Are ‘Made to See’ in Conrad’s *Victory*” is the first essay in the collection to focus upon a single work. Here, Speidel takes up Hampson’s exploration of

screen conventions in *Victory*; only this time the focus is on the novel as a manifestation of Conrad's ambivalence about cinema. Recalling Conrad's now well-worn claim in the preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* that literature aims, "above all, to make you see" Speidel reads the phrase anew in the context of cinema and its transforming effects upon ways of seeing self and world. Speidel suggests that while Conrad's preoccupation in his earlier fiction is characteristically modern, whereby seeing is aligned with epistemological concerns, when we reach *Victory*, "emerg[ing] at a particularly vibrant point in cinema's evolution" (82), Conrad's focus has shifted into the "post-impressionist" preoccupation with ontological instability, a preoccupation which intersects with the notion, inseparable from the medium of cinema, that we are "made to see" (85). This interrogation of self-image and identity as products of mass perception is discernible in Heyst and Lena, and it is through these characters that we arrive at Conrad's ambivalence toward cinema, for he both "censures the performance of a prescribed role (Lena's) whilst also prompting us to wish that Heyst could have played the romantic lead better" (91). At times a little busy and overflowing, the essay is original and draws illuminating distinctions between Conrad's earlier, "impressionist" work and the postmodern thought discernible in his late work.

Speidel's essay is followed by a broader look at Conrad's oeuvre with Stephen Donovan's "Gorgeous Eloquence: Conrad and Shadowgraphy." Here we are invited to consider the motif of light and darkness in Conrad's fiction from an original perspective, that of "the popular practice known variously as shadowgraphy, shadow theatre, shadow-play, *ombres chinoises*, or Chinese shadows" (99). Given the prevalence of the genre, Conrad "would have had plenty of opportunities to attend shadow shows during the twenty-five years he spent travelling the world" (100). Indeed, Donovan shows that shadow theatre would have appealed to Conrad, who favoured marionettes and pantomime over film; his fiction bears traces of shadow theatre, as evidenced in passages from *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* *The Arrow of Gold,* *Lord Jim,* *Heart of Darkness,* "The Return," and *Chance*. Donovan is particularly eloquent on the stylistic and philosophical importance of shadows to Conrad's work: "like D.H. Lawrence's blood red sunrises and sunsets, Conrad invests light and dark with precise epistemological and aesthetic properties that supply a kind of fugal accompaniment to his narratives" (107). And yet, if we are to understand that shadowgraphy and the fascination with shadows expressed by that art transcend both historical and cultural boundaries (100), can we then be persuaded that Conrad's use of light and dark in his fiction is an "obsession"

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(99) and “peculiar” (110)? That is, how does an awareness of shadowgraphy add to our ability to read light and dark imagery in Conrad’s fiction? Donovan concludes that it helps us to appreciate “the resourcefulness of modernist artists” in their seeking after the new, but we have also been led to see how Conrad’s love of shadow theatre is inherently Victorian and arises from a resistance to early (and, of course, new) cinema. Questions and contradictions aside, the essay is innovative and enhances our understanding of Conrad’s life and art.

After considering the influence of shadow theatre, we turn, with Katherine Isobel Baxter’s “Comedy and Romance: A New Look at Shakespeare and Conrad” to the influence of Shakespeare. Discussing the achievements and limits of previous criticism on Conrad and Shakespeare, Baxter invites us to consider how Conrad’s reception of the English bard was “mediated through his father’s, Apollo Korzeniowski, works, and how that mediation invites an interpretive shift of focus from the tragedies to the comedies” (111–12). Baxter points out, in her exploration of Korzeniowski’s literary career—supported by Andrej Busza’s work on the subject—that four of the five plays Conrad’s father translated are comedies; the comedies, with their latent (rather than explicit) political register, may have appealed to the Polish nationalist for their capacity to elude censorship. Along this line of thought, Baxter asks us to “consider what impact if any the comedies had on Conrad’s work, an area which has been left virtually untouched by the various critics who have broached the topic of Shakespeare’s presence in Conrad’s oeuvre” (122). Given the absence of “verbal evidence,” Baxter reads for “thematics and schematics” in the fiction (122), focusing by way of example on *Chance* where we find the motif of doubling (recalling *Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *Two Gentleman of Verona*), the prominence of female characters (recalling various comedies, especially *Measure for Measure*), and multiple tellings and framings (resonating with the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). Baxter concludes with the compelling assertion that with *Chance* Conrad finally achieves a sense of belonging, conversing with “the paragon of English letters” but by way of his Polish roots through his father’s translation of the comedies.

The finale of the collection is Laurence Davies’s “Conrad in the Operatic Mode,” an essay that explores the importance of nineteenth-century opera to Conrad. Davies eloquently explains that Conrad’s “oeuvre is that of a writer who loved opera, drew upon it as a model and an inspiration, and inspired librettists and composers in his turn” (128). Showing how Conrad’s admiration and knowledge of a diverse array of composers,

including Wagner, Verdi, Donizetti, Meyerbeer, Gounod, Mascagni, and Bizet, is discernible in the structure of his fiction, Davies provides a useful model for reading Conrad operatically in his analysis of passages from *Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly*. As Davies reminds us, in the latter work Conrad's use of Wagner was entirely conscious, as we know from Conrad's comparison in a letter to his cousin Marguerite Poradowska, between *Tristan and Isolde* and the final chapter of his first novel. Wagner surfaces again—whether Conrad was conscious of this or not—in *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* among other novels where “the leitmotifs are audible” (133). Davies encourages us to listen carefully, claiming that “the poetry of Wagner's libretti is also dense with motifs, and the full effect of every one of Conrad's major works depends on the reader's willingness to hear as well as see” (135). Such readings extend beyond aesthetics and into the characters and themes of Conrad's fiction; we can, Davies points out, recognize in the interracial relationships in the Malay fiction the “conflicts of [racial, political, and religious] allegiance” especially prevalent in opera from Bellini and Verdi to Meyerbeer (136). Opera's “concerns with duty, honour, solidarity, and outlawry—and in its acknowledgement of suffering and atrocity as enduring facts of life” resonates more with Conrad's fiction—and with his Polish literary heritage—than turn-of-the-century English literature (137). Even, or perhaps especially, as Davies suggests, Conrad's ironic use of opera is testament to its indispensability to his writing life.

From Dryden to Davies, the collection is stimulating and intellectually satisfying. Most refreshing is the lack of jargon; well-worn theoretical frameworks have been left behind, while (however fleeting) references to Deleuze (Barras) and Žižek (Davies) introduce theorists as yet rarely brought into Conrad studies. Often it is the case that collections of essays invite sporadic readings. We dip into them according to our research interests and needs. In this case, because the book is so well-structured the essays are best read consecutively so that the reader might experience the full effect of an ever-deepening conversation about the texts and contexts that shaped and influenced Conrad's work.

With Michael John DiSanto's *Under Conrad's Eyes: The Novel as Criticism*, published with the McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas series, we shift into a humanist framework with an implicit Straussian leaning and a nod to Allan Bloom (195). That is to say, DiSanto is less concerned with substantiating claims about influence with biographical and historical research than he is with the readings that evolve out of encounters between Conrad's fiction and works by his nineteenth-century predecessors. Through such encounters we come to see the fiction as critical dis-

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cussions of key ideas, laid out in six main chapters: work and hero-worship (Carlyle); knowing and not knowing (Dickens); sympathy (George Eliot); confession (Dostoevsky); self-preservation and self-destruction (Nietzsche and Darwin); and Christian suffering and compassion (Nietzsche). The list of authors with which DiSanto engages is impressive and promising, although of course it would have been nice to see a chapter on Conrad and Flaubert or Maupassant, and one also wonders at the decision to relegate Schopenhauer to a footnote (193 n3) given the centrality of the philosopher to Conrad's intellectual life.

If there is scant direct evidence of Conrad's readings of the authors in his study, DiSanto suggests that we turn for "the best evidence" of Conrad's thinking to the novels themselves (9, 11). The novels are evidence of Conrad's thoughts to the extent that the definition of "evidence" is elastic. For support he turns to Leavis's *Great Tradition* and George Whalley's *Studies in Literature and the Humanities* while situating his work against Barthes and Foucault, explaining that "the structure and language" of any text bears the imprint of an author's intentions (13). This perspective informs the study as a whole, in the minimal references to the letters and essays and in critical considerations of scholars and critics who, as DiSanto asserts in the chapter on Dostoevsky for example, have relied too heavily on the letters and consequently missed the complexity of Conrad's position. One of the more appealing aims of the study is to show how reading Conrad with his interlocutors is mutually illuminating. It should be noted, however, that the precursors for the most part emerge from DiSanto's analysis as lesser intellectuals than Conrad, who is consistently lauded in this study. Thus "Heart of Darkness" is a critical response to Carlyle; *The Secret Agent* is in dialogue with *Bleak House*; *Nostramo* is a rewriting of *Middlemarch*; *Under Western Eyes* reflects on *Crime and Punishment*; *Lord Jim* is an "almost Nietzschean" response to Darwin and an anticipatory critique of Freud; and finally *The Secret Agent*, *Victory*, and *Lord Jim* think through Nietzsche's oeuvre.

One of the book's greater achievements is its structure. Holding together the various thematic threads—of work and heroism, knowing and not knowing, sympathy, and self-preservation and self-destruction—is Conrad's undermining of absolutes and oppositions. This overarching idea is of course not new; Conrad himself famously asserts in a letter to the *New York Times* that "The only legitimate basis of creative work lives in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms." Perhaps to avoid drawing from oft-quoted material DiSanto does not refer to the letter. It is to his credit that DiSanto avoids becoming overly schematic in

his exploration of the novels' challenges to antithetical thought. Chapter 1, for example, usefully situates Conrad's thinking in relation to Nietzsche on the one hand and Carlyle on the other. In this chapter, entitled "The Dangers of Carlyle's Heroic Work," we encounter in "Heart of Darkness" a critique of Carlyle's valuation of work and hero-worship (and the implications of these ideals). Here we read that "Neither Carlyle's advocacy of absolute belief nor Nietzsche's radical scepticism is tenable for Conrad and he does not attempt to work or think at either extreme" (36). In this reading, Kurtz becomes "a logical consequence of Carlyle's ideas about the hero's unconsciousness and inherent savagery" in *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (50). Also engaging is the discussion of Marlow through which we encounter Conrad's critique of Carlyle's idealization of work; with its critical discussion of Marlow's too-easy adoption of Carlyle's claim that work and self-knowledge are interdependent, this chapter contains substantial contributions to our understanding of the importance of Carlyle to Conrad.

The next two chapters take up Conrad's conversations with Dickens and Eliot, respectively. Chapter 2, "The Despair of Knowing in *Bleak House* and *The Secret Agent*" establishes shared ground between Dickens and Conrad, exploring what the latter learned from the former about the relationship between knowledge and denial or self-deception. This exploration spurs on comparisons between Bucket and Heat, and Esther and Winnie (while Stevie is addressed more fully in chapter 6), and looks at how Conrad transposes character traits from Dickens's characters onto his own, from Lady Deadlock onto Winnie Verloc, for example. Such implicit transpositions also inform chapter 3, "The Trouble with Sympathy in *Middlemarch* and *Nostromo*," where DiSanto looks at how Conrad "extends [Eliot's] qualifications [about sympathy] and suggests that sympathy can become self-destructive" (98). In comparing Dorothea with Emilia, Ladislav with Decoud, in addition to Emilia and Charles with Rosamond and Lydgate, DiSanto draws out Conrad's skepticism about the relationship between sympathy and knowledge, as he explores the problem of solipsism and passion—how difficult it is "to feel the same as the other or feel with the other, suggesting instead that we feel for ourselves" (116). While the insight is excellent, DiSanto's writing periodically becomes bogged down by attention to why or how we should believe that Conrad transposed this or that trait from Dickens or Eliot onto his own characters.

Perhaps the strongest of this study, chapter 4, "Dostoevsky's Last Confession in *Under Western Eyes*," agrees with critics who refuse to read Conrad's writings as absolute repudiations of his Russian precu-

sor. Indeed DiSanto wants us to recognize the complexity of Conrad's response to his interlocutor: "Conrad does not treat Dostoevsky with contempt; he is treated with the respect of a rival artist and thinker" (140). Just as *Nostramo* throws into question Eliot's valuation of sympathy in *Middlemarch*, in *Under Western Eyes* Conrad questions the alliance of confession, self-knowledge, and redemption found in *Crime and Punishment*. Tied into this idea is Conrad's critique, through the character Peter Ivanovitch, of Dostoevsky's "strange sort of feminism" at the base of which is a problematic idealization of women (140). This extends to a discussion of Razumov and Natalia, whereby Dostoevsky's concept of confession is challenged by Razumov's complex matrix of emotions, from idealizing love to resentment and the desire for revenge. DiSanto is particularly insightful on Conrad's ambivalence toward transgression and judgment:

In rejecting the extraordinary man's right to transgress according to his conscience, Dostoevsky sides with the ordinary Russian who suffers and makes sacrifices in his living. But ... Conrad's attitude toward exceptional and heroic men is conflicted. In Razumov, Conrad complicates the implications of Raskolnikov's antithesis of ordinary and extraordinary. (157)

Insights such as this one are peppered throughout DiSanto's work which is, as the fifth and sixth chapters show, rather uneven.

The fifth chapter, "Living to Die in *Lord Jim*," shows how *Lord Jim* undermines an easy opposition between self-preservation and self-destruction. DiSanto situates the novel in conversation with two "taxonomists," Nietzsche and Darwin, arguing that Conrad brings to bear on Darwin an "almost Nietzschean" perspective in *Lord Jim*. While Darwin implicitly overvalues self-sacrifice, Nietzsche is critical of such a view in his redefinition of true morality according to self-protection, self-preservation, and the life instinct. *Lord Jim* shares in Nietzsche's complication of self-sacrifice, for Jim dwells in the uncertain realm between self-sacrifice as self-destruction and self-sacrifice as self-preservation. DiSanto questions whether Jim is "a sacrifice, a suicide, or a victim" (164), a line of thought that negatively anticipates Freud's dualism. The chapter is probing and thoughtful, even if Conrad's novel is too often characterized as "difficult" or "strange" ("Jim's mastery is very strange. The act of self-preservation is mixed with a strange desire for death" [190]). Some of this strangeness might have been dispelled if DiSanto had not given up so quickly on providing a reading of Stein. After speculating that Conrad composed Stein's words as a private joke, amused by the thought "that readers would be end-

lessly fascinated with the intricacies of the passage,” DiSanto decides that “the passage is nothing if not a problem and the structure of the passage defies finding a solution” (167). Here DiSanto seems afraid to appear foolish in advancing an interpretation of Stein’s words and is content to make the point of obscurity, obscurity itself, in concluding that “Conrad articulates the relation between the two instincts in manner that is anything but clear” (167). Despite the “history of ideas” approach to the novel, coupled with the attention to antitheses or oppositions in Conrad’s oeuvre, one looks in vain for a discussion of tragic conflict in this chapter.

Conrad’s ambivalence toward Nietzsche is now, after work by Nic Panagopoulos and Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan among others, a critical commonplace. Thus it is puzzling that DiSanto should present the insight at the start of his sixth and final main chapter, “Conrad versus Nietzsche versus Christ,” as though it originated from his “spending a great deal of time of thinking about” the two authors (192). Indeed, DiSanto seeks out tension where there is none: “Given the number of editions of Nietzsche’s work available in French and English, Garnett’s interest in Nietzsche, years of allusions and reference to Nietzsche in his writings, and Conrad’s love of reading, it is hard to believe Conrad had no knowledge of one of the most famous philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century” (197). Why does he feel compelled to set up a straw man here? Nevertheless, in this chapter we come to see how *Victory* throws into question Heyst’s father-cum-Nietzsche’s conflation of pity and contempt; in *Lord Jim* and *The Secret Agent*, “Conrad rewrites and revalues Nietzsche’s criticism of Christianity” (194). Here, DiSanto explores Conrad’s interrogation of Nietzsche’s life and works (from the *Birth of Tragedy* to *The Will to Power*) through Jim and Stevie as comparable to both Christ and Nietzsche in the elements of self-sacrifice, suffering, and victimhood. Although fascinating, the section on *Lord Jim* is at times a little labyrinthine: “One of Conrad’s insights into Nietzsche’s thought is revealed through the analogy with Jim. Jim’s heroism is self-preservative and self-destructive. With this in mind, it is difficult to tell if Nietzsche’s self-preservative attacks against pity and Christianity are not also self-destructive” (206). DiSanto is clearer in his explanation of how “the differences between Nietzsche and Christ collapse in Conrad’s representation of Stevie as he explores the similarities in their self-sacrifice” (218).

In *Under Conrad’s Eyes* presents Conrad as a writer concerned with the relationship between ideas and “living and being” (32), a description implicitly opposed to critical theory’s preoccupation with the construction of identity and ideology. Thus DiSanto openly aims to write in an acces-

sible and frank style, unapologetically warning us in his introduction that readers might find his approach “uncouth.” But there is a big difference between writing that is refreshingly clear and free of jargon and prose plagued by unnecessary reiteration and rambling, candid expressions of the mind’s processes that those may be. DiSanto gives us no reason to doubt his enthusiasm for his subject matter, but this study is not the best example of its kind—and it badly needs to be. If DiSanto is, as he claims, writing in the margins of contemporary literary scholarship, he has an even greater responsibility to produce work that persuades readers of the rigour (and value) of a “history of ideas approach” to literature.

Katherine Isobel Baxter’s recent work, *Joseph Conrad and the Swan Song of Romance*, shares with *Under Conrad’s Eyes* a desire to read Conrad anew. While DiSanto is concerned to redress what he perceives as an excessive emphasis on poststructuralist and postcolonial criticism on Conrad, Baxter exposes structuralism’s problematic hold on the way we approach romance in Conrad.

In her stimulating introduction, Baxter draws attention to the lingering influence of Thomas Moser’s half-century-old devaluation of Conrad’s later works where generic elements of the romance genre are explicitly in play. That is, for the most part critics continue to buy into the idea that the elements of romance detract from truly serious literary texts. Why do we continue to devalue romance in Conrad’s fiction? Baxter argues that the problem lies with structuralism, a mode that still dominates the way we approach romance. Whether the practitioner is Northrop Frye or Gillian Beer or, more recently, Margaret Bruzelius, structuralist readings implicitly trivialize individual works of literature in favour of a prescriptive, totalizing framework. While Baxter appreciates the value of that sort of work so far as it goes—providing, for example, insight into a transcultural and transhistorical consciousness—structuralism leads to a dead end, paradoxically devaluing its own subject matter by privileging patterns and motifs over and above singular attributes of this or that novel, poem, or play. One might point out the obvious, that the question Baxter would prefer us to ask about Conrad’s writings—“[H]ow does Conrad engage with romance, and what happens when he does?” (5)—can only be answered with recourse to structuralist thought. That is, in order to recognize Conrad’s particular adoption of and departures from conventional elements of the genre, we have to know what the conventions are in the first place. Still, Baxter is persuasive in showing how structuralism has tended to limit, rather than stimulate, interpretations of Conrad’s oeuvre.

Seeking a new way into Conrad's fiction, Baxter turns to Robert Miles's concept of philosophical romance, found in his essay "What is a Romantic Novel" (2001) and book *Romantic Misfits* (2008). Miles explains that philosophical romance emerged in the late eighteenth century with fiction by Walpole, Godwin, and Maturin among others whose works are characterized by the destabilization of objective truths in which Enlightenment thought had placed so much faith. Eschewing the mask of objectivity found in other genres, such as realist novels and histories, philosophical romance narratives are openly and self-reflexively fictional and call into question "stable paradigms of value and legitimacy" (8). On the other hand, works of anti-philosophical romance, by Sir Walter Scott, for example, find closure through re-inscribing, rather than destabilizing, the status quo. Consequently we are to understand that philosophical romance explores "ideology as ... ideology" and anti-philosophical romance reaffirms and is complicit with ideological constructs (7).

Concerned to avoid a rigid application of Miles's conceptual framework, Baxter proposes that philosophical romance provides an opening into a new appreciation of romance's subversive potential in Conrad's fiction. True to this aim, philosophical and anti-philosophical romance guide Baxter's readings of Conrad's fiction, but the concepts remain implicit rather than structurally explicit in her navigation through the eight novels on which she focuses. Thus the three parts into which the study is divided are not, as might be expected, entitled according to the organizing concepts of the study but simply indicate the novels studied: "Part 1: 'Heart of Darkness' and *Lord Jim*"; "Part 2: *Romance*, *Nostromo*, and *Chance*"; and "Part 3: *Victory*, *The Rescue*, and *The Rover*." It is not until we encounter the titles of individual chapters and their subheadings that themes are indicated, and these, too, do not always overtly refer to elements of philosophical romance or its antithesis. At times the work seems a little chaotic, as if Baxter is trying to incorporate too much, about Conrad's critical reception, his creative process, his resonances with various works throughout English literary history, and the aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political implications of his deployment of romance techniques. All the same, a reader might find that the openness and multi-faceted quality of Baxter's study to be its greatest strength. After all, the point of the work is to evoke an appreciation of Conrad's richly diverse, experimentalist deployment of romance.

Part 1, although at times reiterating essentially familiar readings of "Heart of Darkness" and *Lord Jim*, provides important groundwork for later chapters. Here Baxter presents both novels as exemplary of philosophical

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subversive and  
thus implicitly  
philosophical.

romance in their implicit interrogation of “how narration shores up the construction of these ideas and ideologies [of imperial ideals or codes of duty and honour]” (18). The opening chapter, “*Heart of Darkness* and the Modern Quest” explores Conrad’s ironic use of the quest motif characteristic of romance narratives, with a focus on the narrative’s throwing into question ideologies of history, geography, race, and sanity. Baxter eloquently concludes that “Marlow’s quest, which had begun as a journey shaped by history, geography, and race, that is to say, apparently rational and external concepts, becomes a journey into ontology, a quest caught in its own hermeneutic circle” (32). Chapter 2, “*Lord Jim*: Other Words, Other Worlds” explores Conrad’s subversive use of romance techniques in his radical interrogation of romance narratives. The disjuncture between Jim’s ideals and reality, argues Baxter, exposes the paradox of romance narratives, fuelled as they are by the failure of the very ideals they celebrate.

Baxter’s reading of *Lord Jim* becomes a touchstone for later chapters, especially chapter 3—the first of part 2—entitled “Anti-Philosophical *Romance*.” In this chapter the radical impossibility of return in the former novel is contrasted with the anti-philosophical romantic resolution in the latter, with Kemp’s return home to England. Orienting her reading with Miles’s discussion of Sir Walter Scott, Baxter points out that “in *Romance*, as in *Redgauntlet*, the further the plot moves its hero away from home and safety the more complete and assured is his final return” (57). Here we find an excellent account of the narrative’s reification not only of nationalist ideals but also the implied retreat from alterity implicit to the novel—a retreat that comes to light when Baxter reads the text with Michel de Certeau’s concept of “the return of the other as the same” found in his *Writing of History* (1988). The subsequent chapter, “*Nostromo*, Not the Man,” takes as its point of departure the frustration of “teleological purposefulness” in effect through Conrad’s exploitation of various romance tropes, such as doubling and inter- and intra-textuality. If the generic shift at the end of the novel is awkward, Baxter asks us to consider that it might be intentionally so, “for it re-enacts all the other failures of narrative that the book catalogues” (80). Chapter 5, “Power, Gender, and Laughter in *Chance*,” explores the novel as a counterpoint to the “radical scepticism” of *Nostromo*. While the novel’s movement toward its “comic resolution” aligns the work with anti-philosophical romance, Baxter points out that “the peculiarly domestic nature of the story is at odds with traditional romance narrative, and instead shows up the flawed romanticism of the narrators’ desires” (89). It becomes clear that Conrad’s works of anti-philosophical romance are subtly subversive and thus implicitly philosophical.

As she explains in her introduction, Baxter aims to show how “Conrad’s use of philosophical romance goes further than Miles’s account of the form in the Romantic period, for he extends its inherent instability to the novel and narrative itself” (14). It is in part 3 of the study where we encounter in full force the notion of Conrad’s work at the limit of romance. Chapter 6, “*Victory*: ‘Damned Tricks’ and Girls,” explores the novel that “exposes the ways in which romantic fictions are used rhetorically to obscure the practicalities of financial and personal interaction” (105). If we consider the novel as a work of philosophical romance, *Victory* emerges as an interrogation of romantic rhetoric as it constructs and obscures emotion and “the machinations of finance” (117). In chapter 7, “Theatre and Incomprehension in *The Rescue*,” we come upon the phrase after which Baxter’s book is named, taken from Conrad’s remark in a letter to his agent, J.B. Pinker, that the *Rescue* is “the swan song of romance as literary art.” In *The Rescue*, Baxter finds philosophical romance’s self-conscious interrogation of ideology stretched “to an ironic exposure of romance narrative itself” (102). Thus we come to see how the concept of philosophical romance sheds light not only upon *The Rescue*’s exposure of honour as an ideological construct but upon the cause of the novel’s belated completion. In the eighth and final chapter, Baxter shows how an awareness of the radical questioning that informs Conrad’s “swan song of romance” opens up possibilities for reading the critically neglected *Rover* (1923) as “a post-romance landscape peopled by characters straight out of a romance narrative who continue to exist after the narrative that gave them purpose as characters has been removed” (135). Such a reading sheds new light on Conrad’s modernist nostalgia and attendant tropes of disappearance and dissolution.

*Joseph Conrad and the Swan Song of Romance* is a richly expansive work, for it not only challenges conventionally dismissive readings of romance in Conrad’s fiction but situates the novels in the context of British literary history, while also considering the evolution of Conrad’s literary career. Throughout the study we encounter useful and entertaining comparisons to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (to situate the quest motif in “Heart of Darkness”), Spenser’s *The Fairie Queen* (to situate, in relation to Duessa and Una, Jim’s elusiveness and, later, to discuss romantic doubling in *Nostromo*), and Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* (to situate the *Rescue*’s exploration of honour and heroism), in addition to astute engagements with literary criticism and analyses of Conrad’s creative process as reflected in the letters, essays, and fiction. Indeed Baxter’s Conrad is an innovative literary artist with a coherent, however richly diverse project that persists

through the early and later fiction in throwing into question “the colonial, social, domestic, and political ideologies of his time” (147).

What emerges from a consideration of all three works together is a sense of Conrad as a dynamic writer whose oeuvre is best considered not in isolation but in relation to immediate and widened cultural, political, and social contexts. That is to say, collectively the works under review emphasize the importance of reading Conrad with other “texts,” whether these be theatrical, cinematic, operatic, or literary, in order to open discussions of Conrad’s implicit and explicit conversations with cultural products with which he was either directly or indirectly acquainted. One noticeable trend is that all three studies appear to be relatively unhampered by philosophical concerns about the question of authorial intention: critics are quite free to state that Conrad makes use of this or that convention, tradition, or work of fiction in a particular way; they can refer to Conrad as an author who aims to explore concepts and respond to his predecessors and contemporaries. Also observable is the disappearance of figures who have dominated the critical theory scene since the 1970s: their work may quietly support that which is now emerging in Conrad studies, but Levinas, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Lacan are mentioned only in passing or in discussions of previous criticism, if they are mentioned at all. Perhaps carrying over, however subtly, into contemporary Conrad scholarship is the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries achieved by the poststructuralists; Conrad’s readers are now free to respond in full force to the hitherto latent, interdisciplinary potential of his oeuvre.