Conrad and History (review)

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Scholars often try to drag Joseph Conrad into the present. Though he was born in the middle of the 19th century and might be seen as a life-long supporter of the great Victorian virtues of duty, work, and loyalty, F.R. Leavis famously declared him a modernist in *The Great Tradition*, linking him with Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf. A generation later, with his attack on Conrad as "a bloody racist," Chinua Achebe provoked Conradians to defend him as a proto-post colonialist. And some of us have recently demonstrated how Conrad can be read as a very contemporary-seeming, subterranean champion of same-sex desire.

There's no doubt that Conrad continues to appeal to readers in part because, thematically and stylistically, his work anticipated so much of the 20th and 21st centuries. The torture and murder of the Jewish Hirsch in *Nostromo* foreshadowed the Holocaust. The Unabomber and the attack on the World Trade Center reminded many commentators of *The Secret Agent*. And Conrad's stylistic experiments in unreliable narration, epistemology, and the mixing of genres are evidence that we can legitimately read him as both modernist and post-modernist.

But other critics, led by Conrad's great biographer, Zdzislaw Naj der, continue to remind us of Conrad's vital intellectual and emotional roots in nineteenthcentury England, France, and, especially, Poland; Richard Niland's *Conrad and History* is an erudite and often insightful contribution to that work, though one can make two central criticisms. First, Niland sometimes fails to make a sufficient or persuasive connection between Conrad's work and what Niland claims are his sources. Second, Niland occasionally bogs down in tangential matters only vaguely related to Conrad and history. (Indeed, one of those matters, nationalism, is treated so often and so independently of "history" I believe the title of the book should be *Conrad, Nationalism, and History.*) But Niland introduces an impressive array of hitherto neglected sources, especially for *Nostromo*, and, despite its omissions and occasional obscurities, *Conrad and History* should engage every Conradian.

In the "Introduction," Niland emphasizes the centrality of Polish history to Conrad's world outlook; it affected his politics, his sense of history, his values, and his psychology. "Conrad's nostalgic yearning is rooted in the Polish national experience with its refusal to accept the present as the fulfillment of history, looking to a lost past while revealing an uncertain faith in the future" (4). Niland claims, more specifically, that Conrad's view of history is essentially Hegelian, modified by 19th century Polish philosophers, especially August Cieszkowski.

He claims that Conrad did not necessarily encounter Cieszkowski directly but that he would have absorbed Cieszkowski's philosophy and historiography "through the Romantic writings of [Polish poet Adam] Mickiewicz, [Polish poet Juliusz] Slowacki, and [Polish poet and dramatist Zygmunt] Krasinski, and the more immediate influence of his family" (5). However, he adds, "While Conrad's elegiac view of the past emerges from the Polish tradition, it also borrows from the lyrical English Romanticism of

William Hazlitt's essays, with their focus on the subjective power of memory, and follows the historical treatments of Carlyle" (7).

Proving that an author has been influenced by a particular philosopher can be difficult, and it can be equally difficult to demonstrate the value of tracking down that influence. How, in other words, should our awareness of that possible influence affect our understanding of the work? This problem emerges several times in Chapter 1, "Conrad and the Philosophy of History: Youth, Poland, and the Romantic Past," where Niland (almost) claims that Almayer in *Almayer's Folly* (1895) personifies Poland: "If Almayer's intolerable present between a lost past and an uncertain future should not be read as a direct allegory of the condition of Poland, then the language with which it is presented is certainly characteristic of Polish concerns with statehood and history in the nineteenth century" (15). Despite Niland's qualifications for this claim, it seems strained, and, more importantly, the equation of Almayer and Poland fails to take us very far into the novel. To say, in general, that the gloom that pervades Conrad's fiction—from *Almayer's Folly* to *Victory*—can be traced to Conrad's intellectual biography and nationality is justifiable. But to allegorize individual characters in this way—even hesitantly—isn't helpful.

A similar problem occurs later in the chapter when Niland argues,

For Marlow, history should be understood in the Cieszkowskian tradition, with inherited experience teaching the way to the future. In the most direct echo of Cieszkowskian language in Conrad's work, Marlow declares: "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (*Y*, 96). This historical perspective supports the novella's scathing critique of imperialism and its skeptical demythologising of the insatiable power of Kurtz, drawing attention to the belated but ultimately inescapable encounter between historical judgment and European colonial rapacity." (21)

The quotation from Marlow Niland draws our attention to is simply too brief and open to interpretation to be a definitive echo of any particular philosophical position, and Niland's summary of the implications of the echo for the novella is underdeveloped. Even if, as Niland suggests, Marlow's statement is a rephrasing of Polish Romantic historiography, why should it necessarily support "the novella's scathing critique of imperialism" and the "demythologising" of Kurtz's power? We need significantly more discussion for this argument to be persuasive.

Niland is more persuasive when he turns to Emelia Gould in *Nostromo* (1904) because not just her attitude—and the attitude of the novel itself— but her very words echo Polish Romantic historiography. Niland quotes her thoughts from near the end of the novel: "[F]or life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after" (22). This is a convincing and valuable insight about Emelia's thought (which, reported via free indirect discourse, has always seemed a little out of place to me), but, again, we might be given more analysis of her character and how this attitude toward history plays

itself out in the novel. Later Niland makes a similar claim about the "creed" Razumov formulates, nearly unconsciously, after betraying Haldin in *Under Western Eyes* (1911): "History not Theory. /Patriotism not Internationalism. /Evolution not Revolution. / Direction not Destruction. /Unity not Disruption" (27). I'm convinced that Niland is right: Razumov appears to be a participant in the philosophical/ historiographical debates of Hegel and his most important Polish interpreter, Cieszkowski. Razumov is therefore more Polish than Russian (just as Emelia's comment lends her something of a Polish point of view). But we need more discussion of Razumov's participation in these intellectual and political debates and more analysis of the novel itself, especially of Razumov's creed.

Near the end of the chapter, Niland introduces a number of Polish philosophers and literary figures to the complex debate between Polish Romanticism and Positivism, for Conrad represented most intimately by his Romantic father, Apollo Korzeniowski, and by his Positivist uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski. This lends appropriate complexity to a debate that had such an important affect in Conrad's thinking and attitudes.

After focusing on Conrad's Polish intellectual roots, Niland turns to Great Britain in Chapter 2, "Narrative and History: *Tales of Unrest* to *Lord Jim*," which suffers from the same problems noted above. Niland suggests "Of all the figures in Polish literature, Conrad held [Juliusz] Slowacki in the highest regard" (61). But we are given no compelling evidence of the ways Slowacki's poetry affected Conrad's fiction—only that "Before the appearance of Marlow in 'Youth' in 1898, Conrad's most accomplished stories treat characters contemplating the past" (61), a circumstance we are to attribute to Slowacki's influence. But many authors treat characters contemplating their pasts, and, of course, Conrad dealt with characters who live obsessively (and often self-destructively) in their pasts throughout his career. Moving on to British influences, Niland claims the essayist William Hazlitt's advocacy of contemplating one's past to help one deal with the present in "On the Past and Future" (1821) influenced "Youth" and other early work (66), but the evidence is slight, and the possibility doesn't take us very far into Conrad's work. Finally, I'll make one last criticism of this type before moving on to the chapter's considerable strengths. Niland suggests F. H. Bradley's essay, "The Presuppositions of Critical History" (1874) influenced Conrad's creation of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* because Bradley introduces the idea that the historian (which Niland equates, plausibly, with Marlow in the novella) always brings a particular and subjective point of view to his or her work. Given the critical importance of Marlow's unreliability, this association between Conrad's most important character and the work of Bradley is quite interesting. But Niland doesn't summarize Bradley's thought sufficiently, doesn't demonstrate Bradley's influence conclusively, and doesn't sufficiently trace that supposed influence through the novella.

Niland's brief but compelling and original approach to Conrad's greatest novella in a section titled, "History and Oral Narrative Tradition in 'Heart of Darkness,'" suffers from none of the problems noted above. Drawing on philosophy from Hegel, his English translator, J. B. Baillie, and F.H. Bradley; from theories of oral history, and from

earlier Conrad scholarship, Niland shows how "Heart of Darkness" works as a complex critique of the possibility of achieving unassailable truth in the retelling of history. Niland contrasts, for example, Marlow's pointedly subjective story-telling with official narratives, such as Kurtz's report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs," and reveals the flaws of "authoritative" history, represented as well by the Harlequin's copy of the naive *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship,* which Marlow finds such a simple and comforting alternative to the dark reality of his work in the Congo. The next section on oral historiography in *Lord Jim* is equally rich and original. Niland finds a story from Herodotus involving an honored guest who inadvertently causes the death of his host's son that clearly parallels Jim's narrative—Niland has uncovered an important source for the novel that reveals Conrad's deep interest in historiography.

Chapter 3, "History and Nation: *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes,*" uncovers many additional sources for Conrad's works, most notably Argentinean Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's (1811-88) *Facundo, civilization y barbarie* (1845): "Mary Mann's 1868 translation entitled *Life in the Argentine Republic in the days of Tyrants, or Civilization and Barbarism* uncannily recalls the work in progress of Don Jose Avellanos and the riotous world of *Nostromo"* (118). Niland also begins to account for Conrad's complex treatment of Giorgio Viola, noting how his patriotism and worship of Garibaldi are connected with Costaguana's and Sulaco's nationalist struggles. And he helps us understand the novel's tone—its barbs against the US, its strange nostalgia for what was, after all, a brutal South American past. The chapter explains just how readers should feel about the Occidental Republic's present and future, dominated by material interests based in the United States. Though, overall, Niland's greatest contribution is to our understanding of *Nostromo*, his later discussions of the sources of "Prince Roman" (1910) "The Crime of Partition" (1919), *The Secret Agent* (1907), and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) are also often interesting and persuasive.

In his last full chapter, "The World of Yesterday: Conrad, European History and Napoleonic Legend," Niland contributes to our understanding of Conrad's much-debated decline when he proves how poignantly Conrad felt a part of a vanished and repudiated past after the outbreak of WWI. "Conrad's wartime fiction, *The Shadow-Line* [1917], 'The Warrior's Soul' [1916], and 'The Tale' [1917], constitutes a dialogue with youth, one member of the older generation asking for understanding" (152-53). (Niland probably goes too far when he suggests, though never states directly, that Conrad's wartime fiction anticipated the anti-war literature inspired by WWI, that he essentially adopts the attitude of the disillusioned young (157-59).) Later in the chapter, Niland interestingly traces the influences of Napoleon's career on Conrad's thinking and work.

In his very brief "Conclusion," Niland argues that "while scholars [notably, I would add, Stephen Donovan] have recently sought to locate Conrad's work within British popular culture at the turn of the twentieth century, the importance of the contemporary philosophical milieu of Britain and Europe to Conrad's literature should not

be eclipsed" (193). This book is a significant contribution to the study of that milieu and those influences. Conrad appeals to readers on many levels—while he wrote sea and colonial adventure fiction that appealed to men and boys, he did so while writing some of the most aesthetically original stories and novels published in English, and while participating in several of the great intellectual debates of his time—and ours.

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