



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction

Carola M. Kaplan, Andrea White

Conradiana, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 1-2 (Article)

Published by Texas Tech University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cnd.2007.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217060>

Introduction

CAROLA M. KAPLAN AND ANDREA WHITE

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, POMONA
AND CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINGUEZ HILLS

The essays in this issue of *Conradiana* were originally responses to our 2002 Call for Papers, a project that resulted in the volume *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives* (Routledge 2005), in two panels at the 2004 MLA conference in Philadelphia, and in this issue. It is a topic that has stirred great interest and that has in turn generated a rich abundance of essays of far-reaching significance.

These essays, as you will find, bear out our assertion in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* that “since the beginning of the twenty-first century, things have taken a peculiarly Conradian turn” (xiii). While Conrad has been hailed as a contemporary since at least 1970, when the Joseph Conrad Society of America was first formed, more recent events have brought repeatedly to our attention the relevance of Conrad’s work. The events of September 11, 2001, were immediately linked by commentators to Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*; the invasion of Iraq was connected to *Nostromo* and its theme of the imperial West; and the renewed violence in various African countries has reminded current analysts of *Heart of Darkness*. Scholars and journalists continue to view contemporary issues of globalization and the New World Order as anticipated by the concerns of much of Conrad’s work: dislocation, homelessness, cultural clash, loss of personal vision, and the dark eruptions of the irrational.

Ambiguities, ambivalence, precariousness, and irreconcilable antagonisms—so familiar to us today—are Conrad’s stock-in-trade, as Stephen Ross finds when he traces Conrad’s political and ideological

development as an evolving response to his ambivalence towards modernity. Roger Bowen claims that it was the quality of Conrad's engagement with his day—one so much like our own—that enables him, as both literary model and cultural presence, to continue to haunt us today. Both Nels Pearson and Debra Romanick Baldwin offer new approaches to *Typhoon*. Baldwin compares Conrad's text to Primo Levi's *The Monkey's Wrench* to claim that both enlist comedy as a way of "celebrating the diminutive in a precarious world," subverting traditional notions of heroism— notions that supported imperialism's claims—and anticipating the role of the nonheroic in twenty-first-century literature. Pearson also sees a profound subversion at work in *Typhoon* in Conrad's linking the instability of language with that of the capitalist ideology that provided the rationale for the *Nan Shan's* voyage, thus exposing the material interests at its base.

Implicitly or explicitly, these essays point out and proceed from the multiplicity and instability of Conrad's position in the world, vis-à-vis his nationality, culture, and language, a positional uncertainty that uniquely equipped him to observe the early social, political, and economic trends that we term globalization. That Conrad was an early and perceptive observer of the process we call globalization might lead us to query: Was Conrad prescient? Or is this—the Global Conrad—one we are able to see because of our own particular historical position at the beginning of the twenty-first century? As Stephen Greenblatt and others have pointed out to us, these questions are both inseparable and unanswerable. All that we can say at this point is that Global Conrad is the Conrad who emerges most clearly for us now, as though Conrad's concern with globalization had been written in invisible ink only to become visible when heated by the flames of recent history, a history that has seen the failure and fallout of colonialism, the upsurge of totalitarianism, the emergence of organized terrorism, and the rise of neoimperialism. All these processes have sounded the death knell of progress and encouraged us to view ourselves through the reductive lens of comedy rather than through the enlarging eyepieces of epic or tragedy. We now find that it is Global Conrad who most distinctly speaks to us—and to whom we must listen—as he instructs, advises, and warns us at the menacing inception of this new century.