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Conrad and Masculinity (review)

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Andrew Michael Roberts. *Conrad and Masculinity*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. 250 pp. ISBN 0-312-22782-5

Andrew Roberts's *Conrad and Masculinity* is full of sharp insights into variations of masculinity in thirteen Conrad novels and a short story. Roberts, who teaches at the University of Dundee, is a scholar of broad interests and expertise: editor or coeditor of books on the novel, on Conrad, on Conrad and gender, and on poetry and contemporary culture; he is author of a recent monograph on the British-American poet Geoffrey Hill. This book more than fulfills its promise of exploring "the importance of masculinity in Conrad's work in the light of feminist theory, of theories of masculinity which take their lead from feminism" (1). But I expect that many readers will find, as I do, that theoretical discussion here frequently overpowers explication and critical argument.

The volume is organized along both topical and (approximate) chronological lines. The introduction helpfully locates Conrad's writing within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British Imperial culture; summarizes the recent upsurge in gender-related discussions of the author; and briefly surveys the major theoretical bases of the book—particularly the inherent contradictions in "masculinity" considered as an ideology and as a "socially constructed identity," and the continuum of "sexual and non-sexual forms of bonds between men" defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (5, 8). There is also a suggestive biographical point of reference in the characterization of Conrad as cultural outsider whose "awareness of alienation, isolation and powerlessness" and "skepticism about identity, certainty and effective action" figure into his portrayals of both women and men (3).

The first two chapters focus on "European males in imperial settings" (14). Roberts reads *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Almayer's Folly*, "Karain," *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, and *Lord Jim* as narratives in which race is "always already interlocking" with gender, and masculinity is articulated mostly through relationships with women—in spite of the extensive male bonding (14). Chapter 3 explores theories of "the body" with reference to "Typhoon" and *The Secret Agent*. Chapter 4 is devoted to *Nostromo*, emphasizing Charles Gould and Nostromo as two versions of masculinity (English gentleman/colonial administrator and Latin male heroic adventurer), both finally revealed as "hollow men of modernity" (96).

Chapters 5 and 6 are the most satisfying in the book. The first explores "epistemology, modernity, and masculinity" in *Heart of Dark-*

ness, using Marlow's lie to Kurtz's Intended near the end of the novella as a starting point for analysis of shared male power through shared knowledge (27). Chapter 6, on *The Secret Agent* (briefly revisited), *Under Western Eyes*, and *Chance*, moves beyond the exclusion of women from masculine knowledge to the notion of women being identified with knowledge in various forms.

The final two chapters treat *The Arrow of Gold* and *Victory* in light of theories of vision, starting with an explication of "the politics of the visual" and a probing of the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (166). They explore similarities and differences between M. George's aestheticizing of Doña Rita in the former novel and Heyst's detached male gaze upon Lena (and, briefly, her imagined view of herself as seen by Heyst at the moment of her death) in the latter.

I expect that readers not thoroughly familiar with the Conrad texts or not particularly interested in the permutations of recent gender and cultural theory will be somewhat put off by the book, for all of its valuable insights. Details from the fiction are for the most part cited with little or no orientation for the reader. And Conrad's writing is often lost sight of in the lengthy discussions of theories of gender, postcolonialism, and other topics by Sedgwick, René Girard, Chris Bongie, Kaja Silverman, Michael Foucault, Frederick Jameson, Luce Irigaray, et al. A more reader-friendly approach might have allowed the theoretical considerations to emerge organically from discussion of problematic treatments of masculinity in the Conrad texts. Perhaps this could have been accomplished by an expansion of the theoretical underpinnings in the introduction, elaborated as needed in the later chapters.

Roberts often introduces theoretical arguments in abrupt, even somewhat mechanical, fashion. Thus, in chapter 1: "An attempt to relate masculinity and imperialism in Conrad's work requires some model of how the Same, the Other and the hybrid operate in terms of gender and in terms of race" (19). Or this in chapter 3: "Another way of understanding the status of Stevie's remains would be in terms of Kristeva's concept of the abject" (92). Beyond stylistics, multiple theoretical references and literary allusions frequently clutter the line of critical argument. For example, in chapter 1, a long paragraph moves quickly from speculation about authorial psychology (that Conrad early in his career could deal with "the otherness of women [only] by heightening that otherness through ideas of racial or cultural difference") to a series of quick references to Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, to a comment on the racial Other by Bongie, to Zola's *Nana*, to aged non-European women in Conrad's fiction, to Ronald Hyam's use of "a

Freudian hydraulic model of sexuality,” to a series of questions by Ann Laura Stoler about sexuality and imperialist thinking, to Sander Gilman on sexuality and racism, to Christopher Lane on imperialism and the death drive as “a corrective to the homogenizing idea of the imperial project”—all leading to this inconclusive end: “Faced with this profusion of competing and interrelating models, it is important to bear in mind that they are only models. That is to say, they are heuristic and interpretive devices with which we can analyze and perhaps explain imperial practice and discourse (and, in the present instance, Conrad’s fiction).” (20–2). Similarly, a summary of various theories of the body (by Hélène Cixous, Foucault, Jane Gallop, Peter Stallybrass, and Allon White) in chapter 3 leads only to this: “any attempt at a generalized theoretical synthesis or reconciliation of such theories may be of limited usefulness” (68).

In chapter 4, Roberts asserts that Charles Gould in *Nostromo* “discovers [...] that his methods [...] are, in respect of his personal (partly unconscious) aims, self-defeating” (106). This claim is, to say the least, arguable. Roberts attempts to support the point by turning, not for a closer look at the Conradian text, but rather to the writings of Bongie (on the “New Imperialism”) and Foucault. “It is entirely in accord with Foucault’s account that Gould’s belief in his individual autonomy is the product of his subjection to the disciplinary powers of modernity, and serves those powers” (107). Does this convince us that Charles comes to understand that his methods are self-defeating?

Still, the chapter on *Nostromo* pursues a subtle analysis of Charles, Emilia, and *Nostromo* as “trapped within systems of meaning which determine them,” taking pleasure in others’s “attribution of meaning to their bodies” (109). There is a great deal more in the book to praise. Chapter 1 offers a complex conception of imperialism (citing particularly Homi Bhaba) that includes the propensity of colonialism to be “complex, ambivalent, and divided within itself”—for example, a white European projecting “violent heroism” onto the Asian subject (24, 16). Feminist theory—including Kristeva’s and Katherine Judith Goodnow’s theories of “the abject” and “feminization” of the male body, respectively—underlies a highly suggestive discussion of challenges to “the classical male body” in *The Secret Agent* (86). Chapters 5 and 6 bring fresh and sustained critical judgments to *Heart of Darkness*, *Under Western Eyes*, and *Chance*—with notably more restrained and judicious handling of theoretical material than elsewhere in the book. The central subject of *Chance* is shown to be competition among males for their understanding of women—including the frame narrator in

competition with Marlow. What the men here have in common is "their shared lack of understanding and their shared inability to engage with women other than through the distorting medium of complementary sets of male idealizations and condemnations" (159). Further, Marlow of *Chance*, seeking to define the nature of the feminine, conforms to the female stereotype: "overt passivity combined with covert influence" (156).

Roberts is appropriately cautious when approaching the question of possible homoerotic overtones in the Conrad texts—a subject lately broached at times without sufficient care. In chapter 6, for example, he challenges Sedgwick's suggestion that Kirylo Razumov's heterosexual desire for Natalie Haldin in *Under Western Eyes* is "a perfunctory detour on the way to a closer, but homophobically proscribed, bonding" with her brother Victor Haldin: "There are no evident overtones of the sexual in Razumov's response to Haldin" (145). In chapter 8, Roberts takes Jeffrey Meyers to task more directly for claiming that in *Victory* Heyst and Morrison clearly have "a homosexual friendship," that Heyst "never desires Lena" sexually, and (in a "yet more dubious assertion") that because of her previous sexual experience Lena has "a great deal in common" with the vicious Ricardo (205). Roberts's most intriguing discussion of "the haze of ambiguity and transgression that Conrad creates around questions of sexuality" (as he wrote about *Victory*) comes in chapter 5, in response to Nina Pelikan Strauss's mention of Marlow's feeling for Kurtz, "a love that strikes [Marlow] with horror, " as an example of "men's passionate love for one another" (205, 130). While finding plenty of subtle suggestions of male-male desire in *Heart of Darkness*, Roberts refrains from reading the novella as "primarily about repressed homosexual desire" (131). Rather "the relationship between Marlow and Kurtz takes place within a whole matrix of intermale relationships involving competitiveness, desire, bonding, the sharing and appropriation of power and knowledge" as well as the exclusion of women from such power and knowledge and the imperialist adventure (131). The chapter concludes with interesting speculation about the implications of Marlow's encounter with the Intended, based on Sedgwick's extension of the Freudian "homophobic regime of utterance" ranging from "I [a man] do not *love* him—I *hate* him" through "I do not love him; *she* loves him" to "I do not *love* him, I *am* him." (135–6)

In the introduction, Roberts promises to emphasize "narrative self-consciousness [. . . as one of] the most distinctively modernist features of Conrad's technique," which often foregrounds "the acts of narrating and listening or reading" in ways that raise epistemological questions

(7). Roberts delivers on this promise in a variety of ways. Virtually all chapters contain shrewd analyses of narrative points of view, frequently making use of the tools of cinema criticism. In chapter 1, Roberts points out the difficulty of knowing the "moral and political stance of the implied author," and thus the extent to which the protagonists of Conrad's first two novels are ironized (24). In a helpful discussion of free indirect discourse in the same chapter, he charges Ruth Nadelhaft with understating "the complicity of the narrative voice with some of the attitudes which it ironizes" (28). Elsewhere, he notes how the perspective of the narrator of *The Secret Agent* sometimes merges with that of "singularly unsympathetic characters" such as Vladimir and the Professor (84). Roberts concludes his discussion of *The Arrow of Gold* (subtitled "A Story between two Notes") with a suggestive commentary on the fact that the woman whose curiosity about the narrator called this narrative into being (according to the "First Note") is not mentioned in the closing "Second Note": Conrad here "fails to develop the possibilities for a radical revision of the structures of gender exclusion which are present in 'Heart of Darkness'" (185–6).

That sentence, along with the excellent summing-up paragraphs at the ends of most of the book's chapters, suggests the possibilities for a larger, more sustained argument on the theme of Conrad and masculinity which Roberts might have made, had the citations of theoretical sources been more subdued and more at the service of critical interpretation. This reservation aside, *Conrad and Masculinity* is a fascinating and informative study, based on an extraordinarily wide grasp of gender theory. It is a book that all Conrad scholars interested in the implications of gender in the author's work—and it is hard to imagine why one would not be—need to know.

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