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## Review of *Conrad and Language*

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## Review of *Conrad and Language*

### **Comments**

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*Conrad and Language*, eds. Katherine Isobel Baxter & Robert Hampson. Edinburgh: U of Edinburgh P, 2016. £70

The first thing people ask me about the work of Joseph Conrad concerns language. “How,” they ask, “could a Pole write such extraordinary novels in English?” Until now, I have been unable to give more than a flippant answer, marveling with them that he wrote so beautifully in his third language. Katherine Isobel Baxter and Robert Hampson’s *Conrad and Language* suggests I was wrong; English may actually have been Conrad’s *sixth* language, following Polish, French, Latin, German, and Russian.

As the introduction claims, one great strength of this volume is that it adds to our understanding of one central concern in Conrad’s work: the uncertain relationship between language and truth, which remains a vital issue of our own time. And it places Conrad in the context of late-nineteenth century interest in comparative linguistics: “While Conrad may not have thought of his own writing practice in this quasi-scientific way, nonetheless his own assessment of language in the world echoes in an existential vein the same concerns for the precarious and arbitrary condition of language expressed by Frege, Wittgenstein and Saussure.” (4) As the noted Conradian, Laurence Davies eloquently suggests in his “Afterward”: “The chapters . . . consider many junctures, many differences—not so much polarities as swirls of literary energy between and among spoken and unspoken, spoken and written, articulate and inarticulate, multinational and domestic; terms of art and terms of common discourse, heteroglossia and polyglossia, frankness and evasion, ontology and epistemology, the locutionary or illocutionary and the perlocutionary . . . . These studies of Conrad and language mix in various proportions the aesthetic, philosophical, ethnographic, historical, ethical, cultural and geographical with the linguistic” (204).

The problem of a collection of this nature is nearly always unevenness – both in quality and in style – which make it difficult to review in a general way. The focus on *language* also does little to delineate the content of the volume, so the chapters range widely in their focus and theoretical foundations, from literary theory to linguistics to colonial discourse theory to various areas of philosophy. Some chapters seem to have been truncated to meet the publisher’s word limit. Others need greater illustration and documentation. Still others add insufficiently to what we already know. As I hope this review will demonstrate, however, overall this is a well-edited and sometimes revelatory collection that includes chapters by some of the most thoughtful and original academics working today in Conrad studies.

Robert Hampson’s “Conrad and Nautical Language: Flying Moors and Crimson Barometers,” takes up the observation from the introduction that Conrad looked back nostalgically on his life as a sailor in part because a sailor’s language is concrete: an existential hedge against chaos and the void. Hampson praises that language in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *Lord Jim*, “Typhoon,” and “The End of the Tether” for its efficiency and its clarity – clarity even for the non-expert. He touches on the ways Conrad euphemized standard sailor profanity, but he is as careful as any Victorian with his own language. Hampson might have done a full translation of Conrad’s often amusing euphemisms, but he refrains, merely translating words such as “b’gosh” to “by God” and “durned” to “damned,” avoiding translation of more explosive profanity. When he notes that Conrad euphemizes the “cloacal nature” of the *Patna* captain’s language, he employs euphemisms himself (20). Conrad, he writes, “offers a double-voiced text: an irreproachable text for the delicate or juvenile reader and a readily translatable text for those with stronger nerves” (19). This begs the question: How DID sailors curse in the 1880’s and 90’s? He refrains as well from sufficiently examining Conrad’s use of the term “nigger” in *The Nigger of the*

'*Narcissus*.' In their reviews, Hampson tells us, Americans noted that its use violated good taste on our side of the Atlantic, while British reviewers tended to ignore it. As Hampson points out, however, Wait himself objects to the term, used by the infamous Donkin, in the novella. Hampson might have contributed to the debate about Conrad's use of the term, and its effect on our understanding of the novella, by providing a full, contemporary context for its use in Great Britain.

In short, Hampson is always worth reading on Conrad, but this chapter reads something like a conference paper – it needed to be fleshed out more fully.

Andrew Glazzard's "Navigating the 'Terroristic Wilderness': Conrad's Language of Terror" is fascinating, thorough, and quite timely. Opening with the UN's difficulty defining the word "terrorist," he enlists Conrad to help us understand how the word represents a discourse, a whole lexicon of competing assumptions. Glazzard points out that in *Under Western Eyes* Halden takes pains to distinguish himself as a freedom fighter, not a terrorist. We are led to see him as a martyr to a higher cause, though Conrad troubles that equation by having Halden's bomb kill an innocent driver as well as the murderous Minister-President.

At the opposite end of the "terrorist" spectrum from Halden, here is Glazzard's discussion of Nikita, the grotesque and, with the Minister-President, equally murderous revolutionary who proves a double agent in *Under Western Eyes*. Glazzard begins with this description from the "Author's Note":

As to Nikita – nicknamed Necator – he is the perfect flower of the terroristic wilderness. What troubled me most in dealing with him was not his monstrosity but his banality. He has been exhibited to the public eye for years in so-called 'disclosures' in newspaper articles, in secret histories, in sensational novels.

"Conrad," Glazzard explains, "appears to fear that he may have derived Nikita from popular-culture constructions of terrorism, which would mean that he is a simple villain rather than either a realistic portrait of a political actor or a psychological case study. Conrad thus recognizes the immense cultural baggage that a pejorative and political word such as 'terrorist' might bring with it: Nikita may be as much a cliché from political-cultural discourse as a representation of an idea, a movement or a person" (39).

Glazzard casts new light on *The Secret Agent*, *The Rover*, and *Under Western Eyes*. His conclusion, that "Conrad's examination of political language implies a need for skepticism, vigilance and an awareness of context and contingency, underpinned by an acceptance that language has power" applies equally well to Conrad's fiction and to our own troubled world.

An important, perhaps *the* important purpose of literary criticism is to help readers see the work with fresh eyes. In "Conrad, G. E. Moore and Idealism," John Attridge ably introduces G. E. Moore's essentially phenomenological approach to language. But his association of Conrad with Moore adds little to what we know about Conrad's famous distrust of abstractions, which appears to be the point of Attridge's comparison of the two figures. That said, Attridge helps illuminate Conrad's complex relationship with forms of idealism in *Nostromo* and *Under Western Eyes*.

Yael Levin sets herself a characteristically ambitious project in "Conrad's Language of Passivity: Unmoving toward Late Modernism": to explain how "the categorical separation between experience and expression – and the problem it poses for an early modernist writer such as Conrad – is everywhere

evident in the thematic and stylistic makeup of his fiction.” Her study focuses on the “distinct ontological articulations in the refashioning of plot, narrative voice and character” that reveal this separation between words and their signifiers (64). She fruitfully holds Conrad’s work in this regard against Becket’s, whose depiction of the tenuous relationship between language and empirical reality, language and being, is explicit, while Conrad’s is more implicit.

Levin takes up *Lord Jim*, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus,’* *Victory*, and *Heart of Darkness*, and she makes significant use of Heidegger. Her arguments are complex and interesting, but the chapter needed to be twice as long to support her claims for all these works – which each illustrate the central ontological problem she addresses in different ways – as well as to support the chapter’s philosophical apparatus.

Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s impressive essay, “The Powers of Speech in Conrad’s Fiction,” also would have benefitted from a longer, more leisurely presentation. She employs John Langshaw Austin’s distinction between locutionary language (whose purpose is purely communicative) and perlocutionary language (whose purpose is affective) to examine *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, “Karain,” “Outpost of Progress,” *Chance*, *Under Western Eyes*, and “Youth,” and she applies an array of theories from film, psychoanalysis, and linguistics. The chapter demands and rewards close scrutiny: I much appreciate, for example, her analysis of how the governess’s words do almost permanent physical and psychological damage to Flora in *Chance*, and the perlocutionary effects of Kurtz’s written and spoken words in *Heart of Darkness*. She simply needed more space to support and illustrate her claims.

Katherine Isobel Baxter usefully introduces disability studies to Conrad studies in “‘Soundless as Shadows’: Language and Disability in the Political Novels.” Her observation that the disabled Stevie has a literal understanding of language that makes him physically and emotionally susceptible to violent language – he swallows it, Baxter points out, it penetrates him – contributes to our understanding of his role as a holy fool, one of Conrad’s very few martyrs with direct, unfiltered access to truth. She points out that Razumov, in *Under Western Eyes*, lives in a world of lies; deafness, paradoxically, cures him: he can no longer be a conduit for lies and a tool of liars.

Baxter might have articulated David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s concept of “narrative prosthesis” more fully, and I am unconvinced that an application of disability studies advances our understanding of Decoud or Hirsch from *Nostromo*, but this is a welcome introduction.

Christopher GoGwilt’s “Conrad and Romanised Print Form: From Tuan Almayer to ‘Prince Roman’” is one last example of a fine piece of scholarship that may have been packed too tightly in this volume. In its treatment of *Almayer’s Folly*, *Under Western Eyes*, and “Prince Roman,” GoGwilt significantly extends our understanding of the ways Romanisation is a key concept for an exploration of Conrad’s representation of colonialism and other forms of cultural conflict. GoGwilt introduces the imperial advance of Romanised print over Arabic in Malaysia in Conrad’s first novel, and the complicated ways that Cyrillic and Roman letters clash within proper names and within Slavophile versus Westerner debates implicit within *Under Western Eyes*. Raumov’s very name, he points out, alludes to those debates. And he treats “Prince Roman” as providing “a key to unlocking the hidden Polish perspective informing the timing and spacing of Romanised print form in Conrad’s English” (124). As with Levin’s and Paccaud-Huguet’s earlier chapters, the chapter repays close attention, but I would have appreciated a more leisurely discussion.

I don't believe Andrew Francis is right when he claims, in "Languages in Conrad's Malay Fiction," that the literary role languages play in Conrad's fiction has been neglected, but he supplies an interesting compendium of the many languages used among the Malay "possessions" of the Dutch and the ways Victorians attempted to understand and categorize them. The chapter continues GoGwilt's discussion of linguistic imperialism in the Archipelago.

Claude Maisonat's "Gallicisms: The Secret Agent in Conrad's Prose" is one of the volume's highlights, in part because Maisonat's own English prose is so clear and graceful. Why, he asks, was Conrad macaronic both in his speech and writing? Maisonat has four answers: First, Conrad sometimes felt limited in English because it was not his native language. Second, mingling tongues in ones writing was considered a sign of sophistication at the turn of the nineteenth century. Third, he wished to allude to concepts beyond the world of his English readers. And fourth, perhaps most interestingly, "Conrad's use of French . . . was not only the result of conscious decisions and assumed volition but also had deeper, hidden implications related to the innermost libidinal forces of his creative power . . . . The massive collection of gallicisms in his narratives suggests that intensive translinguistic negotiations were implicitly taking place when he put pen to paper" (152). Polish, Maisonat suggests, was something of a repressed language, but the "situation of French is different because it is constitutive of Conrad's art" (154). Maisonat's examination of *The Rover* in this regard is particularly illuminating.

*A Personal Record* is one of the oddest autobiographical works in English, but Andrew Pursell adds little to what Conradians already know in "'The speech of my secret choice': Language and Authorial Identity in *A Personal Record*"; it's also unlikely non-specialists will be drawn to this chapter. Yes, *Personal Record* is a form of "self-fashioning" (181), but that might be said for every autobiography.

Ludmilla Voitkovska's concluding chapter (before Laurence Davies' eloquent "Afterward," a summing up and tribute to the volume), "The Russian Redemption of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*," includes a brief but fine publication history of Conrad's work translated into Russian as well as an expert's recommendation of the latest translations. The history of Conrad's publication life in Russia matches his own agonistic relationship with his *bête noire* and Voitkovska provides a fitting conclusion to this heterogeneous and useful collection.

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