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Richard Ruppel
Chapman University, ruppel@chapman.edu

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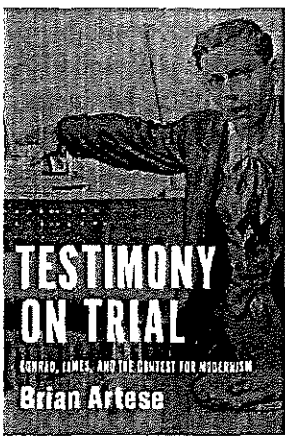
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Comments

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Testimony on Trial: Conrad, James and the Contest for Modernism

Brian Artese

Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2012. 206 pp.

The thesis of Brian Artese's *Testimony on Trial: Conrad, James and the Contest for Modernism* is ambitious, complicated, and provocative. Post-modern theorists and critics, he argues, have worked assiduously to divorce all subjective expressions in fiction from expressions of truth; every narrator, in this way of thinking, is unreliable. So the material they narrate dissolves, becoming purely self-referential. Artese (too) briefly traces the history of this movement from the inception of the novel in the eighteenth century, with the testimonial nature of Defoe and Richardson, to the beginning of the twentieth, when readers were taught to distrust all testimony: a distrust, he argues, fed by journalists, who helped to invent a disembodied, corporate, and commercially-driven, omniscient voice. Artese's goal is to counter the perception that modern novelists created "cryptograms." On the contrary, modernism, here represented by James and Conrad, challenged the notion that we can have truth beyond testimony. James and Conrad distrusted unattributed and therefore irresponsible speech, answering it with testimony. Testimony may be corroborated or disputed, in a novel or a courtroom, but the effect of this give-and-take brings us closer to truth.

This, then, is a book about the truth of fiction, an attempt to rescue the novel—an art form preoccupied with the search for truth from its origins—from

the suspicion that all its meanings are provisional and subjective. So this is an important book, one that courageously tackles large theoretical orthodoxies. Unfortunately, it is often poorly developed and unclear, and Conradians, especially, will find it disappointing. Very often, Artese fails to support and clearly develop his claims about Conrad's fiction, and he overlooks important Conrad criticism. He stakes out interesting positions, but he fails to support them adequately.

"It would be difficult to exaggerate," Artese claims in the first and best chapter, "how much our conception of the modernist novel has been shaped by the rhetoric of narratology It is a familiar and still-venerated truth that [modern] novels despair at the insurmountability of subjectivity, and consequently effect a retreat 'inward,' away from the real" (25-26). Artese draws attention to Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* and Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* as especially effective enforcers of this point of view.

I would call this a useful oversimplification. Chinua Achebe's 1975 criticism of *Heart of Darkness* was effective precisely because readers continue to take the "facts" of the novella quite seriously. Some critics dismissed "An Image of Africa" as naïve: "Of course," they said, "Achebe is wrong to equate Conrad with Marlow, an unreliable narrator." But many more have accepted the authority of the narrative and, with Hunt Hawkins, created a historical context for Marlow's observations. Here and elsewhere, Artese is selective in the critics he cites, finding those best suited to highlight his counterargument. This is useful here, however, because, as Artese suggests, the perception that all modernist texts are sealed off from the real, within what Jameson calls the "windless closure of high naturalism" (*Political Unconscious*, 206), persists and continues to trouble those who hope to find meaning—philosophical, moral, historical—in fiction. Artese is at least partially right when he claims, in other words, that "our critical view" concerning the undecidability of fiction "generally has not moved beyond poststructuralism as

much as it has merely sidestepped it" (44).

Artese concludes an impressive first chapter with an over-arching analysis of *Lord Jim* as "an assertion of testimony in a culture of anonymous authority." Like Kafka later in the century, in his trial scene, Conrad pits the individual against the anonymous, all-powerful authority of the state, which poses as an absolutely disinterested arbiter, one that will extract the truth in its proceedings. That scene is introduced by an anonymous, third-person narrator and, in a traditional novel or newspaper story, the trial would promise a "comprehensive disclosure." Yet Conrad shifts from third person to Marlow's narration just at this point. "What Conrad stages," Artese concludes, "is . . . a narratological coup over an anonymous authority he has set up precisely for this purpose" (45-46). We get the facts during the trial, but not the truth, which is embodied, literally, in the individual characters. This is a very interesting claim, but, as we'll see, it is not well supported in Chapter 4, where Artese elaborates on his "testimony versus confession" thesis.

Chapter Two focuses on Henry James and his ambivalence toward revelation versus secret-keeping in *The Aspern Papers*, *The Reverberator*, *The Bostonians*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*. A desire for openness and truth alternates with a desire for privacy in these works, expressing "a fundamental ambivalence in the post-sentimental novel about its own role in both delineating and 'discovering' the frontiers of the private." A quarter century after the publication of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James attacks the American assault on privacy in *The American Scene* (1907), where he anticipates Foucault's later contention that observation originates with and enforces discipline and control. American architecture, James wrote, serves "you up for convenient inspection" (61). These are interesting claims, but here and elsewhere Artese's references to "the sentimental novel" needed to be more complete. Which novels does he have in mind? Did all such novels represent the private and the public as aligned in the same way?

Artese stays with James in apter Three, which takes up *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *2 Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl*. I introduces earlier fiction, Henry Mackenzie's epistolary novel, *Julia de Bagné* (1777) and Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857), in his errogation of "the nineteenth-century vel's slowly evolving critique of what ght be called a disciplinary sentimentalism," which reaches, he claims, ie height of its lucidity" with Henry nes. But, he adds, James's critique incomplete because James continues provide, through his omniscient narion, glimpses of the "disinterested," orally superior "intererority" of his roines and of the interior corruption of r antagonists (100). Thus, Artese sugsts, James perpetuates the sentimental vel's insistence on a consistency between the public and the private, and an sistence on providing the reader with oth from a disinterested, authoritative rerspective. He concludes with a transiion to his concluding two chapters on onrad, claiming that Conrad rejects is disciplinary omniscience:

Marlow arrived in the English novel to displace a theatre of "external," unframable interrogation of the subject—embodied in both the anonymous authority of the "public inquiry" and in the depositional structure that had come to govern the [sentimental] novel itself—with a theatre of interlocution between commonly framed and mutually responsible subjects. (101)

The analyses of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Lord Jim* in Chapter Four take us in several interesting directions, but they needed much clearer development, and they involve some dubious claims. To begin with "*Narcissus*," Artese argues that the novella is anti-imperial in its representation of James Wait. Wait inspires a sentimental response from the crew precisely because he is the abjected, colonial other. Sentimentality is one of the driving forces of imperialism—the West justifies its conquests because only Western culture can promote progress and alleviate "savage" backwardness. The perfect

emblem of this dynamic comes when a tearful Donkin robs the dying Wait, which represents the West crying crocodile tears as it exploits its colonial possessions (114-17). This is ingenious, but I need more evidence linking Wait with the colonized other; he has more in common with the Vaudeville "Negro" than exploited Africans. It's also far from clear to me that this potential allegory represents what Artese calls "the central theme" of the novella (114).

Problems with development and clarity arise when Artese links Donkin's rhetoric in "*Narcissus*" to Conrad's essay on the sinking of the *Titanic*, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*," written fifteen years later. Artese equates Donkin with the irresponsible and faceless Board of Trade represented in Conrad's essay in ways and for reasons I simply can't follow (109-110). I have equal difficulty fully understanding the following paragraph alluding to Donkin, sentimentality, and feminism:

As evident in its treatment of Donkin, George Flack [a journalist satirized in James's *The Reverberator*], and *The Aspern* narrator, the English novel had long passed the phase in which it required itself to infuse signs of femininity into its male enforcers of sentimental discipline. In terms of a larger geopolitical fabula, however, which Conrad will increasingly elaborate over the course of his career, there remains no ambiguity about the politicized feminism ultimately agitating Donkin and all such "Plimsoll men." In *Heart of Darkness*, the perception Marlow discerns "back home" that he himself is acting as an "apostle" of reform in Africa . . . is said to belong not only to his aunt but to a genuine petticoat ruler, "the wife of the high dignitary" who has given Marlow his appointment. (112)

The problems here are legion. The opening claim that gives human agency to novels, that novels make requirements of themselves, threatens the intelligibility of what follows, and how, exactly, did earlier novels enforce "sentimental discipline"? Were all these novels (and, again, I'm not sure which Artese alludes to) written from a male perspective,

with voices that had a feminine inflection? Should we really identify Donkin as someone who had been schooled in "politicized feminism," a feminism somehow embodied by the woman who advances Marlow's career in the Congo? And how, finally, does this relate to "politicized feminism" throughout the course of Conrad's career?

Moving on to *Lord Jim*, Artese distinguishes testimony from confession in the novel: "The statements on Conrad's various stages are rarely intelligible as confessions; they are rather testimonies negotiated through an inevitably public arena" (108). In *Lord Jim*, "Conrad attempts to distinguish the testimonial condition from 'confession' as it had been sculpted within the sentimental tradition of the novel." Marlow, he concludes, "represents a pinnacle in Conrad's artistry because the captain accomplishes precisely what the traditional sentimental novel could not—a sympathetic representation of other minds and other lives without enforcing confession or personal transparency" (109). But doesn't Marlow act precisely as Jim's "confessor" from the moment they meet? Isn't Jim's evening-long, opening statement to Marlow a confession? Doesn't Marlow consult the French Lieutenant as though the latter were a confessor who might absolve both Jim and Marlow himself? In short, it's not clear to me that testimony in *Lord Jim* is presented as a preferred alternative to confession for the discovery of truth. And I need more discussion of how this move toward testimony, away from confession, represents a move away from the sentimental novel.

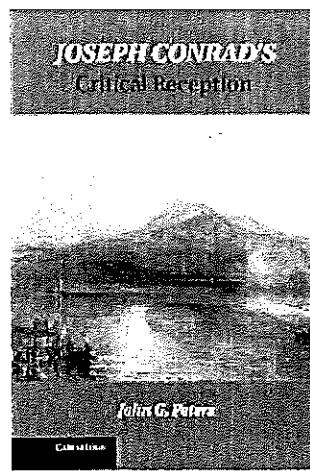
The fifth and last chapter presents the same problems with clarity and development. Artese begins with Henry Stanley's great newspaper stunt, his search for David Livingstone, later noting its many echoes in *Heart of Darkness*. Those echoes are important, of course, but they've long been heard and traced by Conrad scholars, and Artese's tone in his treatment of the affair is excessively partisan. Yes, Stanley was a shameless self-promoter, and his African travels led to more carrier deaths and general misery than most. But was

his financier, the editor of the New York *Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, equally villainous? When Bennett claimed that Stanley's expedition would "'accomplish something more than the solution' to the Livingstone mystery," can we identify that additional purpose, as Artese claims, to be "the production of Orientalist desire" (142)?

There are more problems with the Conrad chapters. Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn have published extensively on Conrad and narratology. Lothe is represented only by one introductory-level essay, Hawthorn not at all. No one expects critics to read everything, but they should engage with the most important works concerned with their subjects; the bibliography of Conrad criticism here is simply too thin. Artese conflates all the iterations of Marlow, treating the character as though he is presented the same way in every work. This is especially damaging when he takes up *Chance*, which he presents as being contiguous with Conrad's earlier novels, though most critics would disagree. In addition and overall, the argument that late-nineteenth century journalism is an important source of disembodied, essentially patriarchal textual authority is interesting but underdeveloped. The representation of the sentimental novel needs fleshing out, and it needs to be distinguished from the sentimentality that helped drive imperialism. In short, this book needed a more engaged editor, someone who would have asked Artese to flesh out his ideas more fully and clearly and who would have directed him to more of the relevant criticism.

Like too many monographs in English studies, this smart and potentially groundbreaking book went to press too soon.

Richard Ruppel
Chapman University



Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception

John G. Peters
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013.
xiii + 274 pp.

In writing a book review of a reception history, one runs the danger of epitomizing Thomas Carlyle's complaint that "Literature has become one boundless self-devouring review" (from his essay "Characteristics," published in 1831). The thought of being rebuked by Carlyle's ghost and inundated with its stream of conversation and laughter is both abominable and fascinating, I confess. I will proceed and look ahead to what happens.

John Peters has written a useful and succinct summary of the history of published commentary of Joseph Conrad's life and writings. As he explains in the preface, Peters had to be selective and largely focuses on monographs, but a few articles and book chapters are included. Those who know Conrad criticism well might quietly grumble at the exclusion of a favorite piece here or there, but one has little room for complaint given the amount of ground Peters traverses in less than three hundred pages. The lengths of the descriptions for each work are generally sufficient to get an adequate taste before choosing to search for a copy of it or look for something else. For established scholars, the book is a mnemonic device for studies read long ago, especially the texts for which the arguments are no longer clear in the mind and/or the copies are not readily at hand. More than once, I came across a title with which I was not famil-

iar or had long forgotten, and I expect many others will share this experience. For undergraduate and graduate students, Peters has provided a set of directions to landmarks and other key stops in the landscape of Conrad criticism. Having a map is usually welcome for visitors unfamiliar with the geography of a city new to them.

The book is arranged in five chapters, each of which is divided into subsections of digestible time periods, and concludes with a brief afterward in which Peters predicts a bright future for Conrad studies. The first chapter, "Early Conrad Commentary," begins by reviewing the biographical and historical criticism and the belles lettres criticism that was prevalent from 1895 to 1930 (e.g., Curle, Huneker, Follett, Ford) and then provides an account of the decline of Conrad's reputation from 1930 to 1940 (e.g., Crankshaw, Daiches, Morf). Chapter two, on the "Beginnings of Modern Conrad Commentary," reviews the period in which New Criticism came to dominate readings, focus shifted to explicating the texts, and interest grew in examining the psychology in and of the writings. It begins with the recovery of Conrad's reputation in the 1940s (e.g., Guerard, Leavis) and moves to the reestablishment of his reputation in the 1950s (e.g., Hewitt, Moser). The "Development of Modern Conrad Commentary" in chapter three reviews the works of 1960s, which laid the groundwork for future criticism (e.g., Busza, Kirschner, Said), and the 1970s, a period in which the established trends continued to develop and some new ones appeared (e.g., Daleski, Knoepflmacher, Johnson). The fourth chapter, "Modern Conrad Commentary" begins with theory's emergence in the 1980s—most forcefully perhaps in the guises of Poststructuralism and Postcolonialism—and its fertilizing influence that led to criticism's growth into a scholarly industry in the 1990s (the scholars' names remain familiar to us now). The last chapter focuses on the present age of "Contemporary Conrad Criticism," starting with those works that appeared following the advent of the new millennium and finishing with the last works published before *Joseph*