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## Review of *Joseph Conrad: Slow Modernism*, by Yael Levin

### Comments

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Yael Levin, *Joseph Conrad: Slow Modernism*. Oxford:  
Oxford University Press, 2020. i-xvi, 174pp.

The best literary criticism rubs away the veneer of familiarity that can mummify even the freshest and most original works of imagination. Yael Levin accomplishes this and more in *Joseph Conrad: Slow Modernism*. Yes, after reading *Slow Modernism* I understand *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostramo*, *Chance*, and even Beckett's plays a little differently, with a keener appreciation both for their richness and strangeness. But Levin's aim is more ambitious than this. She wants us to see narrative itself differently, to stop turning pages to find how this action will lead to that effect and to start experiencing particular moments in Conrad's work outside of time, as examinations of essential being. She succeeds admirably.

One critical explanation for Conrad's well-known problems with audience suggests that his novels and stories seldom conform to the requirements of their genres. So *Heart of Darkness* troubles the colonial adventure tale; *The Secret Agent* refuses to fit comfortably with other dynamite fiction; and *Nostramo* is a perverse founding epic. Levin's alternative explanation for Conrad's lack of popular success (before his 1913 novel *Chance*) is that Conrad's fiction presents "experience that exceeds or eschews reason and logical processing" (xiv). In this way, she writes, Conrad anticipates Beckett, another writer who leads us to question the reassuring Enlightenment binaries — subjective/objective, inside/outside — and to reconsider

our natural tendency to impose order on experience, to channel our perceptions into pre-formulated conclusions. Levin puts it this way:

Honesty, truth, and art are seen as contradictory to the demands of the market and its attention-deficit readers. To produce art is to be true to one's self, one's method and intention. Such integrity comes with a price. To be modern is to be unrecognized — both literally and figuratively, to offer an art that does not conform, that does not follow, that tries to do something new — and does it at its own pace. Conrad refuses to engage his readers by utilizing the shocks of immediate revelation or by providing stock events that will keep them titillated. . . . His artistic intention hinges on a certain deceleration — the frustration of expectation and the protraction of meaning. (6–7)

One other purpose for *Slow Modernism* is to contest Thomas Moser's *Achievement and Decline* thesis, which proposes that Conrad's fiction declines after *Under Western Eyes* (1911). Levin argues that Conrad neither declines nor advances over his career; instead, she traces a tension between what she calls defamiliarization and the creation of something new, something that reveals the stark uniqueness of every moment of experience. The earlier fiction often employs defamiliarization, described by Ian Watt as delayed decoding,<sup>1</sup> a term which suggests that Conrad's fiction is an ongoing, sometimes demanding study in epistemology. Levin describes it this way: "Defamiliarization works by withholding

and then revealing the identity of an object, by withholding and then revealing the manner in which causal links are involved in its production. Our aesthetic experience is contingent on our use of the faculty of reason. We must figure out what we see, find similarities and bring the unknown back to the familiar.” Instead, Levin asks us to attend not to the process of knowing in Conrad’s work but to his representation of *being*. This feature of his fiction “makes us see, yes — but not by appealing to reason. It demands we experience it, that we feel it and are affected by it. The aesthetic potential of such an art is not realized through categorical logic” (10). She believes that “[t]he significance of this shift — between an art that defamiliarizes and an art that creates something unknown, between action and analysis — is at the heart of a shift in Conrad’s art” (8). Levin describes this movement as an “oscillation” between “an art of being and an art of becoming.” (10)

Levin usefully compares Conrad’s depiction of being-out-time with Beckett’s. Conrad’s characters, she shows us, anticipate Beckett’s in that we see the human subject in the process of fragmentation, a process that Beckett celebrates (if that’s the right word) in his plays and novels. Applying this analysis to *Lord Jim* leads Levin to focus not on Jim’s crime and (problematic) redemption, but on Marlow:

Marlow believes himself and his reality to be the product of his rational mind and the choices that he exercises. As a storyteller he produces a world, he creates a reality. However, what he learns in his exchange with Jim is

that, in fact, he is as much the product of others' language as he is that of his own rational mind. His identity is not exclusively of his own making. (59)

Marlow presents Jim from multiple perspectives: Captain Brierly's, Stein's, Jewel's, Dain Waris's, the Raja's, Gentleman Brown's, Marlow's, and Jim's. Like Daisy Miller, he disappears in this kaleidoscope, and readers looking for moral and ethical conclusions based on Jim's innocence or guilt remain caught in an endless, ultimately fruitless debate. A focus on Marlow and the way Jim radically unsettles his conception of an orderly universe and subjectivity is welcome and refreshing.

The best chapter in *Slow Modernism*, for me, is the fifth: "From Being to Becoming: Writing the Now. *Nostromo*." Levin notes the way the novel's many ironic epithets fix certain characters in rigid narratives. So Nostromo is "the lordly Capataz de Cargadores, the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo, the Mediterranean sailor come ashore casually to try his luck in Costaguana" (131) and Charles Gould is the King of Sulaco and "El Rey de Sulaco" (132). These and other characters are trapped by these labels, both by others and by themselves. "Such excess dramatizes the erasure of the reality of an individual's singular experience; it shows identity to be constructed, socially given, a part to be played" (131). Conrad's irony can be confusing; we cannot always tell how to read it. Levin's analysis explains the irony of these labels in a way I have not seen before.

Over several, compelling pages, Levin traces and accounts for Decoud's dissolution after he is marooned on the Great Isabel. She summarizes his descent in this way:

The passage effectively dramatizes the transition . . . from the liberal-humanist subject to a posthuman subject, from spatialized time to duration. A notion of individuality or identity that is founded on the idea of a cohesive and autonomous subject breaks down. The hermetically-sealed figure for the subject gives way to allow for the possibility that identity is fluid, interdependent, and in flux. It is not separated from the environment so much as contiguous with it. The notion of life as unfolding in a sequence of events that are causally linked also breaks down, in so far as the experience of time is no longer thus punctuated. Decoud can no longer be a cohesive, autonomous subject whose actions are traced according to a series of causally-linked events with foreseeable outcomes. He is now one with the world around him where experience is no longer teleological but open-ended. The change is so radical that it disintegrates past and future in an abiding and all-encompassing present. (141)

Hirsch, she later adds, the Jewish hide merchant, is murdered because Sotillo imposes a sinister narrative on Hirsch's behavior: "This Jew might have been very much frightened by the accident," Sotillo reasons, "but he knew where the silver was concealed, and had invented this story, with his Jewish cunning, to put him entirely off the track as to what had been done" (147). Hirsch has no agenda; he is a suffering, terrified victim. Sotillo murders a false narrative.

This chapter perfectly captures the way Conrad's best fiction always works against itself, how it constructs and then demolishes narrative coherence, identity, and epistemological certainty.

*Slow Modernism* is not flawless. It is possible I missed something, but I do not quite see how Levin chose these particular novels. *The Secret Agent* includes several scenes relevant to this approach to Conrad; I am thinking especially of Winnie's slow, time-altering understanding of Stevie's death, when she is shaken out of her dream of a respectable, middle-class life to confront both Verloc and herself for what and who they are. Time slows to a crawl; she is made aware of her own corporality, and she commits murder and then suicide. Or we might think of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*, when, under the enormous pressure caused by the innocent assassin, Haldin, locked in his room, he embraces the comforting, if entirely sinister propaganda of the police state, which takes him from one fixed narrative of the aspiring student to another of the secret agent. At the end, he suddenly dismisses his role as a conniving, narrative-producing government agent, so he is deafened, crippled, and released, painfully enough, from that narrative. These two cases, along with several Levin presents, reveal characters shaken out of the everyday of regularly advancing time and of reliable cause and effect to confront a terrifying Real,<sup>2</sup> and this is something Levin also neglects. With few exceptions, the move from conventional coherence to a confrontation with actual being is painful and deadly. Emilia confronts her childless loneliness. Hirsch momentarily escapes Sotillo's torture by escaping the stereotype of the whining, powerless, cowardly Jew. Strapped in front of Sotillo, Hirsch stops screaming

long enough to spit in his face. But the freedom lasts just a second or two until Sotillo murders him. The escape from the Cartesian cogito in Conrad's fiction is quite often a descent into profound alienation, pain, and death. One other omission, finally, includes Conrad's women, such as Jewel in *Lord Jim*, Teresa Viola and Antonia in *Nostramo*, and Natalia and Sophia Antonovna in *Under Western Eyes*. How do they fit within this discussion of Conrad's counter-narrative? My own feeling is that they complicate it, and I would love to read another chapter devoted to them.

But the complaint that a work of criticism should be longer is no complaint at all, just a plea for a second edition with another chapter or two. *Slow Modernism* is an erudite, thoughtful, demanding, and disruptive book that I recommend to every Conrad reader.

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<sup>1</sup> Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of the Lacanian Real in Conrad and Faulkner, see Maurice Ebileeni's *Conrad, Faulkner, and the Problem of NonSense* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).