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Review of *Conrad and Masculinity*

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Review of *Conrad and Masculinity*, Andrew Michael Roberts. London: Macmillan, 2000 *The Conradian* 27.2 (Autumn, 2002). Richard Ruppel

Over the last fifteen years or so, the representation of sexuality in the works of Joseph Conrad has become deeply contested. How self-consciously does Conrad deal with masculine and feminine stereotypes in his fiction? What are we to make of Marlow's misogyny in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Chance*? How do we define relationships between men in "The Nigger of the *Narcissus*," *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Romance*, *Under Western Eyes*, "The Secret Sharer," *Victory*, and *Chance*? How do these same-sex relationships affect our understanding of Conrad's (often deprecated) representations of women and conventional courtship and marriage?

Making extensive and intelligent use of post-Lacanian, feminist psychoanalytic, colonial discourse, and narrative theories, Andrew Michael Roberts has produced a useful and, for the most part, lucid contribution to this debate through his exploration of masculinity in Conrad's most important fiction – from *Almayer's Folly* (1895) to *The Arrow of Gold* (1918). Roberts makes every effort to provide a theoretical framework for his readings and observations, and his insights are often fresh and original. Though the theory sometimes overwhelms the analysis, and though Roberts sometimes appears to lose his focus, this is a book that all Conradians and anyone interested in late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century constructions of masculinity will want to read.

Roberts sets up his project in the introduction with the observation that "Conrad's representation of gender needs to be understood in its historical context"; that understanding will benefit both late-nineteenth, early twentieth-century historians of gender as well as Conrad readers. He usefully defines masculinity, apart from gender, variously as "a psychic structure, as a fantasy, as a code of behaviour, or as a set of social

practices and restraints” (2, 5). Masculinity presents a rewarding study for readers of Conrad not only because his works deal with it in such a variety of situations and from such a variety of perspectives, but because his famous experiments with point of view always involve male narrators and a male audience – both fictional and “real” or implied. (Roberts takes this up most interestingly in Chapter 5, on *Heart of Darkness*.)

In Chapter 1, Roberts briefly establishes the late-nineteenth-century conventions for the presentation of race and gender, and he theorizes their construction within the British imperial program. He notes the positions of the most important contemporary colonial discourse analysts – Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha, and Chris Bonge—along with those who have more specifically theorized the relationships between race and gender – Ann Stoler, Ronald Hyam, and Christopher Lane. This critical overview might have been clearer, but his articulation of his own position is clear enough:

Rather than treat imperialism as a unified set of practices and discourses, which a literary text either endorses or subverts, I prefer to follow Lane and Bhabha in taking imperialism to be complex, ambivalent and divided within itself The relationship to the Other involves desire and fear. As well as desire for the Other, it can include a suppressed identification with the Other, a desire to be in the place of the Other which is then repressed and denied with a violence of disgust which produces fear and loathing. (24)

Turning to an analysis of *An Outcast of the Islands*, Roberts usefully compares Conrad’s treatment of Willems (whose masculinity is threatened and, finally, destroyed by his relationship with Aissa) with the way masculinity is threatened by the racialized

Other in *King Solomon's Mines*. In contrast to its presentation by the more conventional Haggard, Conrad's masculinity "is itself a tissue of vanity, illusion and self-deception" (25). With Willems, Conrad has created a decentered, truly modern character. Willems' desire for the Other destabilizes him. He loses both his masculinity and his racist, imperial convictions, and he experiences these losses as a terrifying fragmentation of his personality. This section closes with a discussion of how Willems' destruction illustrates Freud's death drive. Following Christopher Lane (in *The Ruling Passion*), Roberts notes how this drive appears generally to underlie the psychology of imperialism.

Overall, Roberts provides a finely balanced account of Willems' self-destruction, revealing Conrad's caustic presentation of Willems' masculine complacency as well as the narrative's own misogyny (in its presentation of Aissa) and complicity with imperialism: "Willems' self-image as proud white male is destroyed, but only by representing the female Other as shapeless death-bringer. Nevertheless, the ideologies of masculinity and imperialism are identified with moral corruption" (29). (We might quibble here that Roberts appears to be showing how Conrad both "endorses" and "subverts" misogyny and imperialism in this passage, and that this directly contradicts his earlier stricture against criticism that stresses "complicity" or "subversion." It seems to me, however, that critics who deal with issues such as these simply can't avoid this.)

Roberts next focuses on the gaze in *Almayer's Folly*, applying film theory to Conrad's presentation of the initial meeting between Dain – who represents a fantasy of untrammelled, pre-modern, heroic masculinity – and Nina – whose power to seduce, conventionally enough, derives from her desire to surrender. This appears to be a fruitful approach to the novel (and Roberts takes up the issues of power and the masculine gaze

later in his concluding chapter on *Victory*), but then he turns back to *Outcast* and closes the chapter with a long and unnecessarily complicated attack on John Stape's reading of Aissa (in Stape's introduction to the Oxford edition). It's hard to see how this academic in-fighting significantly advances his exploration of masculinity in Conrad.

Chapter 2 opens with the claim that "the crisis of masculinity at home [in late nineteenth-century England] operates as the unconscious of Conrad's texts" (45), and Roberts notes how this crisis applied to Conrad's own situation. Conrad had the hyper-masculine title of merchant marine captain before he entered the suspect, feminine (for that time) role of the writer. London, Roberts adds, represented possibilities for sexual deviance, and Conrad might have felt implicated, not only because he was a writer, but because he was part of a male coterie of writers including Ford Madox Ford, Stephen Crane, and others. The imperial "frontier" offered an imaginative, manly escape. The following discussion of the homosocial in "Karain" reveals, intriguingly, how strange the story becomes when we look closely at Karain himself. "Primitive" and "half-savage," he is a figure of heightened masculinity, but he is also a hollow man; his masculinity is a masquerade and may well serve as a "mirror for the complications of Western masculinity" (56).

After a brief discussion of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Roberts takes up *Lord Jim* which, like "Karain," deals interestingly with issues of masculinity and race. Roberts explores how Marlow's relationship with Jim is based on "a professional code in an idealized form, identified by Marlow when he claims Jim as 'one of us,'" a bond that is "sanctified by moments of male intimacy" (58). Jim's dazzling whiteness intensifies the bond. The chapter concludes with a number of insightful observations about the colonial

frontier and “home,” Marlow’s racist narratee (the “privileged man”), and (drawing on the work of René Girard and Eve Sedgwick) the triangular nature of Jim’s unconscious desires.

“Typhoon” is one of Conrad’s more enigmatic stories—to this moment I can’t decide whether I admire or despise MacWhirr. Roberts doesn’t help me with this; his more interesting project in Chapter 3 is to reveal how the disposition and description of “high” and “low” bodies in the story destabilize conventional readings. Roberts provides extensive theoretical justification for his project via Cixous, Foucault, Jane Gallop, Stallybrass and White, and many others—more than he needed, I think, to undergird his subsequent analyses of “Typhoon” and *The Secret Agent*. The focus on the body in *The Secret Agent* in the second half of the chapter seems particularly useful, however, leading to a number of original observations and clarifying what is, for me, the vexing issue of tone in the novel. Roberts examines the confrontation between Heat and the Professor on a side street of London:

Heat looms up “stalwart and erect” with a “swinging pace” (82), with “a good deal of forehead, which appeared very white in the dusk,” and eyeballs which “glimmered piercingly” (83). The allusion to his forehead emphasizes his upper body/mind, his piercing eyes suggest mental perspicacity and his “whiteness” implies (in terms of the racist discourses of the time) a lack of degeneracy, in contrast . . . to the association of Ossipon with racial otherness An attitude of body fascism, partially endorsed by the narrator through the use of free indirect discourse, emerges in the observation: “To the vigorous, tenacious vitality of the

Chief Inspector, the physical wretchedness of that being, so obviously not fit to live, was ominous” (94). One might or might not sympathize with the view that the Professor is unfit to live on the grounds of his morals and actions, but the assertion that he is not fit to live because of his poor physique is characteristic of the unpleasant way in which *The Secret Agent* treats the body as a site for the inscription of narratorial judgement. Yet in both these scenes, and in the interview between Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, the separation of high and low, inside and outside, health and degeneracy, white and black, upon which the self-image of the European male “classical” body depends is subtly eroded. (85)

This passage navigates the scene with great subtlety, and Roberts is equally perceptive in his treatment of Stevie, showing how his fate is the result of his “abjected,” feminized position – his “partial masculinity” (93). He has no control over his own body, a helplessness that is ultimately and grotesquely figured in his radical dissolution in Greenwich.

Opening a superb discussion of *Nostramo* in Chapter 4, Roberts remarks, amusingly, that “heroic male moustaches are much in evidence” (94) in the novel. Despite its ending, *Nostramo* may be Conrad’s greatest creation, and Roberts articulates its thoroughgoing critique of Latin and, especially, English masculinity via Nostromo and Charles Gould. The novel, Roberts argues, “not only calls into question the implicit moral claims underlying Gould’s Englishness, but also demonstrates the moral and emotional vacuity of ideals of normative masculinity, since Gould and Nostromo are both revealed to be hollow men of modernity” (96). As many critics have noted, Conrad is

less successful in his depiction of their “women”—Nostromo’s Giselle hasn’t much more depth than his “Morenita,” and Emilia Gould, good as she is, gains interest only from her hopeless devotion to the hollow Charles. Roberts’ observations on narrative voice, the triangulation of male desire, the discipline (via Foucault) of male bodies, the gendering of power relationships, and the influence of the novel’s colonial overlay lead to a remarkably nuanced reading.

Heart of Darkness has attracted more critics than any other novella – there is hardly a word that hasn’t been picked up, examined, and re-examined. Yet Roberts’ discussion in Chapter 5 adds appreciably to that criticism. Telling stories, writing letters, intercepting letters, retelling “true” incidents, confessing, overhearing, and lying are all the ways that information is exchanged in the novella, and Roberts notes how that exchange is always gendered. He writes persuasively of how Marlow uses his Aunt and other women to make his own world “epistemologically secure.” Women also serve, in complicated ways, to both foster and deny desire between men. Roberts argues convincingly that though the story is not “primarily about repressed homosexual desire” (131), “Marlow’s placing of the Intended as one of Kurtz’s possessions, comparable to the ivory in which he traded, is part of an economy of repressed same-sex desire, complicit with both the structures of patriarchy and the economies of empire” (136). Roberts has contributed significantly to my own understanding of how all of this works.

In Chapter 6, Roberts detects a development from *Heart of Darkness* to *The Secret Agent*. In the former, women are excluded from the vital exchange of knowledge (and they are objects about which men may have uncertain knowledge). The novella therefore appears to celebrate a “fantasy of male power” (139). In the latter, women are

also excluded from the exchange of knowledge, but Conrad appears to handle this more self-consciously and critically. Roberts' juxtaposition of the Intended and Winnie clearly reveals the shift from Conrad's earlier reliance on female stereotyping to a criticism of that stereotype.

Drawing on Eve Sedgwick, René Girard, Gayle Rubin, and Luce Irigaray, Roberts next elucidates the erotic triangles in *Under Western Eyes* among Haldin, Razumov, Natalia, and the narrator. He notes, for example, that Razumov, in his passive courtship of Natalia, does not seek a sexual union with Victor so much as to be Victor – an interesting application of Sedgwick's theories of triangular, homosocial desire. He observes that Razumov and the language teacher represent two ideals of masculinity – the strong, silent imperturbable type versus the chivalrous, restrained type – that are ironized in the novel. His later claim that the “epistemological structure” of the novel “involves a series of confessions which are dogged by the failure to understand, or by incorrect understanding” (147) seems exactly right, but he does not allow himself quite enough space to draw out its implications or to relate it fully back to his central project of examining masculinity in the novel. He makes a good start, however, at the conclusion to his analysis of *Under Western Eyes*: “Conrad's ideas about male and female roles, which are fairly conventional, cannot remain untouched by the strain of radical scepticism about identity and truth that is found in his thought. In *Under Western Eyes* the knowledge that circulates between men is deeply flawed by misunderstanding, misinterpretation, failure of communication and betrayal of trust” (153-54). This focus on male misunderstanding continues through the rest of the chapter on *Chance*, where Roberts nicely problematizes Marlow's misogyny. Unlike *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, the men are the ones who

appear to be “out of it.” Roberts’ discussion may be a bit ahistorical, however. I concluded the chapter wondering what versions of contemporary masculinity Marlow represents, refutes, and/or parodies. One of the problems with relying on psychoanalytic theory is that it has a tendency to be essentializing – all psychology being treated as always the same – and this can hide the need for historical context. Here and elsewhere I would have liked Roberts to deal a bit more with that context.

Chapter 7 takes up the visual in Conrad’s fiction via feminist theories of the gaze—women are always seen in his work; men are “collaborators,” “fellow watchers, seers, actors” (165). Once again, the theoretical backgrounding seems excessive in this chapter, but Roberts does a fine job showing how Rita, in *Arrow of Gold*, is constituted as an object, caught in the male gaze – even George’s. Roberts’ focus on the visual continues in the final chapter, devoted to *Victory*. Roberts successfully employs feminist psychoanalytical theory to explain Heyst’s behavior toward Lena, but the machinery of psychoanalysis that he introduces becomes a little ponderous. Lena’s own gaze is characterized at one point in the novel as “empty,” for example, and Roberts devotes a two-and-a-half-page paragraph to an analysis of that “emptiness.” Overall, this concluding chapter is a little disappointing, especially after the superb three-and-half middle chapters on *Secret Agent*, *Nostramo*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Under Western Eyes*. Roberts fails to bring the many threads of his analysis – on masculinity, gender, narrative, epistemology, the politics and poetics of the gaze, etc – together. He needed a separate chapter for this, not a few pages at the end of his *Victory* analysis.

With his attention to so many theoretically complex issues, we might accuse Roberts of being overly ambitious in *Conrad and Masculinity*. There were times when I

felt my attention pulled in too many directions. Roberts needed more space to accomplish all that he attempted. But the reverse criticism would be considerably more damning.

How many works of criticism, after all, do we wish were longer?

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