Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)
Vol. 11 2016, pp. 121–125

REVIEW OF: JOHN G. PETERS (ED.) *THE SECRET SHARER AND OTHER STORIES*, NORTON CRITICAL EDITIONS, NEW YORK & LONDON 2015, PP. 599

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We are all familiar with the well established Norton Critical Edition series (NCE) which for years has set the standard for scholarly and critical apparatus and which gives master interpretative keys in the reader's hands, being at the same time accessible for undergraduate students. Besides the readership comprises also scholars engaged in historical and textual research who can explore how, for example, Conrad transformed the sources, as well as teachers of short fiction who will find this volume an indispensable manual while preparing class discussions. Conrad's most important works have already been published in the NCE series including the authorative edition of *Lord Jim* by Thomas C. Moser and the comprehensive one of *Heart of Darkness* by Robert Kimbrough. This edition fills the gap between Conrad's novelistic masterpieces and his finest short stories.[1]

The volume follows the well-proven format: annotated text, context, and criticism. The materials were thoughtfully chosen by John Gerard Peters, an eminent Conradian scholar who has authored *Conrad and Impressionism* (2001), *Joseph Conrad's Critical Reception* (2013) among others, and edited a volume of *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews* (2012), *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad* (2010) and recently *Conrad's The Duel. Sources/Text*.

First things first, the original selection of stories made by Peters is a convincing one, based on the connection Conrad himself found among them. In one of his prefaces he referred to his "two 'Calm-pieces'—*The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow-Line*—and his two 'Storm-pieces'—*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Typhoon*" (Peters ix). However, there are also more significant aspects that link these stories. Firstly, in all of them men must face the hardships posed by the elements of the natural world where humans signify nothing. Secondly, these stories identify crucial moments in Conrad's literary career: after *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* Conrad gained nearly universal acclaim, *Typhoon* revealed his outstanding descriptive powers, *The Secret Sharer* marks a shift in direction in Conrad's artistic interests, and *The Shadow-*

[1] *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* was also brought out by NCE in 1979 but contrary to *Lord Jim* or *Heart of Darkness* never revised and reprinted.

Line gives us a final glimpse of the 'great' Conrad. Thirdly, all are based on Conrad's experience. To say that they are autobiographical would be an overstatement, yet they all show how Conrad drew on and transformed his personal experience as well as source materials into imaginative worlds. As Peters aptly points out "Conrad's life reflects profoundly on these tales, just as these tales reflect profoundly on his life" (Peters x).

The first part of the volume comprises the texts of the four tales preceded or followed by *Author's Notes*. The initial story—*The Secret Sharer* is unique in Conrad's writing experience because he was always unsure about the value of his work, yet it was quite the opposite with this tale. He wrote it quickly and was certain of its artistic merit. It is followed by *The Shadow-Line* which obviously records "the imperceptible migration between youth and maturity". But essentially the crux of the story is again man's confrontation with the indifferent world as Peters perceptively observes: "Conrad finds value in the human endeavour not only to endure and to survive but to live consciously with fidelity to truths that are not absolute but merely relative" (Peters xi). However, the most appreciative (not to say courageous one), to my mind, was the decision to include among the selection a story "actually not present in the American classroom". I have spoken to a number of American teachers and scholars who almost unanimously claimed that *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* is nonpresence in the US classroom. As Peters demonstrated elsewhere "[the book's title] is the only reason [that] can explain the story's decline in the sales, popularity and study."[2] Because of the unfortunate title it is no longer discussed in the American academia or reprinted by the renown publishing houses, hence Peters proposed to resurrect the novel under a new (actually its old American) title *Children of the Sea*.[3] Luckily, in this edition the novella is published under the title Conrad liked most, and "Conrad only knows" what powers Peters used to persuade "the notoriously cautious [W.W. Norton & Co.]"[4] to bring it out under that "uncomfortable name". Peters, rightly claims that the novel remains one of Conrad's most important works (Peters xi) since it epitomizes the fundamental component of the writer's *Weltanschauung*: solidarity. He remarks that the situation aboard the 'Narcissus' is a microcosm for the human condition: "just as the men must cooperate and show solidarity to survive in the face of a natural world indifferent to their plight, so also must humanity exhibit solidarity to survive in an inexplicable universe" (Peters xi). Once again the essential link of all these stories comes to the fore: man's confrontation with the indifferent world. Likewise, the last tale dwells upon the themes present in the other stories: solidarity, opposing the hostile universe. Observing Singleton's, MacWhirr's and the anonymous captain's efforts to survive in face of the adverse circumstances, one thinks of the notorious ruthless machine that controls man's destiny which Conrad envisaged in his correspondence:

[2] "'What's in a name': *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*", *L'Epoque Conradienne* 2007, vol. 33, p. 46.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

> There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "this is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold". Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is—and it is indestructible! It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters.[5]

In my opinion this vignette may serve as a motto illustrating in a nutshell Conrad's vision of humanity found in these stories.

The second part—"Contexts"—contains illustrations, a glossary of nautical terms, correspondence related to the four tales, contemporary reviews and accounts. They give the readers a broad panorama of the early reception of which Peters showed his expertise in the previous volumes (e.g. *Conrad's Critical Reception* and *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews*). All of them give the readers a broad overview of the early reception of Conrad's works in the press as well as outline factual sources which Conrad amply and creatively recycled in these stories. Among the illustrations we find the map of the route of the Nan Shan, illuminative drawings of the sails 'taken in' when the ship was in a contrary gale of wind – which helps the landlubbers to visualize some of the tough work that had to be done aboard the *Nan Shan* or the *Narcissus* while the storm was raging. Apart from this, the selection of letters gives us a picture of a self-conscious modernist writer aiming at "getting through the veil of details to the essence of life" (Peters 366) which closely echoes the tasks of a modern novelist perceptively described much later by Virginia Woolf:

> The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?[6]

The contemporary reviews range from the appreciative ones admitting that "Conrad is a genius" (Peters 381), accentuating the same artistic quality that Conrad

[5] F. Karl, L. Davies (eds.), *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1, Cambridge 1983.

[6] V. Woolf, "Modern Fiction" in *Modernism and Literature*, eds. Mia Carter, Alan W. Friedman, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 475.

and Woolf aimed at achieving "the sense of life" (Peters 382) "enthralled by the actual world" (384), stressing that Conrad is "concerned with the mean things of life"—in other words Conrad is the God of little things and manages to depict the nuanced complexity of human existence. However, what seems lacking to me in this selection of reviews is the adverse criticism that the author of *Nostromo* received in the English press which made him very upset and spurred him to such confessions as: "I *am* modern, and I would rather recall *Wagner* the musician and *Rodin* the Sculptor who both had to starve a little in their day—and Whistler the painter who made Ruskin foam at the mouth with scorn and indignation. […] They had to suffer for being "new."[7] Clearly Conrad pondered over the reviews of his work and sometimes gained from them. It is therefore regrettable that this edition furnishes no negative criticism. Although the positive response prevailed, hence rightly enough Peters selected the majority of them for the NCE, still it seems to me a too much sugared picture of the early reception. As if Peters were afraid that the unfavourable reviews would undermine his choice of the tales for the NCE. Quite the contrary, less favourable responses convincingly show the contemporary predilection for writers like Arnold Bennett and the lack of understanding Conrad's modernist writing met with. It may be very illuminating in explaining why Conrad was so unsure about the value of his works. From the "Contemporary Accounts" section, to my mind, one of the most rewarding is Charles Arthur Sankey's account of the "Ordeal of the Cutty Sark". It tells a story of murder and escape, guilt and suicide and definitely bears upon the bare bones of "The Secret Sharer", *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, not to mention *Lord Jim*.

The last part—"Criticism"—is by far the most absorbing and shows Peters expertise in selecting relevant critical materials. He rightly decided to begin with the "early commentary that gives a strong reading and provides the basis for later responses" (Peters xi). Then he proceeds to contemporary responses and thus provides us with diverse theoretical frameworks. From the plethora of Conrad's criticism we receive cornerstone essays of Robert Stallman and Albert Guerard for "The Secret Sharer" (among others), then we have a sample of postcolonial and gender criticism (Lillian Nayder). For genetic scholars the excellent study of topography and its reworking is represented by Mark D. Larabee's essay "A Mysterious System…". Then for *The Nigger of the Narcissus* we depart from the classical study of Morton Dauwen Zabel, move onto a bit over-stretched Marxist criticism of Frederic Jameson only to find ourselves grounded with the insightful reading of Jeremy Hawthorn painstakingly explaining the explosive issues of racial prejudice, stereotype and slur in the "notorious" novella. For *Typhoon* we start with the classic reading of F.R. Leavis and continue with postcolonial and Marxists interpretations of Joseph Kolupke and Nels Pearson. Although Peters attempted to strike a balance between established opinions and innovative approaches to my mind the scales are tipped ultimately in the favour of postcolonial and Marxists readings. What seems lacking to me are the knowledgeable and in-depth analyses by Ian Watt or Jacques Berthoud. Still some choice had to

[7] *The Collected Letters*, vol. 2, p. 418.

be made and it reveals a recalibration of canons (the critical conversation about *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* or *Typhoon*, among others) and proves that all these tales can be continually revisited and critically reinterpreted.

The meticulous nature of Peters editorial effort is engrained in this edition since all the tales are scrupulously annotated with explanatory footnotes. They explicate the geographic terms, biblical allusions and the Eastern realia (among others). Moreover, Peters helpfully cross-refers all the essays to the page number of the stories as well as other articles in this volume. At the end of the Norton Critical Edition there is an extensive bibliography providing a powerful incentive for these readers who would like to delve further. Certainly, the Norton Critical Edition, being full of revealing insights, encompassing a broad variety of material, is worth reading from A to Z but will splendidly serve also for an occasional dip into.