


A PORTRAIT OF A WRITER

Review of Robert Hampson, *Joseph Conrad*. Series: *Critical Lives*. London: Reakcion Books, 2020, 208 pp. with bibliography and 27 illustrations

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When I ask my undergraduate students about Joseph Conrad's life, they don't know much. The short biography of the writer written by Robert Hampson, may help to reduce the gap in their knowledge. The book was published by Reakcion Books in the series *Critical Lives* which explores the work of influential cultural figures in the context of their lives. There were volumes dedicated to Carl Jung, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, to name just a few. Now, it is high time for Conrad to enter this respectable circle.

John Stape dubbed Conrad biography "a fine art" and asked for "thickening the texture" of the narrative of his life by which he meant to "draw on resources," for example, the London he lived in.¹ He persuasively argued that "an appreciation of the circumstances in the outer world affecting his [Conrad's] daily life, offers insights and perspectives" and has "explanatory power."² Jocelyn Baines, Frederick Karl, Zdzisław Najder, Paul Kirschner, Bernard Meyer, John Stape, all of them were eminent Conradians as well as artists depicting the details of Conrad's life; now we can add to this list the name of another prominent scholar Robert Hampson. He is the author of such salient monographs as *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity*, *Cross-cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad's Malay Fiction*, and *Conrad's Secrets*.

The book in question begins atypically and, as we may recall, "it's all there in the beginning," to paraphrase Robert Harris revealing statement.³ So what is there at the beginning of this volume? It starts with an analysis of Conrad's obituary written by Virginia Woolf, which opens with the well-known line: "Suddenly, without giving

¹ John H. Stape, "On Conrad Biography as a Fine Art," *The Conradian* 32, no. 2 (2007), pp. 67-68.

² Stape, "On Conrad Biography as a Fine Art," p. 67.

³ Robert Harris, *The Ghost* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 393.

us time to arrange our thoughts or prepare our phrases, *our guest has left us*.”⁴ When Conrad died, thirty-eight years after his naturalization as a British subject, he was still regarded as a “guest,” a stranger, a Yanko Gooral. We might say that this biography attempts to elucidate his phenomenon of strangeness.

Although with the general audience Conrad’s popularity slumped just after his death, he continued to exert influence on some writers, for example, Graham Green and F. Scott Fitzgerald. However, the critical breakthrough came with the influential studies of Muriel Bradbrook who recognized the contemporariness of the political themes in Conrad’s works and Frank R. Leavis who placed him within the great tradition of the English novel. Within the American context, Albert Guerard championed the vision of Conrad as a subtle and profound psychologist. Besides, in the *Introduction*, Hampson outlines Conrad’s oeuvre’s critical reception and the variety of approaches that were applied to it: psychological, narratological, New Historicist, post-structuralist, feminist and postcolonial (13). Fittingly, to counterbalance Conrad’s unsettled position of a “guest” in Britain at the beginning of the 20th century, Hampson closes the *Introduction* with Conrad’s 21st century stable position as a literary master for many writers worldwide: André Gide, Thomas Mann, V. S. Naipaul, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, among others. To this array of stars, I would add some Polish names of Andrzej Braun, Leszek Prorok, Jan Józef Szczepański and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński.

The first chapter traces Conrad’s family background. Hampson illuminatingly discusses the *nationalist insurrectionary* past of Apollo Korzeniowski, which caused the family’s exile to Vologda. There they heard the news of the January Uprising and recorded the deaths of other family members:

Apollo’s father, Teodor died on his way to join the fighting in April; Apollo’s brother Robert was killed in battle in May; his brother Hilary had been arrested in January and subsequently exiled; his sister Emilia was arrested and exiled in December; Ewa’s brother Kazimierz was imprisoned; and her brother Stefan [...] had led the early stage of the uprising in Warsaw, was murdered in a staged duel in April. (22)

This long list of deaths may partly explicate Apollo’s despair as well as the immense burden of guilt that Konrad Korzeniowski could have felt when he left Poland instead of sacrificing his life for the sacred cause of Poland’s independence. This may also throw light on Konrad’s childhood illnesses and disorders (migraine, stomach cramps, nervous fits and epileptic symptoms) which could have been trauma and stress-induced (21).

Hampson supplements the family story with an informative historical and political context of partitioned Poland: the political groupings of Reds, Whites and conciliators (18). These contextual details are essential for understanding the antagonism between Conrad’s father and his future guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowski who belonged

⁴ Virginia Woolf, “Joseph Conrad, *Times Literary Supplement* 14 August 1924,” in *Joseph Conrad. Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, ed. Keith Carabine (The Banks, Mountfield: Helm Information, 1992), p. 420 (emphasis added).

to opposing political factions and which could cause an internal conflict of values in the adolescent Konrad Korzeniowski. Hampson rightly observes:

Bobrowski's guardianship was characterized by a sustained attack on Apollo's politics and character. Most damagingly, he brought Conrad up with the belief that his father's politics had caused his mother's death, concealing that Ewa had been exiled in her own right. He also raised Conrad with the belief that his father's legacy, the irresponsible Nałęcz side of his genetic inheritance, had to be resisted, while the responsible Bobrowski side had to be nurtured. (24-25)

Next, Hampson mentions Conrad schooling, or rather lack of it, his troublesome behaviour and extraordinary wish to go to sea. Again he contextualizes it with the well-established Polish tradition of emigration (Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki), explaining that as a Russian subject and a son of political prisoners, he was liable to 25 years' service in the Russian Army.

The second chapter provides the details of Conrad's maritime career: the sojourn in Marseille, service in the British merchant navy, takes and retakes of examinations, the voyage to Africa. The section closes with Conrad's marriage proposal to Jessie "on the steps of the National Gallery" (41). In between these bare facts, we get a plethora of colourful details: the rich cultural life in Marseille (theatre and opera), the unsolved mysteries of Spanish contraband, the infamous gambling escapade in Monte Carlo, the hair-raising abandoning ship near Sumatra, the devastating Congo expedition, the embarrassing gaffe of a marriage proposal in Mauritius, the forbidden romance with an older aunt and many, many others.

In the third chapter, Hampson explores one of his favoured themes – Conrad's Malay fiction. The critic lucidly summarizes the main plots of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *The Rescuer*, *Karain*, among others. This chapter's major asset is that Hampson highlights the differences against other imperial writers, such as Rudyard Kipling or H. Rider Haggard. Although Conrad was dubbed "the Kipling of the Malay archipelago," his fiction does not "really fit the [imperialist] agenda" (45). For one thing, *Almayer's Folly* is the story of colonial failure while Almayer himself is an anti-heroic figure (46); then *An Outcast of the Islands* being a story of "male self-deception" (50) interrogates European assumptions of superiority, and last but not least, *Karain* which showcases "male bonding across ethnic differences" (55). Hampson views Conrad's Malay fiction as subversive texts whose "implications are actually anti-colonial" and which may be perceived "as part of a much more critical turn in colonial fiction" (47). Another asset is Hampson's predilection for unravelling Conrad's secrets (and secret plots). Indeed, it is very much in the established Conrad tradition of scholarship, as we remember, Cedric Watts was the first to scrutinize covert plots.⁵ In *Almayer's Folly*, for instance, there is the secret plot of Reshid, "Abdulla's nephew – on which the entire narrative turns" which "has escaped the eyes of most critics" (47).

The next five chapters follow the same pattern as far as Conrad's works' presentation is concerned: the novels (*Lord Jim*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*,

⁵ Watts Cedric, *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots and Transtextual Narratives* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

among others) and short stories (*An Outpost of Progress*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Gaspar Ruiz*, *An Anarchist*, among others) are briefly summarised, interpreted and contextualized. The interpretations are original and insightful, and the contextualizations are vital for grasping the intricacies of the plots. For one thing, the roots of the conflict between Carlier, Kayerts and Henry Price are unintelligible for the readers without the historical details of Sierra Leone (Price's home country) provided by Hampson. He lucidly explains:

Sierra Leone has a unique history. In 1787 the British had established a settlement in the country for 'the Black Poor of London,' mostly African Americans [...]. This first settlement almost died out, but in 1792 the Sierra Leone Company brought over 3,000 African American Loyalists [...]. After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the population of Freetown was further expanded by the arrival of thousands of "recaptives" – West African captives liberated from America [...]. Over the next decades, Sierra Leone was to turn into African centre for European education. [...] Thus, by the end of the century, Sierra Leone had an established Westernized black middle class. However, when the British annexed the territory as the Sierra Leone protectorate [...], Krios were pushed out of their posts [...]. This led to a diaspora of educated Sierra Leoneans to other countries in West Africa. Henry Price is an early example of this diaspora. (77)

Another informative contextualization is a detail mentioned by Hampson in reference to *Heart of Darkness* by means of which he brilliantly demonstrates the subversiveness of Conrad's text. Thus, the opening passage of the novella at first glance could be viewed as "an eloquent imperialistic celebration of English history" but for one negligible name, that of Sir John Franklin whose polar expedition "had ended in disaster and reports of cannibalism among the crew" (80). When the reader connects it with the description of the cannibals on Marlow's steamship, they may hesitate to describe their behaviour as "uncivilized." There are many more such subtle nuances which throw the readers from one *double entendre* to the next. For space constraints, I can only briefly mention such excellent explanatory contextualization as the description of the anarchist movement (106-109) or women's suffrage movement (150-151).

As far as novel interpretations are concerned, I wish to point to just two examples of concise but incisive readings of Conrad's works. The first one relates to the meaning of the characters in *Victory*. Hampson suggests that in the novel:

Conrad critiques militaristic constructions of masculinity; through Mr Jones he presents a version of male homosexuality; and through Ricardo he explores male sexualized violence. Similarities and differences between the characters generate other lines of inquiry. Mr Jones and the polymorphous perverse Ricardo present different versions of misogyny, and Heyst and Mr Jones open up the idea of "the gentleman." Ricardo's admiration for Jones's cold ruthlessness, for example, prompts the reader to consider the relation between gentlemanliness' and psychopathy. (152)

This brief analysis offers a considerable number of interpretative paths of the novel. The second reading relates to the volume *A Set of Six* and to *The Anarchist* in particular. Hampson convincingly demonstrates how the story is aimed to make fun of the reader:

The narrator of “An Anarchist” repeatedly insists that he is “not gullible”; the same is not true of this narrator. Mr X introduces a character called Bomm and orders a *bombe glacée* for his dessert, but the narrator swallows the story whole in his own willing consumption of edgy excitement. This final twist leaves us to consider to what extent the story Mr X told was designed to mock his auditor.

To crown it all, as Hampson indicates, since the story describes the anarchists hiding explosives in cans of “Stone’s Dried Soup,” “of which six went to a case,” the reader may wonder “whether Conrad’s volume *A Set of Six* [...] was also the container for explosive” and potentially subversive matter (104).

However, there is one interpretation, which, to my mind, overlooks a crucial component of established Conrad scholarship. The reading of the final decision of Jim seems to be lacking in an essential context without which it cannot be properly understood namely the notion of honour (as evidenced by Zdzisław Najder’s essay).⁶

The last four chapters are thematic ones. They discuss Conrad and women, Conrad and Poland, America and France. Supplementing this material are reprints of Conrad’s sketches, photographs of Conrad’s family, friends, places he visited and houses he lived in. There are also selected bibliography and criticism sections.

The biography tells us the story not only of Conrad’s life but also of Conrad scholarship. Fittingly, Hampson references the opinions and interpretations of such eminent Conradians as Ian Watt, Zdzisław Najder, Laurence Davies, Keith Carabine, Jeremy Hawthorn, and many others. Nonetheless, I miss some other names, namely that of John Dozier Gordan, Jacques Berthoud or John Batchelor; if they couldn’t be mentioned in the main text, they should have been referenced in the bibliography at least. Likewise, some titles of Conrad’s works such as *Amy Foster* or my favourite one *The Duel* are missing, but I do realize that a selection had to be made, and on the whole, it is a representative one. As a painter has to choose the clothes and background against which they want to show the model’s figure, similarly the biographer has to focus on some aspects of the writer’s life and omit the others.

In his essay on Conrad’s biographers, Stape identified the lacunae in Conrad’s biographies which mostly comprised “a sense of period and place.” The critic further clarified:

Without indulging in picture-painting, this is, perhaps, where Conrad biography most becomes a fine art, the essence of which is shading, lighting, colour, modulation, whereby archival sources are used to create a sense of layered reality and even, perhaps, *the sights and sounds of daily life*.⁷

It is as if Hampson took heed of Stape’s suggestions because this is exactly what his biographical portrait of Conrad amply provides – the sights and sounds of Conrad’s daily life.

⁶ Zdzisław Najder, “‘Lord Jim’: A Romantic Tragedy of Honour,” *Conradiana* 1, no. 1 (1968).

⁷ Stape, “On Conrad Biography as a Fine Art,” p. 67 (emphasis added).

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