

A SIGNPOST FOR TRAVELS WITH CONRAD

John G. Peters, *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge: CUP, 2006, 146 pp.

John Peters' *Introduction to J. Conrad* is a well-arranged book devised to navigate a novice through the high seas of Conrad's fiction. In a methodical way Peters initiates the newcomer into a vast field of knowledge and scholarship called Conradian canon and Conradian studies.

Appropriately, the overview commences with Conrad's biography. Peters emphasizes the links between the writer's life and his work. He carefully points at the events from Conrad's life and connects them with various novels or stories. Yet, he does not chart the biographical and the fictional areas as ideally overlapping, rather signals the tangent points. The general pattern of the first twenty years of Conrad's writing career that emerges from the opening chapter is agonizing: distressful time of composing a literary piece, uncertainty about the value of the produced work, wrestling with the scope and length of a given piece (the subject/story virtually "taking the reins of" the author), generally favourable reviews, followed by poor sales. Ironically, all ambitious and experimental works fall into this paradigm. However, a reversal of fortunes came with the publication of *Chance* – one of Conrad's artistically weakest novels which many critics believed to mark the decline in quality of the later works. *Chance* which definitely was a bestseller with the general public brought Conrad financial stability and fame.

The second initiatory ring that engulfs the newcomer is the context within which the author of *Nostramo* wrote. The number of monographs devoted to manifold contexts for Conrad is overwhelming. So it was definitely Peters fine synthesizing ability which enabled him to produce a comprehensive yet concise survey of the pivotal cultural, historical and philosophical issues for Conrad's writing. Peters orders them under four umbrella terms: *history and politics*, *cultural issues*, *philosophical milieu*, *movements in art and literature*. Unlike the biographical section which gives a close-up of the events of the writer's life, the contextual part provides the reader with a bird's eye view of some cultural matters. Under the general term of *history and politics*, for example, Peters sketches the Napoleonic era, Russia's rule of Poland, the emergence of anarchism and socialism. These notions are not merely mentioned; quite the opposite, they are systematically connected to Conrad's works on which

they have a bearing. Hence if one reads a particular piece (e.g. “The Warrior’s Soul,” *Under Western Eyes* or *The Secret Agent*) one can draw on Peters’ explications referring to broader historical or political context pertaining to the text. Another bottomless term comprises *movements in arts and literature*. Conrad was called a realist, late Victorian or Edwardian writer, a modernist and impressionist, yet he eschewed any restricting pigeonhole. Likewise Peters refrains from affiliating Conrad with a specific literary movement, rather he endeavours to outline various artistic trends and delineate against them Conrad’s similarities or differences. He accentuates Conrad’s divergence from the premises of Realism and Naturalism. Peters believes that Conrad fits best with the Modernist movement, mainly because of his formal experimentation. And he caps the whole discussion of the literary movements with his favourite category, namely Impressionism which he defines as aiming to “represent a contextualized experience such that an object cannot be experienced except at a particular place at a particular time, by particular person” (35). He then proceeds to enumerate explicit instances of such representation in Conrad’s fiction (in *The Shadow Line*, *The Secret Agent*) and concludes that in many other cases “Conrad represents phenomena being filtered through the consciousness of his characters such that subject alters object, object alters subject, and both are influenced by the context in which they appear” (36). Only after portraying the general background does he proceed to Conrad’s oeuvre. Again, the presentation is a lucid one with each work constituting a single entry. Unlike other many overviews, Peters’ *Introduction* does not limit itself to Conrad’s major phase. On the contrary, he divides the writer’s career into the early, middle and later periods. Within each stage relevant works are discussed under title headings in bold type which makes it very easy for the reader to find the novel or short story he is interested in. Moreover, each entry is organized in the same way. First, the readers are given a concise summary of the work, then chief points for analysis and interpretation are related. Such résumés will be extremely helpful for beginners, especially in the case of those novels whose plot is highly complicated which, is true for almost all Conrad’s major books so that they do not get discouraged by the mere effort of disentangling the chronology of the events. However, what is even more commendable, is that having had so little space, and, at the same time, attempting to discuss all fictional works, Peters brilliantly manages to signal all pivotal interpretative tracks characteristic of a given piece. For example, in the presentation of “Typhoon,” he mentions Conrad’s multilayered narrative technique: several perspectives, different sources, as well as the main themes such as the effect of a storm on ship’s crew, the idea of community, the situation of crisis/test, figurative v. literal approach to language and the surrounding world, isolation of human beings, the indifferent nature of the universe, the sea and storm as *mare vitae*, and the futility of human efforts to connect with others. Thus Peters indicates the paths that a reader may wish to explore further. Indeed, it is one of the most prominent advantages of Peters’ book that the newcomer is given a signpost at the interpretative crossroads and what is more, all the roads are painstakingly named and the stopovers labelled. It

is a pity though, that when a specific interpretative route is delineated there is no bibliographical indication of the critics who have already explored it. It would have saved a non-specialist a lot of time if he were told who had analysed a given work from a particular perspective. Still, those entries are not isolated monads but closely-knit molecules. Peters expertly shows how certain themes permeate Conrad's oeuvre. One of such *idée fixes* is man's inherent inability to know anything with certainty ("Typhoon," *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*); another one is the absurdity of human existence ("Falk," "The Duel," *Under Western Eyes*). Besides, Peters indefatigably demonstrates that Conrad takes a subversive stance against the popular Western view of colonialism (*Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, "An Outpost of Progress," "Karain: A Memory").

In view of the plethora of themes and motifs in Conrad's tales, it is perhaps a pity that once again a comprehensive guide to Joseph Conrad was given a cover illustration of ships at sea. Conrad many a time complained about being called "spinner of sea yarns – master mariner – seaman writer" and expressed his longings:

I was in hopes that on a general survey it could also be made an opportunity for me to get freed from that infernal tail of ships and that obsession of my sea life which has about as much bearing on my literary existence, on my quality as a writer, as the enumeration of drawing rooms which Thackeray frequented could have had on his gift as a great novelist.[...]

Of course there are seamen in a good many of my books. That doesn't make them sea stories [...]. I do wish that all those ships of mine were given a rest [...].¹

The concluding chapter focuses on Conrad's ups and downs with the critics. It outlines the fluctuations of the writer's popularity in the form of a sinusoid: its peak at the end of his life, then falling into oblivion for almost 30 years after his death and finally rising again with the critics' attempts to reintroduce Conrad onto British literary scene, however in a different spotlight of moral issues and philosophy.

Additionally, the *Introduction* is accompanied with a rudimentary list of secondary sources. Each entry is paired with a succinct evaluative commentary. Peters distinguishes general overviews, standard works on Conrad and influential or controversial interpretative essays.

Peters' study points at one significant fact, namely that there is no slacking of interest in Conrad's literary output. Therefore rather than dubbing Conrad a *classic* we should call him *our contemporary* and introduce the multifaceted structure of his masterpieces to new readers. In which Peters' *Introduction* will be an indispensable help.

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¹ J. Aubry. *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters*. Vol. II. London: Heinemann; Garden City, 1927, 316.