

**Outposts of Progress: Joseph Conrad,  
Modernism and Post-colonialism.**

Eds. Gail Fincham, Jeremy Hawthorn,  
Jakob Lothe. Cape Town: University of Cape  
Town Press, 2015.iii-xxxviii + 226 pp.  
ISBN 978-1-77582-081-9.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v52i2.36>

This collection of conference papers takes its title from Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" (1897) an early short story which already signals the concerns that would inform his *oeuvre* throughout his life. Darkly ironic and detached in tone, that tale scrutinises imperialist activities in Africa and questions accepted notions of "progress", "civilisation", and the myth of European superiority. As the tale charts the gradual degeneration and, finally, the deaths of two incompetent agents (representatives of the Great Trading Company) the narrative's cool indictment of these "pioneers of trade and progress" anticipates the more profound and sophisticated web of ironies that would inform *Heart of Darkness* two years later.

Both story and novella were written after Conrad's experience in the Congo in 1890: "All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw—all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy—have been with me again, while I wrote" (*Letters* i.294). That indignation, underlying every aspect of "An Outpost", is encapsulated in Carlier's remark: "In a hundred years, there will perhaps be a town here. Quays and warehouses, and barracks, and—and—billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue—and all." The ironic juxtaposition of commerce and conquest, trivial billiard-rooms with civilisation and virtue, the feeble tailing off, needs no underlining. By the end of the story the reader has re-evaluated the concepts of progress and imperialism in Africa through the ironic cross-hatching that shades every page.

Irony was integral to Conrad's vision and style and infuses nearly all his work: ironies

of tone and situation, as well as wider dramatic and historical ironies, reveal that profound political and psychological understanding which give his fictions their power. It was a mode highly congenial to Conrad's temperament and operates at every level, sparing neither the "civilised" countries of Europe, their commercial and imperial activities and agents, the reader (who may indeed recognise his own complicity) nor the narrator or even Conrad himself. It relies, however, on the reader's powers of discrimination and so can be mis-interpreted, as witness Achebe's well-known misreading of *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text.

Based on papers originally presented at a conference in post-apartheid South Africa (at the University of Cape Town and at the Goedgedacht Trust Olive Farm), this volume is especially relevant to Conrad's life-long preoccupation with the ethical issues bound up in colonialism and imperialism. The editors' introduction ably places Conrad in his period, persuasively evaluates his achievement as an early Modernist, summarises the range of critical questions posed in his works, and itemises the contribution of each paper. The volume is divided into two sections, though inevitably there is some overlap: the first half contains essays that address aspects of "Language, culture and history"; the second is titled "Writing and genre in Conrad's fiction". Although most of the papers focus on the earlier works—"An Outpost of Progress", *Heart of Darkness*, *Almayer's Folly*, *Lord Jim*—others analyse later texts such as *A Personal Record* and *Victory*, and three offer illuminating comparisons between Conrad's vision with those of, variously, Coetzee, Ngugi, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

In a short review it is impossible to do justice to all the contributors and of necessity one must be selective, but something of the range of papers offered and their different critical approaches can be seen in two fine

analyses, one on a novella from Conrad's early phase, the other on a novel from his later period. David Medalie's "At the dying of two centuries: *Heart of Darkness* and *Disgrace*" addresses the different perspectives involved in the sense of historical ending, of *fin de siècle* in Conrad and Coetzee. Published a hundred years apart at the end of their respective centuries, these works are suffused with a sense of anxiety and apocalypse and akin in their ironic awareness of history as an inescapably cyclical process. As Conrad's novella unfolds, revealing the ethical hollowness at the core of imperialism, Medalie suggests that both Marlow and Kurtz are overwhelmed by a sense of futility, bleakly recognising the impossibility of moral regeneration in their time. Similarly *Disgrace* reveals a disturbing vision of post-apartheid South Africa as a dystopian society which has merely perpetuated the violence, inequalities and injustices of the previous era.

Konstantin Sofianos' "*Victory, music and the world of finance*" is a welcome addition to the ranks of critics (this reviewer among them) who see *Victory* not as a product of Conrad's declining powers but rather as a fresh experiment, indicating a new direction in his art. While the novel's view of commerce in the opening chapters is as ironic as one would expect from the author of *Nostramo*, Sofianos

cogently argues that beyond the meticulously realised world of commerce and finance, the novel's essential dynamic is driven by the dream-world, by suggestiveness, obliqueness, atmosphere, and that indeed the text as a whole aspires to the condition of music, which Conrad called "the art of arts" (Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*).

As the essays in this discriminating collection demonstrate, Conrad's power as a novelist is founded on his ability to evoke the subjective lives of his characters in their interaction with each other while placing those lives in a wider historical context, showing how the personal and the historical are intertwined. Both are then located in a still wider context which acknowledges the indifference of nature and time to the human world. These essays offer valuable new critical perspectives on Conrad as a modernist writer, on his treatment of imperialism and colonialism, on his vision of human nature and endeavour, and affirm that he remains our contemporary, as relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as he was to his own.

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