Michael John DISANTO, *Under Conrad’s Eyes. The Novel as Criticism*

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REFERENCES

Under Conrad’s Eyes. The Novel as Criticism
Michael DiSanto’s approach is rooted in the conviction that Conradian criticism, “monopolized” by post-colonial studies (15), and discussions of Conrad’s modernity, has not sufficiently acknowledged Conrad’s indebtedness to nineteenth-century philosophers and novelists. It is thus to correct this imbalance that DiSanto focuses on Conrad’s novels as criticism and “rewriting” of the works of Carlyle, Dickens, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Darwin and Nietzsche.

The influence of Carlyle’s works on Conrad’s philosophical views, however, is not unchartered territory: Avrom Fleishman, V.J. Emmett, or Alison L. Hopwood, all cited by M. DiSanto, opened the field and have found successors to the present day with, for instance, the recent publication of Richard Niland’s _Conrad and History_. Similarly, Conrad’s reading, or “rewriting” of Darwin and Nietzsche, have been analysed by Edward W. Said, Redmond O’Hanlon and Nic Panagopoulos respectively (also cited by M. DiSanto). But Michael DiSanto chooses to adopt a polemical stance which, being exclusive rather than inclusive of other critical approaches, limits the scope and impact of what he aims to show. Michael DiSanto’s positioning is also often grounded on dubious premises. DiSanto thus ascribes the alleged lack of interest among Conrad scholars in the Carlylean intertext to “the current reputation that Conrad shares with Carlyle as a questionable writer” (40). This is a reference to Chinua Achebe’s oft-quoted 1977 article, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s _Heart of Darkness_,” whose impact extended beyond the field of post-colonial studies (DiSanto’s “bête noire”), generating fruitful criticism “concerned with the history of ideas,” the disappearance of which DiSanto laments (224).

Michael DiSanto’s method is thematic, each chapter focusing on key concepts: the work ethic and hero-worship (“The Dangers of Carlyle’s Heroic Work in _Heart of Darkness_,” chapter 1), knowing and not knowing (“The Despair of Knowing in _Bleak House_ and _The Secret Agent_,” chapter 2), the nature and value of sympathy (“The Trouble with Sympathy in _Middlemarch_ and _Nostromo_,” chapter 3), the novel of ideas, self-sacrifice and the value of confession (“Dostoevsky’s Last Confession in _Under Western Eyes_,” chapter 4), self-sacrifice and self-preservation (“Living to Die in _Lord Jim_,” chapter 5), pity and contempt (“Conrad versus Nietzsche versus Christ,” chapter 6). DiSanto’s treatment of these concepts is unfortunately repetitive and does not quite add up to a comprehensive analysis of Conrad’s “dialogue” with his predecessors. His obsessive search for textual evidence that Conrad actually read his predecessors often blinds him to wider historical perspectives and to markers of enunciation which qualify Conrad’s response to them in his fiction.

His argument in chapter 1, for instance, is that Carlyle was to Conrad what Kurtz is to Marlow, “his choice of nightmares” (40)—which leads him, curiously, to replace the name of Kurtz by that of Carlyle in a quotation from _Heart of Darkness_ (40). Discussing the cast of
characters in *Heart of Darkness*, he thus notes that all are “known by their occupations: the Director of Companies, the Lawyer and the Accountant”. All the words are capitalized, as if taken from one of Carlyle’s books, and we remember Marlow’s comment about being “one of the Workers—with a capital—you know” (56–7). While the presence of Carlyle is undeniable here, DiSanto’s treatment of this intertext would have been clearer had it analysed Marlow’s ironic criticism of the language of Empire, of the “rot let loose in print and talk just about that time”.5

Similarly, his discussion of Brierly’s suicide in *Lord Jim*, included in his treatment of the question of self-sacrifice and self-preservation, fails to show the extent to which this suicide resonates with the novel’s exploration of “the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct” and of the ideological questions that Jim’s desertion of the *Patna* raises6 (41).

Paradoxically, it appears, DiSanto’s exclusive focus on concepts inherited from nineteenth-century philosophers and novelists does not enable him to enlarge his scope and sometimes leads him to overlook other potential sources. Thus, reading the scene, in *The Secret Agent*, where Inspector Heat examines the remains of Stevie and reflects that “the first term of the problem was unreadable—lacked all suggestion but that of an atrocious cruelty,” DiSanto argues that “Conrad illustrates how the detective’s knowing acts by imposition” (79). Heat, finding it hard to believe “that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony,” “rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time”. “But,” DiSanto argues, “if sympathy is a form of fear, then what Conrad suggests is that sympathy can manifest itself as a desire to not know” (79). Whether it is actually an “imposition” to see the scattered remains of Stevie’s body as the result of an “atrocious cruelty” is debatable; and then, Heat’s questioning of duration and consciousness—which resonates with the symbolical aim of the attempted terrorist attack upon the Greenwich Observatory, which is no less than an attempt against time and space—may well have its origin in Bergson’s *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889).

DiSanto is also sometimes hasty in his discussions of questions of narration. Thus, in the chapter devoted to *Middlemarch* and *Nostromo*, he argues that in some parts of George Eliot’s novel, “the representation is obscured by the narrator’s commentary” (115)—viewing the narrator’s “for my part I am very sorry for him” as a show of “her superiority in sympathy” and a “kind of egoism” (115). But the narrator is part of the representation and precisely the reader’s appreciation of Casaubon’s “terrible jealousies and insecurities” is guided by the narrator’s “demands for pity” (115). DiSanto then opposes George Eliot’s use of narratorial commentary to what he views of the absence of such in *Nostromo*, arguing that Conrad “exclud(ed) the commentary to direct his readers” (115). This is overlooking the fact that, while there is no embodied narrator of the Marlow type in *Nostromo*—Captain Mitchell serving as a parodic echo—, the very audible narrative voice that is to be heard throughout the novel is part and parcel of Conrad’s exploration of the question of historical progress and morality.

The chapter devoted to Conrad and Nietzsche (chapter 6) is more convincing, although the twists and turns of DiSanto’s discussion of pity and contempt rather obfuscate the issue.

Conrad’s “participation in an intellectual tradition” (224) is an important question and it is the undeniable merit of DiSanto’s book that it puts it to the fore and offers useful
textual evidence of Conrad’s reading and response to the works of his predecessors. The wider context of this intellectual debate is unfortunately missing. It is to be found in Richard Niland’s *Conrad and History* in which he shows that Conrad’s interest in Carlyle has to be viewed as part of his Polish heritage. Niland also usefully studies the contribution to this debate of F.H. Bradley whose “contemporaneous thought in ‘The Presuppositions of Critical History’, which investigates the effacing of historical truth, and his later work *Appearance and Reality* (1893), represents a philosophical corridor between the Victorian and Modern imaginations, particularly considering T.S. Eliot’s doctoral thesis on Bradley, and Eliot’s subsequent interest in Conrad.” Michael DiSanto’s desire to offer a “dissenting perspective” (16) prevented him, it appears, from exploring the transitional dimension of Conrad’s response to his illustrious predecessors.

NOTES


7. R. Niland, “Carlyle’s work explored questions of history and representation that characterised the Polish response to German Idealism,” op. cit., p. 7.

8. Ibid., p. 73.