

Crossing Disciplines

Tamás Juhász, *Conradian Contracts: Exchange and Identity in the Immigrant Imagination* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011)

The publication of Tamás Juhász's recent monograph is an important event in Joseph Conrad studies (and, more generally, in English studies) in Hungary. In fact, *Conradian Contracts* is the first full-length critical study of Conrad by a Hungarian scholar that I am aware of, not counting Aladár Sarbu's introductory book, *Joseph Conrad világa* [Joseph Conrad's World], written for a Hungarian audience and published back in 1974. Juhász's study, however, has nothing to do with the (or a) Hungarian reception of Conrad. Published in the United States, it belongs firmly – and also in more profound ways – to the line of works produced by international Conrad scholarship in the last few decades. In terms of its heavy reliance on post-structural theory, *Conradian Contracts* is akin to books such as William W. Bonney's *Thorns & Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction* (1980), Bruce Henricksen's *Nomadic Voices: Conrad and the Subject of Narrative* (1992) or Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *One of Us: The Mastery of Joseph Conrad* (1996). As far as its thematic focus on aspects of commerce is concerned, Juhász's book calls to mind especially the recent work of Andrew Francis on commerce in Conrad's Asian fiction.¹ But

what sets this study apart from the wealth of books on Conrad already published is its specific interdisciplinary character.

To develop his complex argument, Juhász draws on and integrates an impressive variety of theories, and indeed it is difficult either to categorize his approach or to summarize that argument with precision. The author himself defines the aim of his study as the examination of “the ways in which the novelist's characters make . . . efforts to have their displaced selves recognized and accepted by the community from which they are barred” (ix–x). The central assumption is that Conrad is interested in characters who are either actual foreigners, or whose position within their native community is, in a psychological and sociological sense, marginal. In order to overcome their sense of isolation, these characters, Juhász argues, seek recognition by and (re-)integration into some home or social formation through exchange mechanisms that include not just commerce in the narrow sense of the term, but also “[v]erbal or emotional responsiveness, companionate presence, or even mere visual recognition” (x). Within this interpretative framework, Conrad's displaced characters are seen as having no choice but to accept the social contract that entails such gains, however disadvantageous in other ways and morally questionable the contract may be (xi). While the book under review here focuses on Conrad's fiction, the concluding chapter extends

the examination of the link between various forms of exchange and exile to other authors as well. In this concise but illuminating conclusion, which apparently contains the seeds of Juhász's next book (see p. 219), he looks briefly at Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000), three other stories with ethnically and culturally displaced characters at their centre.

I have already touched upon the fact that Juhász's approach is an interesting and bold combination of theories from various disciplines; most notably, he combines psychoanalysis, anthropology and economic history. As he remarks in a perhaps unnecessarily apologetic tone in the Preface (xi), he has found inspiration in and is going to draw especially on the work of thinkers as diverse as Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Karl Polanyi, Jacques Lacan, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida and Louis Althusser. Of these, it is the work of Lacan that serves as the most consistent point of reference, with several Lacanian concepts, among them those more directly related to exchange (such as *demand* or *Debt*), featuring prominently throughout the study. As opposed to anthropology and economic history, ideas from psychoanalysis have of course often and systematically been applied in both Conrad criticism and biography before. Psychoanalytic Conrad criticism goes back to a long tradition hallmarked by such early but important names as Gustav Morf,

Albert J. Guerard, Bernard C. Meyer and Frederick R. Karl. Within that diverse tradition, critics have taken several different routes of investigation. The one that Juhász has followed in much of his book is, in the words of Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber, a reading of the literary text "as a theory of a symptom or complex," an inquiry into "the text's psychoanalytic knowledge."² Juhász's primary aim is not therefore to analyse the psyche of the biographical person Joseph Conrad through his fiction, but to examine Conrad's understanding and dramatization of how certain psychological, cultural and economic factors are interrelated. This I find highly commendable on several grounds, not least because Juhász is at his best when it comes to close readings; his brief digression at one point into biographical territory seems somehow out of place in this fine study of Conradian fiction (21–23).

At the same time, however, an examination of the text's psychoanalytic knowledge also carries some problematic if unintended implications. Some of Juhász's readings posit a Conrad who is far more theoretically oriented than we have reason to believe he was on the basis of his correspondence and other documentary evidence – so much so that at times Juhász appears to suggest Conrad himself must have been something of a poststructuralist theorist. Certainly, this is a problem with many poststructuralist readings of Conrad, as is a dense, abstract style that also character-

ises *Conradian Contracts*: “Unlike in ‘The End of the Tether,’ visual attractions in ‘Youth’ facilitate no irrevocable backsliding into speechlessness, yet the pleasant visual reciprocities threaten the premature demise of both the dialogic narrative act and the progression from port to destination” (32). Although Juhász’s command of English is impressive, sentences such as the above detract considerably from the readability of his study. Still on a critical note, I wonder why the author does not quote from the already published volumes of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad (1990–), which is the only reliable, scholarly edition of Conrad available. It may of course be for reasons of copyright that the much older Dent Collected Edition (1946–1955) is preferred throughout the study; yet, in this context, it seems inconsistent that Juhász does at the same time quote from *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, also published by Cambridge University Press (1983–2008).

As mentioned above, this book’s strength lies in its strong and challenging interpretations of individual Conrad works. Yet, before I go on to give some successful examples of close reading, I would like to voice two further, and final, critical concerns. The first is that, occasionally, Juhász insists a little too much on interpreting Conrad’s works from the specific perspective he has chosen to adopt, which results in over-reading. Not everyone, for example, will agree with the suggestion that in *Nos-*

tromo, Decoud’s death is caused mainly by the “absence of an agreement,” the “disappearance of a social consensus that could define the value of [the silver] treasure” with which he is stranded alone on the Great Isabel island (162). My second concern is that the validity of some controversial readings is, as it were, taken for granted, without these readings being properly tested against more widespread critical views on the subject. When, for instance, the author argues that in “Typhoon,” the first mate Jukes “is hypnotically drawn to MacWhirr’s [the captain’s] body,” I would like to see more textual evidence of such arguable “impulses of homosexuality” in the story (63). This would be all the more important as, to my knowledge, no such argument has been put forward before; not even Richard Ruppel’s full-length study of homosexuality in Conrad’s fiction makes any reference to “Typhoon” in particular.³

Generally, however, Juhász’s close attention to detail produces fine readings. The intellectual rigour and consistency with which he conducts his analyses, and the fact that these analyses never turn into self-serving theorizations, are admirable, given especially how diverse are the critical theories on which he draws. I have found his section on “The Secret Sharer” and the chapters on *The Secret Agent*, *Nostramo* and *Chance* to be the most insightful overall. There is a sense in which Juhász’s approach, with its focus on commerce and other exchange mechanisms, is most appropri-

ate to the gloomy, coldly calculating world of Conrad's London novel. It works very well to describe the various "transactions" involving both commodities and human beings that are conducted by the secret agent Adolf Verloc and other characters. But Juhász is also particularly good on the character of Nostromo. Most importantly, he introduces the concept of *potlatch* to illuminate Nostromo's deep embeddedness in the local society and its culture. Relying mainly on Georges Bataille's work, Juhász defines potlatch as an archaic form of tribal trade which centres around "a combined process of feasting and gift giving, during which large quantities of property are distributed," the primary aim of the overly generous contenders being in fact to acquire a higher social status and prestige (165–166). The notion that Nostromo practices potlatch adds an interesting facet to his character and helps explain his initial and compulsive need for appreciation as well as his eventual and fatal infatuation with the silver.

With *Conradian Contracts*, the author has produced a valuable contribution to Conrad studies both nationally and internationally. It is important for scholarship coming from Hungary to have an international presence, and Juhász's study is one of those books that will very likely make their presence felt outside the borders as well. It will do so mainly by virtue of its boldly interdisciplinary approach and its strong readings of individual Conrad works. This book is

certainly not without deficiencies, yet the overall impression is of a carefully argued and rigorous exploration of complex and as yet hardly studied interrelationships in the fiction of this great novelist. If it is true that the humanities are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, then surely the publication of *Conradian Contracts* is timely and may encourage similar studies to be written in the future.

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Notes

1. See Andrew Francis, "Recovering the Ethics of Economic Botany in Conrad's Asian Fiction," *The Conradian* 34.2 (2009) 75–89, and his "You always leave us – for your own ends': Marriage and Concubinage in Conrad's Asian Fiction," *The Conradian* 35.2 (2010) 46–62. Francis's work, however, is not theoretically oriented but rather has a documentary character, based as it is on extensive archival research.
2. Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber, "Secret Sharing: Reading Conrad Psychoanalytically," *College English* 49.6 (Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy I) (1987) 628–640, p. 630; emphases in original.
3. See Richard J. Ruppel, *Homosexuality in the Life and Work of Joseph Conrad: Love between the Lines* (New York: Routledge, 2008).