

Katherine Isobel Baxter and Richard J. Hand, eds.

JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE PERFORMING ARTS (Ashgate, 2009) viii + 165 pp.

Review by Jeremy Hawthorn

At his interview for an undergraduate place at the University of Leeds in 1960, a friend of mine was asked if there were any works of literature for which he had a special liking. He replied that he was very taken with the plays of William Butler Yeats. At this one of the interviewers leaned forward with a friendly and encouraging smile on his face and said, "Poems. Yeats wrote poems."

Yeats actually wrote twenty six plays, which is twenty three more than Joseph Conrad, if one counts as plays Conrad's adaptations of "To-Morrow" (dramatised as *One Day More*), *The Secret Agent*, and "Because of the Dollars" (dramatised as *Laughing Anne*). These three, along with a screenplay based on his short fiction "Gaspar Ruiz," could be said to constitute Conrad's total dramatic *oeuvre* narrowly defined, although he did also offer extensive and enthusiastic advice to Basil Macdonald Hastings on the stage production of *Victory*. On this basis a book on Yeats and the performing arts might seem a much better bet than one that explores Conrad's links to these arts. But two of the contributors to the book under review – Richard J. Hand and Robert Hampson – draw attention to a letter Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett in 1909 containing the observation that "[t]hough I detest the stage I have a theatrical imagination." If Conrad wrote few plays, there is little of his fiction that is not in some manner or other theatrical in its conception. Although some of the contributors to this volume do write about Conrad's connection to "the stage," the phrase "performing arts" in the book's title is construed broadly enough to guarantee that it trawls a wide area. Richard J. Hand – one of its editors – has previously written a more sharply-delimited study of Conrad's plays (*The Theatre of Joseph Conrad: Reconstructed Fictions*,

2005), but the new book has relatively little to say about these more marginal productions, choosing instead to focus on Conrad's novels and shorter fictions, their debts to and their influences on the performing arts widely defined. In his own contribution to the volume Robert Hampson also mentions Conrad's early (1897) confession to his friend Robert Cunninghame Graham that writing a play was his "dark and secret ambition," and although this ambition led him to no great work of drama it may well have made a crucial if indirect contribution to his fiction.

What becomes clear from the book as a whole is that Conrad's writing was informed by contact with a variety of the dramatic arts, ranging from the high-cultural to the popular. In the final essay Laurence Davies draws attention to the inclusive and wide-ranging nature of Conrad's musical tastes: the novelist at various times expressed himself positively on the music of Wagner, Verdi, Donizetti, Mayerbeer, Gounod, Mascagni, and Bizet. In like manner, Conrad was familiar both with the work of a variety of dramatists and also with the more popular of the performing arts, including the shadowgraph, magical shows, and the cinema. (There are allusions too to the circus in the fiction, and Richard J. Hand mentions briefly those in *Under Western Eyes*, but the volume contains no extended discussion of Conrad's debt to this popular entertainment.) This is a volume, however, that searches not just for straightforward relationships and influences, but also for more diffuse, indirect, and mediated processes of inter-generic cultural appropriation and engagement. The assumption that can be read out from F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948), that great novelists are significantly influenced only by other great novelists, and in ways that are direct and detectable, is not one for which the essays in this collection provide support.

A non-restrictive interpretation of the term "performing arts" plainly informs the first essay in the collection by Linda Dryden. Besides using theatrical imagery to

describe his habits of composition, the Conrad we meet in this essay anticipates cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and James Clifford, who – as Dryden reminds us – “see culture as performance” (12). Conrad, writes Dryden, consistently contests the stereotyping of Eastern peoples by depicting “the truth of *lived* lives in the Malay Archipelago” (16). He renders this truth by showing how performance defines cultural specificity. His Malay fictions, Dryden proposes, “express cultural difference through the way his characters ‘act out’ cultural codes of behaviour” (13). According to Dryden, Conrad’s Malay fictions “reveal ... how far he saw Malay culture as performance by both Malays and Europeans, and how far he saw imperialist adventurers as performing individual ‘self-fashionings’ in accordance with their perception of their culture as superior” (16). Dryden’s essay thus complements the argument of another recent book, *Dangerous Masculinities: Conrad, Hemingway, and Lawrence* (2008). Here Thomas Strychacz reads *Lord Jim* as a competitive theatre of manhood in which Jim and Marlow keep staging their masculinity to each other.

In the present volume, the links between culture and performance are further explored by Susan Barras. Writing on *An Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer’s Folly*, she treats performance as an instrument of colonisation: “the medium through which the British, and other European nations, attempted to create for their colonised subjects the illusion of stability and power” (29). Using Erving Goffman’s theories of “impression management,” Barras explains how representatives of the ruling and the subject peoples competitively act out the larger tensions of imperialism. Her discussion of Mrs Almayer’s possible use of *latah* and spirit possession is particularly illuminating.

Turning from cultural to theatrical types of performance, Richard J. Hand argues that “Conrad’s fiction includes significant allusions to, and uses of, popular

performance including ... melodrama, Grand-Guignol and *commedia dell'arte*" (45). Discussion of the melodramatic presence in Conrad's work is not new, and a number of earlier critics have argued that it weakens his fiction. For Hand, however, Conrad is not always the victim of his interest in the melodramatic. Hand sees *The Secret Agent*, for example, as "a sophisticated exploration of melodrama," and he cites tellingly the inscription that Conrad wrote in a copy of the novel for Richard Curle: "the book is an attempt to treat consistently a melodramatic subject ironically" (qtd. 46).

So far as the Grand-Guignol is concerned, Hand notes that it is alluded to directly in *Laughing Anne* and that it informs the stage productions of *The Secret Agent* and *Victory* (46). He claims, however, that evidence for the influence of the Grand-Guignol in Conrad's fiction is not exhausted by these examples. For Hand, "[t]he themes of 'ghosts' and revenge in 'Karain: A Memory' and 'ghosts' and guilt in 'The Planter of Malata' are classic stock-in-trade material of the Grand-Guignol. Likewise, the displays of violence in the novels (including *The Secret Agent* and *Victory*) and sensationalistic short stories such as 'The Inn of the Two Witches: A Find' and 'Because of the Dollars' can be elucidated through reference to the Grand-Guignol" (46). Hand also uses the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* as a way into Conrad's "Freya of the Seven Isles," arguing that "[o]nce we use Conrad's 'comedy cameristra' as our key into 'Freya of the Seven Isles' as Italian comedy, other characters fit comfortably into place" (49).

Katherine Isobel Baxter's essay argues that Conrad's complex borrowings from Shakespeare may be traced at various levels: "verbal, thematic, and structural" (125). While usefully surveying previous discussions of this topic, she adds a number of her own fresh insights. Much has already been written about the presence of *Hamlet* (and Hamlet) in *Lord Jim*. Baxter notes that "of the several Shakespearian allusions that

Conrad uses self-reflexively in [the] early stage of his career those to *Hamlet* are most numerous” (114). Her argument is not so much that Jim is based on or resembles Hamlet, but rather that “the very mode of self-reflexive allusion which Conrad uses from time to time in this period served as a model for the allusions that followed in *Lord Jim*. That is to say that Conrad’s echoing of *Hamlet* in *Lord Jim* finds its initial development as a literary mode in Conrad’s own self-fashioning references to *Hamlet*” (114). One regret: Baxter has little to say about Conrad’s *The Shadow-Line*, which also contains many allusions to *Hamlet*.

Baxter also sheds new light on Conrad’s debts to other Shakespearean plays. While previous critics have noted echoes of *The Tempest* in *Victory*, Baxter finds more in *The Rover*. Peyrol works no magic in *Victory*, but “his careful and secretive manipulation of events is worthy of Prospero. And like Prospero he is unwilling to give up, or acknowledge the limits of, his powers” (117). Turning from *The Rover* to *Chance*, Baxter finds echoes from both *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. These include the motif of doubling (two characters named Powell in the novel) and the prominence given to female characters. Moreover “in its multiple tellings and framings *Chance* draws upon the implications of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s play within a play” (123). As Baxter notes, while Conrad’s borrowings from the dramatist “are most clear in relation to the tragedies and *The Tempest*, the comedies lurk significantly behind *Chance*” (125).

Conrad began his writing career at about the same time that the cinema was born, and even though he spoke dismissively of this new medium (see below), it arguably left its mark upon his art. Following hints from Conrad’s letters through a number of Conradian texts on a journey that provides many new perceptions, Robert Hampson shows how the influence of early cinema may be traced in Conrad’s fiction. In *The*

*Secret Agent*, he argues, Winnie Verloc's "visions" after learning of her brother's death are less like what Stephen Donovan had earlier called a "moving panorama" than "a cinematic montage of narrative fragments" (71). One can easily imagine, Hampson suggests, the written intertitles that (in a silent film) would have appeared between the remembered sequences from the courtship section of her memories. Take for instance "Mr Verloc, indolent, and keeping late hours, sleepily jocular of a morning from under his bed-clothes" (*The Secret Agent*, ed. John Lyon [Oxford 2004], p. 3). This, Hampson notes, "seems already to belong to the genre of intertitle" (71). Hampson is also very good on the erotics of the gaze in Conrad's *Chance*, although perhaps less convincing here on Conrad's debt to cinema.

More on this debt is to be found in the essay on *Victory* by Suzanne Speidal. In addition to his reported dismissal of cinema in favour of the shadowgraph (see below), Conrad's letters are scattered with dismissive references to film. Writing to Eric Pinker 23 October 1923, for example, he decries "that repulsive cinema-swindle which is being rammed down the public throat" (*Collected Letters* 8: 207.) But just as Conrad's strictures on Dostoyevsky did not keep him from writing novels that bear witness to the Russian novelist's pervasive influence, so too Conrad's dismissive comments about film and the cinema by no means establish that his fiction was untouched by this new medium. Like Hampson, Speidal suggests that Conrad appropriates a filmic technique – in this instance that of cross-cutting – and employs it to good effect. In *Victory*, she suggests, Conrad evokes a "mass perception which mimics Conrad's own reservations about cinematic presentation" (87).

Speidal also has interesting things to say about the issue of gender in *Victory*. In Thomas Strychacz's reading of *Lord Jim*, as I have already noted, masculinity has repeatedly to be staged and acted out. In *Victory* too, according to Speidal, "the notion

of performance is frequently evoked in connection with gendered behaviour” (90) – a claim she convincingly supports through detailed analysis of Conrad’s novel. What has this to do with film? Well, Speidal suggests that “early cinema also played a part promoting images of ‘manly’ courage and physical prowess” (90). She notes that “[t]he propensity of commercial narrative cinema to promote aggressive, romanticized masculinity ... is aptly illustrated by the 1919 film of *Victory*. ... Here Heyst (Jack Holt) shoots Ricardo (Lon Chaney), and the subsequent intertitle reads: ‘Something has indeed happened to Heyst. He was no longer the slave of an idea, but a man, free to slay and die for his woman’ ” (90). Speidal concedes that Conrad’s Heyst never experiences such a dubious liberation, but she nonetheless maintains that “Heyst’s life (and death) are undoubtedly shaped by his complex, ambivalent relationship to such images of masculinity” (90).

Conrad ranked cinema below a medium that it helped to consign to virtual oblivion: shadowgraphy. According to Walter Tittle, cited in Stephen Donovan’s essay, Conrad briskly dismissed moving pictures in 1922, concluding that “Shadowgraphs in pantomime are much better” (qtd. Donovan 108). Donovan notes that few readers of Conrad “can have failed to notice the peculiarly intense depiction of light and dark in his work,” and he quotes Gustav Morf: “I doubt whether there is any writer in the English language employing so often words like *sombre...*, *gloomy*, *dark*, *ghosts and shades*, *shadows*” (*The Polish Shades and Ghosts of Joseph Conrad* [1976], 195, qtd. Donovan 97).

Donovan also quotes a number of telling examples to reinforce his claim that “Conrad’s marked sensitivity to the visual delights afforded by shadows is evident from his private writings” (105). A quick search through electronic texts of Conrad’s novels confirms that the word “shadow” and its cognates appear in them with a relatively

unvarying frequency, including an appearance in the title of *The Shadow-Line*.

Donovan also provides examples of Conrad's evocation of shadow-effects through the use of other words: "tenebrous immensity" in *Lord Jim*, "Cimmerian gloom" in *The Inheritors*, "opaque, lightless patches" in "The Secret Sharer," and "darkling shade" in *Victory* (97). And how many undergraduates have been faced with the task of writing an essay on the images of light and darkness in *Heart of Darkness*?

Now of course Conrad, like all seeing individuals, will have observed shadows in real life. He will, moreover, have had to interpret the significance of certain shadows very carefully in the course of his work as a sailor. And, again like many of us, he will have encountered references to shadows in written texts that exploit both their literal and their symbolic force. But Donovan suggests that another possible source may lie behind the images of light, darkness, and shadow in Conrad's fiction, arguing that the novelist's undoubted familiarity with a variety of now-forgotten performances and instruments that used shadow-effects to present still and moving likenesses has to be considered a possible influence on the novelist's liking for such images. Donovan's essay reminds us that our comfortable familiarity with a common word such as "shadow" may obscure significant shifts of connotation and even reference over time.

The volume is rounded off by Laurence Davies's splendidly affectionate "Conrad in the Operatic Mode," the final chapter in the volume. Noting that operatic composers "turn verbal compression into musical fullness," Davies concedes (as well he must!) that Conrad is hardly a man of few words, but adds that "in the manner of opera's most dramatic moments, he is also pungently concise" (127). There are references to opera in a number of the works and also in Conrad's comments on these works – such as his wonderful description (in a letter written in 1894) of the final chapter of *Almayer's Folly*. Taking his cue from Conrad, who treats the chapter as if it were an operatic

scene, Davies writes: “No one in the trio of Nina, Dain, and Almayer entirely understands the other two. This is a scene devoted to the making and breaking of bonds, bonds of duty, bonds of passion, and the delusory bonds of race, and each of these bonds joins or separates the characters, even as they speak” (132). As Davies observes, opera “thrived on international or intercultural turmoil,” adding that in this sense “the interracial loves of *Lord Jim*, *Almayer’s Folly*, and *An Outcast of the Islands* are operatic” (136).

All in all, *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts* is an excellent collection: eight original and thought-provoking articles remind the reader how much Conrad absorbed from the performing arts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Opera, theatre, cinema, shadowgraphy – the collaborative or competing influence of all of these very different branches of the performing arts can be traced in Conrad’s fiction. If this book draws our attention to the ways in which Conrad’s characters are above all performers in the world, it may also lead us to ponder the extent to which Conrad is the great Director, arranging his scenes, his exits and entrances, to exert maximal effect on his readers. Specialised chapters such as this book contains may obtain greater focus by concentrating on single sources; the reader is left to wonder about the ways in which these sources combine or clash in the fiction – a topic that can only really be pursued by close analytic attention to specific scenes in individual works.

Having finished reading this book, are we better able to understand what Conrad meant when he said that he had a theatrical imagination? For my own part, the book reminded me that Conrad is a novelist for whom human beings make, discover and display themselves in interaction with other human beings. For all of his modernist concern with the inner selves of his characters, Conrad is not a writer for whom lonely introspection is the royal route to self-knowledge. There *is* a fair amount of lonely

introspection in his fiction, of course. One might instance the scenes in *The Shadow-Line* where the newly appointed captain spends much time in self-scrutiny (and self-condemnation) while experiencing the loneliness of command. But when the captain *acts* with his fellow sailors to meet the challenges of disease and bad weather, he discovers not who he is, but who he can be – he *makes himself* rather than *discovers himself*. Indeed, examples such as that of the fate of Decoud in *Nostramo* give grounds to argue that in the world of Conrad's fiction, lonely self-analysis leads sooner to self-destruction than to self-discovery.

As in the theatre, the key unit in Conrad's fiction is the scene, the interaction of a small number of human individuals facing personal and shared problems in a specific material and social context. If this sounds like a stunningly banal statement it is worth reminding ourselves that it is not one that can be applied unproblematically to all the great works of modernist fiction – it is for example not particularly convincing or illuminating when applied to either James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

The publishers are to be congratulated on an attractively produced book, impeccably copy-edited and presented.

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