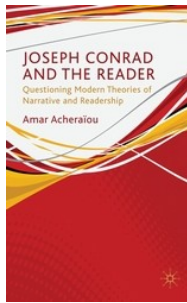


## JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE READER: QUESTIONING MODERN THEORIES OF NARRATIVE AND READERSHIP



By Amar Acheraïou  
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Reviewed by Laurence Davies on 2010-05-22.

There is much to enjoy here, much to appreciate, much to ponder, and a certain amount to challenge. Acheraïou begins by denying that authorship has now been interred for good and all in the cemetery of dead ideas. He advocates the literary equivalent of restorative justice, acknowledging author, text, and reader as hermeneutic entities, none of them endowed with absolute powers. Acheraïou's purpose is not to restore the idea of an originating authority whose life and cultural circumstances are all the critical reader knows or needs to know. Instead, he offers a theory of dissemination, whereby "the author neither vanishes from the text nor is impotent within it" (19). He finds this concept embodied in Conrad's comments on his fiction as well as in the fiction itself. Using Conrad's own words to make the point, Acheraïou proposes that the novelist "remains to a certain extent a figure behind the veil, a suspected rather than a seen presence--a movement and a voice behind the draperies of fiction" (*A Personal Record*, qtd. 18). Thus, writes Acheraïou, "where Barthes dismisses the writer as a total absence, Conrad grants the novelist a real, though unstable footing in his writing" (19).

While an author may be tricky or domineering, readers may be prejudiced, claiming ownership of an author on grounds of identity or, on the same grounds, asserting an author's essential otherness. Acheraïou describes Conrad as "a trans-continental author who defies nationalistic appropriations and insular perspectives" (197, n. 22). The next stage in his argument is a fascinating though flawed discussion of the demands made on Conrad's ethnic fidelity, whether to Poland or to England. In the third section, we encounter "Aesthetic Ramifications, Narrative Entanglements, and Fictional Readers." Here, Acheraïou probes the nature and affinities of Conrad's visual aesthetics, his complex engagement with fictional and extra-fictional readers, and his artistic deployment of narrative self-consciousness. This section is notable not only for its treatment of literary history and theories of reading, but for its immersion in such vital Conradian texts as *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Victory*, "Amy Foster," "Typhoon," and, above all *Under Western Eyes*, which Acheraïou considers the most exemplary embodiment of Conrad's narrative practice. Many of the issues explored in this volume have already caught the attention of other theorists and critics, as witness at least a score of books and a

cascade of articles on topics such as audience, reception, narrative authority and performance, "psychotextuality," and Conrad as a theorist of his own fiction. Nevertheless, Acheraïou casts fresh light on every topic, and the overarching concept of authorial dissemination holds up well. In fact the general argument is often stronger than the details.

On recent critical maps, the necrological approach to authorship looks less alluring than it did four decades ago. What began in Paris as a playful and politically radical act of liberation traveled abroad as a dour and apolitical dogma. Soon enough, the dogma came to look inadequate in the face of such disparate forces as new historicism, identity politics, and the realisation that invoking the words and deeds of such writers as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Zora Neale Hurston, or William Blake is not self-evidently a necrophiliac or reactionary move. Other challenges came from theorists fluent in the assassins' dialect. Acheraïou (194, n. 8) footnotes Seán Burke's anthology *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* (1995), but the same author's *The Death and the Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (1992, revised editions 1998, 2008) is even more valuable, a work truly deserving that overworked epithet "rigorous." Thus, Acheraïou's critique, though splendidly energetic, might seem belated. Moreover, describing his opening chapter as "a cross-examination of Conrad's vision of the reader against the ideas of such leading theorists as Roland Barthes, Marie Louise Rosenblatt, Wayne Booth, and Wolfgang Iser" (2) promises more than it can pay, since Booth, Iser, and Rosenblatt (whose real given names were Louise Michelle), receive far less attention than Barthes, and then mostly in three footnotes (193-5, nn 5, 6, 11). Besides, in this heterogeneous quartet only Barthes was given to "celebrating the death of the author" (141) as opposed to putting him or her in brackets or, like Booth, focusing on the transactions between implied author and ideal reader. The distinctive feature of Acheraïou's case is his treatment of Conrad's authorial deftness. In effect, it is the theorists who are blinkered and belated, and Conrad who "articulates a tripartite textual transaction which [...] encompasses text, reader, and author, each collaborating in the overall signifying enterprise" (141). Nevertheless, simply to praise him as a writer before his time, a modernist or postmodernist *in posse*, is to ignore the "numerous filiations" with his predecessors (2). At his most illuminating, Acheraïou refuses "any unilateral, zealous insertion of Conrad into a determined national culture or literary tradition" (192).

Conrad has endured many such insertions. He has been claimed for England, Poland, and, in recent years Ukraine (though, to the credit of the Ukrainians, his qualifications include having been born in the multicultural town of Berdichiv, where four secular and three sacred languages were in daily use). Acheraïou gives us an extensive account of the rival chauvinisms. Conrad's Polishness, according to some zealots, was so intense that only Poles (not least in the Polish diaspora) can grasp the quiddity of his work, and according to others was so corrupted by venality that he was little better than a traitor. Likewise, some contemporary reviewers in Britain

found his work too foreign, and some more recent commentators have moved the other way, affirming his Englishness at the expense of his affiliations with French and Polish culture. This critical procrusteanism has done violence to his work and reputation; Acheraïou is right in affirming that "readership is neither monolithic nor ideologically neutral" (26). He does not deny the Polish aspects of Conrad's oeuvre, but realigns them, movingly: "Conrad adopts [...] a method of representation that consists in enveloping his traumatic memories of Poland in a veil of mist and silence which are eloquent signs of an unutterable loss or absence" (38). One might add, though, that interpretative narrowness grows not simply from "insertion [...] into a determined national culture" but from taking any culture to be already "determined." An alternative reading of Polish culture would emphasize its turbulence rather than its static adherence to supposedly timeless values. For the sake of the hermeneutic possibilities, one needs to be aware that its dynamism might be more influential and more worthy of recognition than its fixity.

Acheraïou's portrayal of late Victorian and Edwardian England shades the literary scene too uniformly. He seeks to explain why, despite mainly favourable reviews, Conrad had to work for almost twenty years before seeing his first commercial success. This was *Chance*, whose appeal resulted, Acheraïou says, from "abdicating his literary principles to the reading taste of the multitude" (53), i.e. women readers. This needs correction. Though *Chance* indeed sold very well, its success was due to Doubleday's adroit marketing in the United States, and there is no evidence that Conrad abdicated literary principles by taking an interest in female readership, which-- like other readerships-- was heterogeneous in its tastes. (On this topic, see Susan Jones's invaluable *Conrad and Women*, 1999.) Conrad was not in the least writing down, for even Henry James slyly professed his astonishment at the narrative complexity of *Chance*. (200, n. 12). Regarding the earlier, less financially successful volumes, Acheraïou emphasizes "the neglected racial, ideological, and cultural factors constructing the responses of British readers and reviewers" (53). He concedes that "the exotic quality of Conrad's language, his a-chronological, multi-focal narratives, and his pessimistic worldview were obviously significant hurdles to wide popularity" (54), but "there is good reason to suggest that English racial prejudice contributed greatly to delaying Conrad's acceptance and popularity in England" (61). Undeniably, all too many English people distrusted or even feared anyone foreign, even their fellow inhabitants of the Anglo-Celtic Archipelago. On the evidence of Conrad's letters, which Acheraïou quotes extensively, it is also undeniable that his British citizenship failed to deter some critics from seeing him as "a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English" (letter of 4 October 1907, qtd. 61). Reading the contemporary reviews en masse, we see that those who took this line were in a small minority. The most persistent offender was the essayist Robert Lynd, who attributed to Conrad "the vision of a cosmopolitan, of a homeless person" (51). But Lynd, who also wrote under the name Robeard Ua Flionn, wasn't English at all; he was an Irish nationalist, a member of Sinn Féin whose continued residence in England and steady employment as a columnist suggests that at least

some circles of literary London were rather tolerant. Lynd implies that Conrad ought to be more Polish. On the other side were writers such as Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf, who recognized Conrad's "foreign" qualities but admired him all the more. At least as common in his letters as anxiety about his life as an immigrant are his complaints about Slavophiles eager to link his work to the Russian writers they so much admired.

Whatever the snags in the chapter on Englishness, it deserves a thoughtful response to a challenging surmise. Acheraïou, who is very widely read, relies more heavily on secondary sources in this chapter than is his usual practice, and it shows. By far the best section is a fresh discussion of "Amy Foster," Conrad's story of a Polish peasant who is shipwrecked on the English coast, has to endure rural prejudice and ignorance, and loses even the love of his English bride when he falls into a fever and reverts to his own tongue. Acheraïou gives us a compelling analysis of bigotry in action, but Conrad's characters, who have no time for bookishness, are hardly representative of readers, writers, or critics. Some of Acheraïou's sources insist that a smugly bucolic obsession with "Englishness" dominated the literary scene. It was certainly a significant presence, but by no means the only feature of the landscape. One problem with linking Conrad's sluggish sales to ethnicity or far-off settings is that home-grown Britons faced similar difficulties. While Stevenson was living in Samoa, for example, he received letters from his close friend Sidney Colvin begging him not to waste his time on Polynesian subjects. Yet neither literary opinion, nor the publishing business, nor the reading public was monolithic, as even a skimming of late Victorian and Edwardian magazines attests; there was no shortage of exotic locales, though they lacked the sardonic vision of a Conrad. Even when the setting was rural England, not all authors lost their critical senses: to refer to "the pastoral serenity of Galsworthy's *The Country House* (1907)" (60) is a little odd, since its author skewers the cruelty of English divorce laws and the hypocrisy of the Church of England. Likewise, it is more than a little confusing to associate Arnold Bennett, a stout Francophile and chronicler of life in the industrial towns of Staffordshire, with a quest for "authentic roots which [...] lay in the heart of the country" (58). In truth, beyond sales figures and the wide array of critical verdicts, we have little way of knowing what the readers of Conrad's era liked or disliked. One revealing exception is the case of Marie Corelli, who changed her name from Mary Mackay to honor her supposed ancestor, the Italian composer. To the second edition of *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), she added an extraordinary budget of testimonials from readers whose lives had been changed--even saved--by her story of an "improvisational pianist" rescued from despondency by a Chaldean magus. Her choice of foreign settings, from Paris to Babylon, Cairo to the Caucasus, proved no barrier to popularity. Over the next two decades, her fictional guides to the perplexed sold by the hundreds of thousands, being read in mansions and in miners' cottages. Adored by the general public, she was variously reviled for her literary excesses, her social or artistic conservatism, and her artless prose by critics and other authors, among them Joseph Conrad. Authors like Corelli and Hall Caine, with

their triumphantly resolved plots, their religiosity, and their utter lack of irony were anathema to him.

This matter of popular appeal bulks large in a later stage of Acheraïou's study. The relation of the author, both explicit and implied, to his implied readers and to audiences and narrators within the texts, is central to the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters. Acheraïou identifies a hierarchy of fictional listeners and readers, some inadequate or unreliable, some models--as he sees it--of attentiveness. The narrative multiplication, and the interplay between modes of telling (oral and written, for example) in a work like *Lord Jim*, "contribute to making the novel's meaning always open, constantly plural" (118-19). Acheraïou deals with those narrative leaps and gaps so important in the work of Wolfgang Iser, but sees them as manifestations of authorial presence rather than absence.

Acheraïou's treatment of audiences embedded in the texts is mostly persuasive. I would diverge from him only over the question of fictional "privileged readers." He offers several examples, but principally the man in *Lord Jim* who has listened to Marlow's long narrative in the Eastern hotel and subsequently receives a package of letters in London continuing Jim's story. Acheraïou describes this fellow as embodying "the subliminal reader that Conrad projects in his fiction [... who] possesses all the required features of a supreme reader." He is the only one of the group at the hotel who has taken a real interest in Jim and, in his quiet and lofty apartment, has "his full visual and intellectual potential engaged in his interpretative enterprise" (136). Does he, though? In his cover letter, Marlow speaks to this man's belief in racial superiority: "You said [...] that 'giving your life up to them' (*them* meaning all of mankind with skins brown, yellow, or black in colour) 'was like selling your soul to a brute'" (Dent and Doubleday collected editions, 339). How then can this person make any decent sense of Jim's commitment to the people of Patusan, which is ruptured only by the arrival of a particularly nasty Englishman, Gentleman Brown? Surely this is yet another less than perfect reader? His supposedly clear vision of the London rooftops can be read not as a signifier of thorough comprehension but as an ironic gibe at a character who quite literally looks down on people.

Acheraïou describes Conrad as "wavering between a feigned democratic aspiration and a disguised aristocratic inclination" (130). He rightly observes that in his letters and essays "Conrad expresses an ambivalent attitude towards the average reader." On one hand we have the Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* with its invocation of solidarity with all of suffering humanity and its hope that his art will "arrest, for the space of a breath, the busy about the work of the earth"; on the other, we have letters such as the one to Norman Douglas in which he mentions "the inconceivable stupidity of the common reader" (qtd. 126). In the fictional scenes of storytelling, Acheraïou contends, he shows a less ambivalent elitism: "This is suggested in his narrators' condescension to their audiences" (131).

Acheraïou concedes that "Conrad's fiction was read across social categories. This does not mean, however, that Conrad was sympathetic to or had a positive view of working-class readers who bought and read his books" (129). Yet one might recall that the buffoons and rogues in Conrad's fiction are scattered right across the social spectrum, and those gentlemen who fail to listen properly to Marlow are his social equals. Might not these diffident or dozy listeners express a writer's frustration with an audience whose experience did not match his own? They had never seen the horrors of the Congo Free State, or the fate of political dissidents forced to walk in chains all the way to central Siberia. Describing Conrad's writings as those of an elitist or an aristocrat works only in terms of aesthetic rather than social hierarchies.

Here we come back to the problem of readership. Conrad disliked mass culture and its journalistic clichés. He expressed his dislike of popular fiction by Corelli, Caine, and E. L. Voynich, but admired the more acerbic work of H. G. Wells. What annoyed him was the lachrymose, the melodramatic, and the blatantly redemptive. In this respect, he was in the same plight as other British writers who wouldn't or couldn't lay on the comforts of the well-appointed best-seller. Faced with the reaction to his bleaker novels, Hardy gave up writing fiction. Conrad's own work offers ironic versions of popular genres such as imperial romance or the vision of urban catastrophe (often featuring ruthless anarchists). The labyrinthine narrative of *Nostromo* bewildered the regular readers of *T. P.'s Weekly*, who perhaps looked back nostalgically to H. Rider Haggard's *Stella Fregelius*, serialised the previous year. But who now reads that cosmic romance, or would choose Douglas Fawcett's *Hartmann the Anarchist* over *The Secret Agent*? Populism and progress are not always synonymous. To be "elitist" and difficult is not inevitably a permanent condition.

Acheraïou's book is dense with ideas, pleasingly so thanks to the vigor and clarity of his prose. His argument often moves two steps forward, one step back: assertion first, then qualification. Such is the case with his ideas about Conrad's debt to Greek and Roman literary theory, or the influence of Fielding, Diderot, and Sterne. As he has already shown to great effect in a previous study, *Rethinking Postcolonialism* (2008), Acheraïou has an extensive knowledge of classical and eighteenth century literatures. It is difficult within a limited space, however, to assess his claims about influence and affinity in the detail they merit since so much depends on the balancing of putative sources, the close examination of verbal texture, and the recognition of ironic tactics.

The grand finale of the present book is the chapter on *Under Western Eyes*, which turns on a reading of the Teacher of Languages. Is he, as Acheraïou has it, a direct descendant of narrators in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*? In terms of narrative self-consciousness or theatricality, why not Thackeray, Cervantes, Calderón, or Shakespeare, authors that we know Conrad had read? In terms of "narrative inconsistency" or the "ethics of denegation" (180-181), why not

Henry James? Indeed, why not all of the above? Acheraïou hovers between a genealogical model, in which sources are detected and descent established, and a synchronic model, in which affinities are recognized and responses to the nature of authorship and readership compared as if in a continuous present. Because it is so hard to prove that, for example, Cervantes trumps Sterne, or Sterne trumps Cervantes, the genealogical method is hampered by its own intricacies and its own moments of uncertainty. Less troubled by questions of precedence and ancestral legitimation, the comparative method is more flexible and goes to more rewarding places. Whichever method one prefers, we should be grateful to Dr Acheraïou for opening up so many possibilities, not least that of seeing Conrad as a genuinely transnational author--and all the more alive for being so.

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