



Walter Göbel, Hans Ulrich Seeber, Martin Windisch, eds. *Conrad in Germany*.
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The Fate of an Important English-language Author in Germany

This collection of essays proposes to present in English an overview of the significant body of research produced by German scholars on Joseph Conrad. With the publication of this collection the editors hope “that in future a more interactive exchange of research will develop with stimuli working also from German studies into the anglophone sphere” (p. 2). The collection consists of some newer essays, originally written in English, as well as translations from the German of previously published older and more recent essays. The book is divided into three sections, the first of which covers translations, film interpretations, and Conrad’s influences on German-language texts such as Urs Widmer’s *Im Kongo* (1996). This section begins with Laurenz Volkmann’s essay, “Conrad in Germany—A Historical Survey,” which provides some insight into the history of German interpretations of Conrad, as well into motivating factors for trends in German scholarship. The second section presents various interpretations of modernism in Conrad’s work, such as Walter Göbel’s “The Birth of Modernism in the *Heart of Darkness*,” as well as exploring how Conrad’s work embodies specific historical contexts such as colonialism (Wolfgang Klooss’s “Through the Eyes of Colonialism’: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Its Metaphors”), or degeneration (Paul Goetsch’s “Conrad, Nordau, and Degeneration”). The third section, “The Nautic Quest,” explores how the sea, ships, and their crews play out in Conrad’s work.

Close readings of several Conrad texts demonstrate the strong suit of this book. Martin Windisch’s “Rites of Memory: Urs Widmer’s *Im Kongo*” provides, for example, an insightful account of the intertextual relationship between Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the Swiss author’s novel. Bernhard Reitz, in “‘Within the brooding gloom’: Joseph Conrad’s Vision of London,” explores how Conrad depicts the metropole in several texts as a means to criticize not only colonialism, but also western decadence at the *fin de siècle*. Reitz effectively links his interpretations to textual examples: “As the tugs pull the ship towards the port of London, the *Narcissus* is literally drawn into the heart of an industrialized society which mans the flagship of the human race but which is unveiled as ‘soiled,’ as populating a ‘sordid earth’” (p. 210). Moreover, Reitz effectively foregrounds his analysis by citing other scholars on the role of the city in Conrad’s works and thus contributes explicitly to the editor’s stated goal. The same can be said for the article by Paul Goetsch. Goetsch effectively compares the work of Max Nordau with that of Conrad by historically contextualizing his close readings of both authors. For instance, Goetsch explores Nordau’s disdain for urbanization, a concrete historical development during the era, and links it to Conrad’s depictions, yet successfully avoids overstating the comparison in his conclusions: “In his disgust with modern man’s atavistic tendencies Conrad comes close to Nordau, but as a critic of society he remains distanced from him” (p. 179).

In comparison to the examples named above, however, several of the other essays in this collection fail to ground their readings of Conrad adequately in historical contexts. This particular flaw weakens the value of close readings in several instances throughout this collection. To cite one example, Wolfgang Klooss, in “Through the Eyes of ‘Colonialism’: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Its Metaphors,” states that “In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad presents a colonial reality,” yet does not elaborate sufficiently what this colonial reality actually means (p. 133). Nor does Klooss define “colonial society,” a reference later in the essay (p. 145). Colonialism and “colonial societies,” as so much research, from Edward Said to Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, has shown, are terms simply too complex to provide interpretive substance without reference to concrete descriptions and detail. When Klooss posits, in reference to the ivory trade and based solely on Kurtz’s fictional recollections, that “Fiction, by adequately rendering the historical, thus uncovers the prime motive for colonial expansion,” little interpretive value is provided. Perhaps Conrad’s fictional depictions are indeed accurate reflections of colonial reality, but Klooss presents insufficient justification to substantiate the claimed link. Moreover, this 1981 essay has not been updated from a theoretical perspective. Only Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) receives mention, but at the very least the reader deserves an updated overview, however brief, of ongoing colonial and post-colonial theory.

Another example of a piece in which historical contextualization and theoretical positioning become critical for the author’s interpretive import, but remain at times inadequate, is Hans Ulrich Seeber’s essay, “Surface as Suggestive Energy: Fascination and Voice in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” Seeber seeks to analyze “Conrad’s verbal art of arranging suggestive images and words” (p. 153). Citing Mikhail Bakhtin and Fritz Mauthner, Seeber does provide a more satisfying theoretical context for his analysis, as well as historical background for what he describes as “the striking importance attributed to voice at the turn of the century” (p. 161). He relates effectively his interpretations to important developments, such as shifting technology—the gramophone—and situates Conrad’s work in the context of other literary production during the era, such as the poetry of Robert Frost or Hugo Ball’s Dada poetry: “Clearly Conrad’s prose text does not and cannot aim at such effects despite its use of pauses, elliptical sentence patterns and the like, it primarily invites

us to explore its polyvalent, often contradictory meanings” (p. 167). Yet, in another section of the essay, Seeber references Max Weber’s analysis of the charismatic leader, here building on earlier work by Michael Levenson, and proposes to define Kurtz as one such charismatic character. Yet Seeber’s interpretation requires a deeper fleshing out of Weber’s thought. In fact, though he does briefly summarize Weber’s ideas, he never cites Weber other than one phrase—“rule of genius”—and the title of one essay in which it appeared (“Napoleons ‘Herrschaft des Genies,’” [1922]) (p. 165). Without a fuller account of Weber’s characterization of the charismatic leader, his conclusions here tend to fall flat.

A more egregious lack of theoretical foundation confronts the reader in Bärbel Czennia’s “Conrad’s German Voices: Translating Narrative Innovation in *Heart of Darkness*,” an essay that discusses various translations of Conrad’s fiction into German. Czennia translates back into English German translations of Conrad, a cumbersome and somewhat confusing exercise, but more importantly cites no translation theory whatsoever, a step in argumentation that would seem critical to the effectiveness of this essay. In another example of this collection’s surprisingly frequent inadequate theoretical or historical corroboration is Herbert Klein’s “Paradise Regained?—Filming Conrad’s *Victory* as a Means of Coming to Terms with Germany’s Past.” Klein discusses quite informatively various film interpretations of Conrad’s *Victory*, focusing primarily on Vadim Glowna’s *Des Teufels Paradies* (1987) from the general perspective of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Yet remarkably, in the essay’s concluding section, “What is German about this film?,” Klein concludes by explaining in two pages how the film can be interpreted under the rubric of Arthur Schopenhauer, Faust, and Sigmund Freud, conclusions for which the reader is theoretically and contextually unprepared.

In summary, this collection does provide several insightful interpretations of Conrad’s work, but frequently exhibits the flaws of what Clifford Geertz might have termed “thin description” by failing to contextualize interpretations adequately in historical terms or by omitting the requisite theoretical framework to support the presented arguments and conclusions. Without meeting these basic requirements of effective scholarship the value of the collection remains questionable, particularly in creating a scholarly dialogue between the “anglophone” and German-speaking spheres of Conrad scholarship.

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