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Review: Rethinking Joseph Conrad's Concepts of Community: Strange Fraternity

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Kaoru Yamamoto, Rethinking Joseph Conrad's Concepts of Community: Strange Fraternity (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 186 pp., bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-3500-9002-6.

The question of how to place Joseph Conrad seems to be one of the more enduring problems that has preoccupied literary scholars interested in making sense of his place in world literature. As Kaoru Yamamoto's engaging new study of Conrad's conception of community makes clear from the outset, his work continues to pose challenges for critics who have approached Conrad from perspectives ranging from "modernist subjectivity" to "gender studies, postcolonialism, and new historicism" (p. 2). Conrad has the unique ability to attract readings presenting images of him as a writer who is both a late Victorian and an emergent modernist, a "traditionalist and a revolutionary," but also a writer whose body of work has often been understood through the "'achievement and decline' paradigm" (p. 2). In Rethinking Joseph Conrad's Concepts of Community: Strange Fraternity, Yamamoto draws on the work of continental thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida, and Hannah Arendt, among others, to reevaluate this fractured image of Conrad through a completely different lens entirely, that of community as "strange fraternity."

Yamamoto's study of Joseph Conrad is a welcome addition to the vast body of existing scholarship devoted to him. Her readings of a wide range of works by Conrad, from canonical works such as Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, and Under Western Eyes to his lesser-known, later novels like The Arrow of Gold and The Rover, will appeal to Conrad scholars interested in tracing the ways in which his work explores questions of the subject, identity, history, and memory. Although a relatively slim book by scholarly standards, Yamamoto brings a wealth of knowledge of Conradiana, including an appreciation of his full body of work and its critical

reception, as well as a solid grasp of continental philosophy and literary criticism, which allows her to place Conrad within existing scholarship and to break new ground. This study will prove to be stimulating to scholars deeply invested in situating Conrad in the range of approaches enumerated above, whether that be his position as a modernist, the impact (or presence) of his Polishness, or his resonance in global literature. One of the more interesting and gratifying aspects of Yamamoto's study is also her deliberate interest in reassessing Conrad's later or "lesser" works, including short stories such as "The Secret Sharer," "The Duel," "The Warrior's Soul" and his unfinished novel Suspense. Far from being works that speak to Conrad's period of "decline," Yamamoto finds new value in them and makes a compelling argument for the way they display the unique way he engaged with the other and created a sense of "strange fraternity" throughout his career as an émigré writer.

As the focal point of this book is on Conrad's ideas of community, however, clearly one of the chief strengths of Yamamoto's study is for the light she sheds on the myriad of ways that his work evolved to create this feeling of "strange fraternity," which "is not to say that the self and the other(s) merge into some higher substantial identity 'we,' for instance, through soldierly communion; but rather, it is to suggest that a singular plurality takes place, a plurality that is something more than a collection of individuals having something in common" (p. 163). While Conrad coined this term "strange fraternity" in his last published novel The Rover (1925), Yamamoto makes a case for "Conrad's engagement with the strangeness of community [. . .] through the entirety of his works" (p. 1). Whether it is the deaf Russian Finn Wamibo in The Nigger of the "Narcissus," the endlessly dueling officers, D'Hubert and Feraud, in the Napoleonic wars in "The Duel," or the compassionate Tomassov in "The Warrior's Soul," "individuality in Conrad seems to be indissociably bound up with collectivity" (p. 16). As she

explains in her introduction, this is somewhat at odds with what has been the dominant critical approach to Conrad's work, "modernist subjectivity," or what Ian Watt refers to as "subjective impressionism" (p. 5). In work after work, Yamamoto displays how Conrad develops characters whose sense of self, perception, and memory is tied up in the other. For a writer who could both express his frustration for feeling alienated as an émigré writer and be called out for his "conservative distrust of the noise of social agitation," it is rather remarkable that for "Conrad as well as for [Jean-Luc] Nancy, who suggests that we think of being as community, being is not the other; being is always 'with'" (p. 17).

In a way, this sense of community has the reverse effect of opening Conrad up to connections and relationships across a range of boundaries including gender, trauma, and consciousness. For scholars of Polish literature, such an approach is an intuitive and welcome one as Conrad's otherness, or what Wiesław Krajka argues makes him a "homo duplex," is immediately apparent. What is interesting about Yamamoto's approach, however, is how broadly this sense of otherness extends Conrad beyond the confines of his Polishness and the "Polish Question." Although Conrad's sense of community means that it "is not difficult to recognize . . . the effacement of Polish history that is not directly told but only elliptically suggested as an address to the listening of another," Yamamoto explains that he makes it equally easy to "give voice to the voiceless" and to recognize that "we are implicated in other's traumas" (pp. 33, 128). There are intriguing echoes here of the connection between Conrad and Witold Gombrowicz, about which George Gasyna wrote so eloquently in Polish, Hybrid, and Otherwise: Exilic Discourse in Joseph Conrad and Witold Gombrowicz. Yamamoto's concept of "strange fraternity" seems to work as a bridge of sorts to Gombrowicz's idea of form, which argues that there is no authentic self but that which we create in one another. Rather than reduce Conrad to

his Polishness or separate it out from his overall corpus of work, the idea of Conrad's community includes this "otherness" as part of a larger pattern in which "the self can no longer be separated and distanced from the world; rather, surrendering the 'I' to the other, it touches and identifies with the other without appropriating the other into itself" (p. 163). What is more, in works such as The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and The Arrow of Gold, Yamamoto underscores how Conrad's sense of community and otherness extends beyond literature altogether and draws on elements of painting and sculpture. In short, by continually looking beyond the self, Conrad "roves somewhere in-between, ever-renewing his bonds of 'community,'" which perhaps explains the enduring place Conrad continues to enjoy in world literature today.

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