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Marina Lops (a cura di), *Mondi di carta: Conrad e l'immaginazione geopolitica*, Milano, Mimesis, 2022, pp. 166, ISBN 9788857598260

For an author of the stature of Joseph Conrad, celebrations surrounding the centenary of his death – which occurred in 1924 – are bound to precede the actual chronological date, and also to reverberate in the aftermath. Hence, in 2024, we are drawing attention to the proceedings of the symposium *Sotto gli occhi dell'Occidente: Conrad e l'immaginazione geopolitica*, which took place in Salerno in 2019, enriched with other contributions. During this event, the spatial dimension and its fictional representations, so complex and pivotal in the Conradian macrotext, were explored in their various ramifications, both figural and semeiotic, while referring to the concept of geopolitics developing at the time. The term, coined at the end of the nineteenth century, is also at the centre of the current debate, given the economic and political processes underway in the global scenario, where Russia and eastern nations are playing, once again, a crucial and much discussed role.

Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* – his so-called 'Russian novel' – was somehow privileged by some speakers, who saw it as the culmination of the author's propensity for drawing a geopolitical perspective. In spite of this, given his transnational position in life as in the literary sphere, all of Conrad's works bear a strong geopolitical mark, confirming the variegated mixture of interracial power relations in the vast imperial domains with which he came into contact during his years at sea, while transferring his faceted travel experience to an imaginative plane. Conrad thus proceeded to highlight his discourse about imperialism while subtly deconstructing it; the latter approach was such a refined stance that it has not always been clearly recognised by commentators, a fact which only testifies to Conrad's genius and narrative skills.

Giampiero Moretti ("Conrad e gli 'occhi' della *Weltliteratur*: nota su *Under Western Eyes*") lucidly analyses the Eurocentric connotations characterising the term *Weltliteratur*, whose 'salvific' promise fascinates comparatists who aim to eliminate the divide between a dominant centre and the periphery. In his interpretation, it resonates with *Weltgeist*, alongside the spiritual undertones that this word conveys on the narrative level. Indeed, only this resonance might redeem the first term from its imperialist connotations. Moretti also looks for traces of the dialectic between truth and material facts, which is noticeable in the verbal exchanges between Razumov, the denouncer, and Haldin, the perpetrator. We have here another typical Conradian binomial, whose interplay is worked through by the intermediation of the imagination, which proceeds to the 'spinning of existence', to echo a telltale recurring metaphor permeated with

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metafictional value and recalling mythological motifs. Conrad succeeds in showing how these conflicting instances might be only pacified on a spiritual level, which in the novel is associated with Haldin's sister. This allows Moretti to address the topic of the role of the feminine in Conrad's works, which is often underestimated.

Richard Ambrosini – whose “Ripensare i dintorni testuali e biografici di *Under Western Eyes*” centres on paratexts and biographical aspects – also recognises the prominent role of women at the end of many of Conrad's novels, from *Lord Jim* to *Under Western Eyes*, where they acquire a ‘numinous’ halo. Conrad's intention to make his readers *see* and *bear* is also enacted by the incredibly powerful silence of his female characters.

Conrad's objective of making the Russian soul known to Western minds is attained through a refinement of the narrative tools – as the author himself explains in various interventions – so as to present facts from different angles, while declaring that whatever estranged effects he obtained were to be traced to this strategy, and not to his Slavonism, as maintained by his detractors.

For Giovanni Bottiroli (“Identità e sosia parodici: una lettura di *Under Western Eyes*”), in *Under Western Eyes* Conrad explores the Russian temperament, as elusive as it might appear from a Western perspective. The phenomenological assumption informing Bottiroli's analysis, borrowed from thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, is that a national imprinting, while not strictly objective, is nonetheless the result of many factors, and should be seen above all as a cluster of potentialities emerging out of a universal pool of qualities. This also explains how the peculiarities of fictional characters might acquire a larger scope by focusing on this fleeting Russian soul. Thus, mysticism and a love for overflowing language are ascribed to Russians, while curiously associated with cynicism. The fictional correlation of mysticism is to be found in a lack of form, an unboundedness reflected in landscapes that call to mind a sort of *cupio dissolvi*, or even in the physical description of Razumov. To these opposite qualities are added the notions of trust and betrayal applied to the couple Razumov/Haldin, whose presence reverberates on the other characters. In the end, revolutionary action clearly appears delusional and studded with blunders. At this point, Razumov decides to come clean: when admitting to his espionage activities, he assumes a Dostoevskyan halo in the vein of a parodic double – a caricatural facet of a hero figure – as many others that populate the work of the great Russian author. Bottiroli's conclusion points to the inadequacy of any kind of action, only liable to generate misunderstandings. Paola Di Gennaro – while comparing Conrad's *The Secret Agent* to Greene's *The Confidential Agent* in the last metafictional section – expresses a similar idea about the danger of trying to convert ideas into facts, whose redeeming potential is definitely lost in the last, disenchanting novel of Conrad.

But *Heart of Darkness* remains at the core of Conrad's reflection upon the socio-political reality of his time, and the prominence assigned there to maps speaks volumes regarding the connection with the then rising ‘geopolitical theory’, a term proposed in 1899 by the Swedish Rudolf Kjellen, in the same year as the novella's first appearance, as pointed out by Riccardo Capoferro in “‘A large shining map’: geopolitica e cartografia in *Heart of Darkness*”. Here, we detect Conrad's first firm rejection of the pompous

propagandistic discourse that was striving to promote imperialist enterprises, a branch of geopolitics aimed at producing *representations* for the benefit of the people. Cartography and maps were exerting a fascination on naïve millions, as Marlow and Conrad tell us, but the symbolism emerging from their aesthetic treatment in the novella highlights a dimension that is quite different from the exaltation of *le magnifiche sorti e progressive* – as developments in cartography and its massive didactic employment at the time would imply. As a result of European intervention, those fabulous and promising regions of the planet are indeed depicted by Conrad as the reign of evil in a Christian sense. The great river is devilishly seen as a snake, as Capoferro points out – although, in my opinion, the same symbol might be further explored in light of its echoes from Eastern cultures, adding multiple layers of meaning while hinting at spiritual rebirth.

Having shown how propaganda can dangerously sway people's minds, and deconstructed the notion of a progressist, enlightening colonisation, Conrad transfuses his mature, skeptical vision into his last works. By implementing his aesthetic tools, he offers a rich fresco depicting a civilisation on the brink of collapse. He manages to project a peculiar European trajectory in a character like Axel Heyst in *Victory*, under the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as Marina Lops contends ("Un palinsesto di decadenza: *Victory* e l'esemplarità di un *Everyman* coloniale"), also drawing on Fausto Ciompi's work. A rich cultural texture made up of quotations and cultural references traces the many mythic and literary roots which buttress fictional situations, giving them depth and further resonance. Critics have looked at the biblical tale of the Genesis as well as Milton and Shakespeare, whose *The Tempest* provides a particularly productive archetype for these borderline settings, where different worlds face each other, until they become a hypotext, in Genette's terminology. From Lops' perspective, *Victory* portrays the European decline while reaching a metaphysical atemporality. Her analysis goes even deeper, focusing on Conrad's fictional strategies, which are deemed here at their most refined and functional to convey incongruous or conflicting qualities. Degrees of diffraction confer a typical ambiguity upon the main character, while his grotesque antagonists contribute to the emergence of his facets.

After pointing out *Victory*'s inclusive, all-encompassing texture, which makes it resemble a palimpsest of Western literary styles and genres, we can now focus on the last group of essays, dealing with Conrad's intertextuality. Worthy of notice is Daniel Russo's "'Twixt land and sea...and languages: il panorama sociolinguistico dell'arcipelago malese in Conrad", a contribution which considers the range of subtleties comprised in Conrad's fictional keyboard from yet another perspective. In fact, it must not be forgotten that Conrad has been able to render the complex, variegated socio-linguistic fabric of the Malay region, allowing for a vision that went well beyond the classical dichotomy between colonisers and colonised. Conrad, who in *Under Western Eyes* finds an *alter ego* in a professor of languages, masterfully employs his knowledge of many linguistic varieties – from those spoken by Europeans to creole and indigenous idioms – to represent the various power relations between colonists and natives in a specific area of geopolitical interest.

We might say that the scope of Conrad's penetrating insight expands in both a geographical and temporal dimension, opening the way for others to explore analogous

themes in his wake, shedding light on how imperialism changed geopolitical equilibriums, while also affecting the Western inner self.

From the German Studies area (“Il cuore di tenebra della noce di cocco: ambiguità politico-narratologiche in *Imperium* di Christian Kracht”), Gabriele Guerra presents the case of *Imperium*, a novel by the Swiss author Christian Kracht loosely based on the life of the spiritual reformer August Engelhardt, who, in 1919, went to New Guinea to start a curious cult promoting a body and soul renewal, in keeping with the principles of *Lebensreform*, embedded with racial mysticism. This movement, which was aligned to the philosophical trends of the time and turned to Martin Heidegger’s doctrine of representation, had been preaching the ideal of going back to an essential nature since the last decade of the eighteenth century, in order to make peace with the guilty conscience associated with German imperialistic expansion and the massive growth of industrialisation. The German mystic’s utopistic goal to create a new insular Eden was teeming with rhetorical self-representations, so much so that his plethora of ideas is curiously reminiscent of Kurtz’ hollowness – who, as we know, had ‘gone native’ – and its alternations with eloquence. A fact that, rather than being a sign of opposition – as implied by Guerra – seems to me to reveal an implied common matrix. Guerra outlines the various, interlacing levels of Kracht’s ‘representing description’ – both historical and fictional – by metaphorically relying on the mathematical figure of the Möbius strip.

Another fictional pattern was cast in the twentieth century by Conrad’s political novel *The Secret Agent* (1907), which finds a valuable counterpart in *The Confidential Agent* by Graham Greene, as shown by Paola Di Gennaro in “Metonimia di un’assenza: geopolitical melodramas in *The Secret Agent* di Conrad e *The Confidential Agent* di Greene”. In a context that is vaguely anarchist and purposelessly terroristic, Conrad shows us a metropolitan setting which is as blurred and elusive as the wild natural backgrounds previously represented in other novels. The fog is again a recurring motif, as it was also in Charles Dickens’ atmospheres, leading the dark horror projected by colonists onto the conquered lands back to its source at the core of civilisation. Verloc, the protagonist, is a diminished Marlow, and the Professor, the anarchists’ boss, the wildly ambitious ‘moral agent’, is the hater of everybody, resembling – I would say – a metropolitan Kurtz. Both in Conrad and in Greene, irony and disenchantment dominate the scene, action is powerless, uncoordinated, and verbal expression is ineffectual and paradoxical. The universe is a blind destroyer allied to ideology: in *The Secret Agent*, the desperate terroristic action aimed at recreating order out of chaos should be the chronologically programmed destruction of time, symbolised by the Greenwich Observatory. Oxymorons signal – as usual in Conrad – the crucial approach to inner reality, to a sort of negative epiphany. In *The Confidential Agent*, the main conspirative action, again doomed to failure, involves a charge of coal, whose real recipient remains unknown, as does the identity of the enemy. Similarities and slight variations on the keyboard are analytically described by Di Gennaro, unveiling a surprising timeliness in Conrad’s geopolitical vision, whose imprinting was taken over and revisited by other authors, giving birth to hypertexts in the same mould, such as Greene’s.

Carlo Pagetti (“Storie di uomini invisibili: da Griffin a Razumov, da Wells a Conrad”)

carries on an interesting excursus which points out the amical exchanges and subtle literary influences that occurred between Conrad and Herbert George Wells, and other emerging writers at the time. With the author of *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *The Invisible Man* Conrad shared a critical attitude toward social Darwinism, and a focus – often parodically declined – on terrorism. The latter is seen as an elusive enemy, handling intangible and treacherous weapons like bacteria, a motif already present at the end of the nineteenth century within the emerging utopian-dystopian dialectic. The short story “The Stolen Bacillus” by Wells contains themes taken up again in both *The Invisible Man* and *The Secret Agent*, which was dedicated by Conrad to Wells. Even though hidden correspondences with Wells’ works are still perceptible, in *Under Western Eyes* Conrad continued his reflection on terrorism in his own fictional terms, expanding its scope beyond Europe to include a confrontation with eastern Russia, whose vast territory is seen as a metaphysically charged ‘uniform whiteness’, a ‘monstrous blank page’, thus veering away from Wells’ comic realism.

Lastly, I will examine Enrico Riccardo Orlando’s “Ideologia e politica nelle prime traduzioni italiane di *Nostromo*”, a contribution about the first Italian translations of a novel touching on the outcomes of the Italian Unification process. Translations are crucial to the diffusion of literary works, and foreign readers’ appreciation of them crucially depends on the quality and fidelity of translators’ renderings. To guarantee their effectiveness, they must feel free to render the original text without having to submit to any pressure of political or ideological power. This was not the case with *Nostromo*, however, which was translated into Italian at the height of the fascist era. In fact, the first three editions were heavily altered as regards the length and assemblage of chapters, and also the choice of some peculiar terms – such as ‘camerata’ rather than ‘compagno’ – was meant to avoid being chastised by the regime. The amount of editing that Conrad’s novel underwent at the hands of the Italian translators ended by vandalising the text source, especially if considered in the light of current Translation Studies. Its paradoxical merit is that, in retrospect, it provides the trace of the *actual* comprehension of its meaning, which, far from being misunderstood by the translator, was just rendered ideologically palatable, obliterating any judgment of culpability and betrayal connected with the ideals of the *Risorgimento* at the expense of the Italian ruling class. Therefore, we should never underestimate the high degree of responsibility – both professional and ethical – required of translators, who, when making unfortunate choices, might delay or mislead the correct reception of a valuable work of art. In a way, it might appear as a contradiction that the latter must have an adequate number of translations in order to reach the summit of literary success, a process which in turn helps to sharpen the critical tools, gain deeper insights and feed the circulation of ideas.