

REVIEW OF: PETER LANCELOT MALLIOS. *OUR CONRAD: CONSTITUTING AMERICAN MODERNITY*. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010.

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Peter Mallios's recent book *Our Conrad: Constituting American Modernity* (2010), published by Stanford University Press, comprises three main sections: *The Nation in the World*, *The World in the Nation* and *Regions of Conflict*. The first and third sections are further divided into two subchapters each.

In the Introduction to his study, Mallios opens his reader's eyes to the seminal role which Joseph Conrad played in "constituting American modernity," as is hinted in the subtitle. In attempting to account for Conrad's unbelievable popularity in the United States – which had begun three years before his only visit to the North American continent in the July of 1923 and continued undiminished after his death in the following year – Mallios refers to Foucault's famous 1967 lecture entitled "Of Other Spaces," which hails Conrad as a "heterotopic writer." This, Mallios claims, is exactly why Conrad appeals to the American mind and to American sensibilities. If, after Cesare Casarino, we define "heterotopia" as "a special kind of space from which one can make new and different sense of all the other spaces" (qtd. in Mallios 24), "Conrad's heterotopic fictions" – a term recently coined by Robert Hampson – "make new [...] sense," as suggested by Mallios, of "two great ideological spatializers of the U.S., isolationism and exceptionalism," which they seem to condone and disavow at the same time (26).

Our Conrad presents us with an array of heterotopically structured American inventions of Conrad in the first half of the twentieth century that are creations of the American press, the ideologically motivated cultural and literary circles of the American South (represented by such great critics of the day as H.L. Mencken, W.J. Cash and R.P. Warren) as well as American men and women of letters – including Conrad's contemporaries (Cather, Glasgow, Crane, Hughes, DuBois and Fitzgerald), those who continued to write for several decades after his death (Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Faulkner and Wright) and those who – like Chinua Achebe – capitalized on American misreadings of Conrad.

Explaining the basic premise of his book, Mallios refuses to identify himself with those numerous American readers and writers who have been appropriating Conrad for the last hundred years or so (see: Secor & Modellmog) by claiming him as an “American” on “spiritual, temperamental or aesthetic grounds.” Instead, the critic believes that it is the “sociocultural overlap between ‘Conrad’ and the modern U.S.” (36), specific Conrad dichotomies and binary oppositions operating in the fields of culture, ideology, politics, sociology, race and ethnicity – together with the strikingly convergent conditioning of Conrad’s native land and the American South – that may account for the writer’s mediating role in the American context.

The first chapter – entitled *In the Crucible of War: Immigration, Foreign Relations, Democracy and H. L. Mencken* – presents a fascinating picture of three American constructions (or should we say appropriations) of Conrad at the time of the Great War – those of L.H. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph S. Bourne. In an erudite and revelatory subchapter devoted to Mencken, Mallios questions the critic’s reputation for “thinness” by demonstrating the full complexity of his subversive ideas and critical texts, in many of which he expresses an unprecedented admiration for and envelopment in this British writer of Polish origin. As is apparent from Mallios’s analysis, Mencken’s fascination with Conrad would seem to have been related to political and ideological matters occasioned by United States home and foreign policies during the First World War. Being of German descent, for patriotic reasons Mencken condemned America’s yielding to British hegemony by entering the Great War on the side of the Allies, opposed government pressure on immigrants to assimilate and – paradoxically – celebrated the free spirit of “aristocracy” as opposed to the enslaving spirit of American democracy. For these reasons he saw Conrad as the very epitome of resistance to ideologies and the essence of exemplary emotional detachment.

Brooks’s Conrad differs from that of Mencken in that he becomes symbolic of “experience” rather than “aristocracy” – very much in the spirit of the American frontier. On the other hand, as “a kind of negative objective correlative for the United States” (98), he bridges the gap between the material and the spiritual for the American nation, which Mencken deemed to be beyond repair. Bourne’s construction of Conrad is essentially pacifistic and predominantly artistic rather than politically or ideologically conditioned.

The “heterotopic” American constructions of Conrad discussed in Chapter 2 (*Appositions: Jews, Anglo-Saxons, Women, African-Americans*) and in the remainder of the book are set up, as Mallios announces, in apposition to those of Chapter 1, thus making the very structure of *Our Conrad* – and also that of Chapter 2 itself – “contrapuntal” (97). The wartime pacifistic and anti-Waspish Menckenian articulations of Conrad are here pitted against their very opposites in the political discourse of the Great War and its aftermath – launched mainly by the American press (the *New Republic* and the *New York Times*) and two American publishers (Knopf and Doubleday), who construed Conrad in military (patriotic) and Anglophile terms.

Mallios convincingly pictures the unprecedented scale of Conrad’s popularity in America, which was meticulously and systematically built up by the two publishers

in the advertising campaigns which accompanied the publication of each new Conrad text (be it literary, e.g. *Chance*, *Victory*, etc. or political, e.g. *A Personal Record*) as well as the appearance in print of American editions of Conrad's novels. The "heterotopic" applications of Conrad in the United States at that time – Mallios argues – acquired both nationalist (American imperialistic) and internationalist (anti-Bolshevik) proportions, in accordance with current American policies at home and abroad. Hence – in the context of American literature and current affairs – the remarkable popularity of Conrad's lesser known novels, i.e. *The Rescue* (being close to Cooper and anti-isolationist) and the unfinished *Suspense* (being anti-Bolshevik). The latter even occasioned a nationwide competition in *the Saturday Review of Literature* – aimed at the book's completion – just after Conrad's death. However, what is occasionally lacking in Mallios's multifaceted, subtly balanced and fascinating picture of the American constructions of Conrad is further critical assessment of these American departures from the ideological reality of Conrad's works.

On the 1920s American domestic front of mass immigration and strained race relations, Conrad's particular appeal to the American mind – enhanced by Knopf's seminal study entitled *Joseph Conrad: The Romance of His Life and Books* (1913) – lay in his biography, which was reminiscent of a Horatio Alger story about the American Dream. The romance of Conrad's life, as Knopf emphasized time and again, was inevitably linked to his "calling as an Englishman" – an account which Conrad himself prompted by his own "rapturous" statement of "self-discovery as an 'English' man" in *a Personal Record* (172). As a result of Conrad's other enthusiastic pronouncement concerning his "natural," almost "inherent" ability to write in English, the post-war "nativist" (isolationist) American rhetoric construed him as supporting its racist ideology of "exclusion" and "exclusiveness," thus departing from wartime constructions of the writer in the vein of "immigration acculturation" (176).

The remaining part of Chapter 2 is devoted to the literary and ideological responses of specific American writers (e.g. Willa Cather, Langston Hughes, DuBois and Wright) to Conrad's engagements with the issue of broadly understood "exclusions." In his incisive analysis of two of Cather's short stories echoing Conrad, Mallios points to her highly personal preoccupation (as a writer and editor) with Conrad's works and to her contradictory appropriations of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* as both condemning and condoning the American policy of "racialized exclusion" (183). Mallios likewise pinpoints contradictory feminine American readings of the predominantly masculine world of Conrad's fiction, which – with respect to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* – was praised by Cather, albeit in part for personal reasons (as justifying her own approach in *O Pioneers!*) and in opposition to Mary Austin's and Frances Newman's condemnations of the phenomenon.

Continuing in this contrapuntal vein (which pervades almost every paragraph of his book), Mallios juxtaposes various African American literary responses to Conrad – particularly to *Heart of Darkness*, but also to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. First comes Lindsay's famous 1914 poem entitled "The Congo," which – though originally intended as being conciliatory towards racial hatred – is directly linked by Mallios to Achebe's 1977 critique of *Heart of Darkness* as an expression of "thor-

oughgoing racism” (191). However, Mallios draws the reader’s attention to the centrality of the specific “*U.S. context*” (191) behind Achebe’s attack on Conrad after the Nigerian’s American visit in 1974-75. He ends by advocating the teaching of *Heart of Darkness* in the United States not as “a fundamentally ‘other’ text” (191) but one to be read “with concrete sensitivity to its historical status as an internality (as well, obviously, as an externality) of U.S. culture” (192).

Further on, two exhilarating contemporary Southern racist responses to *Heart of Darkness* by John Powell and Warrington Dawson – which Conrad himself found annoying – are pitted against Countee Cullen’s more aestheticizing than racializing reading of Conrad, where the boundary runs between “art” and “race” rather than between racism and anti-racism. Discussing at length rewritings of *Heart of Darkness* by specific major African American authors, Peter Mallios sees those of Hughes as being oppositional (his autobiographical *The Big Sea*) and parodic (“Luani of the Jungles”), that of DuBois as racially ambivalent (“The Souls of White Folk”) – largely because it was occasioned by Conrad’s own ambivalence in the matter – and that of Wright as (technically) an existentialist and Marxist acknowledgment of Conrad’s critical ideological stance in matters of race oppression (“Superstition”).

Just as the last chapter of Mallios’s book – devoted to Faulkner’s Conrad – mostly revolves around Faulkner’s internalization of Conrad’s anti-imperialist and anti-racist stance in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in – among others – *As I Lay Dying*, nearly half of Chapter 3 – focusing on “the lost generation” – deals with the impact of *Nostromo* on *The Great Gatsby*. Beginning with a more general discussion of American expatriate contrapuntal constructions of Conrad by Fitzgerald, Hemingway and T.S. Eliot, Mallios lays particular stress on the first of this modernist trio. The chapter likewise emphasizes the overall exilic nature of other “heterotopic” constructions of Conrad by such American writers of “the lost generation” as Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos or Eugene O’Neill, who saw Conrad as “one of them” and thus in apposition to the American space.

Drawing the reader’s attention to the extent, sensitivity and sophistication of Fitzgerald’s curious involvement with Conrad (considering their fundamental differences – Fitzgerald mentions Conrad in some 124 letters and essays!), Peter Mallios identifies it as being also basically “exilic,” though – unlike that of Hemingway and Eliot – it accommodates the “national” in that Fitzgerald attempts to “place Conrad as a formal model of national self-articulation” (239) for lack of a truly American “authoritative national voice” (236). By contrast, Mallios construes Hemingway’s and T.S. Eliot’s “heterotopic” visions of Conrad as being contrapuntal, the former laying stress on the universality of *experience* as opposed to the American provinciality, from which “the lost generation” strove to escape, while the latter laid stress on the depersonalization of *art* in defiance of Emerson’s proclamation of America’s literary independence.

The latter part of Chapter 3 is given over to an incisive and revealing analysis of the similarities between *Nostromo* and *The Great Gatsby*, a comparison that has to date not received any critical attention. As is apparent from his construction of the book and its main character, Fitzgerald looms as “the first good reader” (243) of this

Conrad novel, which was not spared severe criticism on its publication. In Fitzgerald's capable hands – as Mallios demonstrates – its apparent “faults,” such as the central character's elusiveness, his essential fictionality, Romantic (national) involvement and even metafictional overtones, become “virtues.” This truly inspiring analysis by Mallios merits the appreciation of Conrad scholars and American literature specialists alike.

Chapter 4 – entitled *Under Southern Eyes: Visions of the South in the 1920s* – provides a survey of the sorry sight of the Southern cultural and literary *status quo* before Conrad, which three years before the latter's visit to the USA was viciously attacked by the formidable Mencken in his famous article “The Sahara of the Bozart” (*beaux arts*). As Mallios indicates, it is precisely Mencken's essay rather than Conrad's literary and other American friendships (with Crane, Glasgow) or the 1919 American success of Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold* – featuring “an antagonism of feeling” (269) between a European (an Englishman) and an American (a South Carolinian) – that caused a sudden surge of interest in Conrad in the American South before Conrad ever set foot on American soil.

As is stressed by Mallios, the appeal of Conrad's writing to the Southern mind was absolutely unprecedented – also in the variety of conflicting inventions of Conrad that it occasioned. Mallios sees the reasons for this appeal in the writer's contestations (resulting from his national background, which, as the evidence amassed by the critic appears to show, bore numerous similarities with the South), his skepticism about political doctrines and institutions and his understanding of how “the material complexities” and “the ideational certainties ... misconstrue human affairs” (277). No less so, too, does he detect them in Conrad's aristocratic gentility and his *valeurs idéales*, especially honour and fidelity, to which the writer gave expression in his famous essay on Henry James, whose publication in 1921 (in *Notes on Life and Letters*) coincided with the Menckonian revolution in Southern culture and literature. This was also – as Mallios observes – a time when this seminal essay became available to both Faulkner and Warren (who, incidentally – quite independently of each other – used it on two occasions in the 1950s: Faulkner in his 1950 Nobel Prize address and Warren in his Introduction to the 1951 Modern Library edition of *Nostromo*). However, as Mallios indicates, both applications of Conrad's text have their roots in what he refers to as “the literary and political culture of Conrad that emerged in the modern South during the 1920s” (265-6).

Mallios is of the opinion that the role of *Notes on Life and Letters* in the Southern ideological milieu can hardly be overestimated – also in connection with the book's political essays – “Autocracy and War” and “The Crime of Partition” – which struck a particularly sensitive chord with Southern sensibilities, i.e. the idea of “the lost cause” (Confederacy), imperialist mentality at work (the North) and post-war destruction (Reconstruction). And – last, but not least – comes the famous Conrad-Faulkner opposition between “endurance” and “prevailing” (again relevant for the post-bellum South), which Mallios dismisses, stressing instead its mediating function – akin to that of Conrad himself – in the Southern controversies of the day.

Presenting a lucid and fascinating account of the conflicting Southern appropriations of Conrad on ideological grounds, Mallios divides these into three categories in terms of Conrad's relation to the South. These are: *critical externality* adopted by the "modern" Menckente magazines *The Reviewer*, *The Double Dealer*, *All's Well* and *The Mirror Repolished* (an instantaneous consequence of his caustic attack on the South); *sympathetic internality* represented by the conservative Vanderbilt Fugitive and Agrarian group; and *critical internality* visible in the great writers of the Southern Renaissance: R.P. Warren, Faulkner, Th. Wolfe. By stressing the centrality to his own invention of the Conrad of "alienated self-division so as to reenter the human community" (323) – an invention which in itself expresses the essence of the dichotomy between Conrad's literary utterances and his non-fictional personal statements – Warren's vision of Conrad contradicts both "the Southern Menckente" construction of the writer as "an agency of pure negative, skeptical, corrosive force" and "the static traditionalis[t]" (321) Agrarian appropriation of Conrad, which condoned Southern racism. Nevertheless, these three literary and ideological centers of the 1920s South all named Conrad as their seminal writer – "one of us" – and acted accordingly both before Conrad's American visit in July 1923 and after his death in the following year.

Finally we come to Chapter 5 – entitled *Faulkner's Conrad* – which focuses almost exclusively on the different ways in which Faulkner transcribes and inscribes, rereads and rewrites Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in(to) his fiction, i.e. how he invents and reinvents Conrad chronologically, from the raceless *Soldier's Pay* through the unmistakably Southern *The Sound and the Fury* to the race conscious *As I Lay Dying*. In the two latter novels, Faulkner develops his own autonomous voice, which – as Mallios argues – he owes to his gradual internalization of Conrad in general and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in particular. Thus – as Mallios further observes – "if *Soldier's Pay* significantly models itself on aesthetic and mathematic elements in that Conrad novel, *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates internalization of this modeling" in presenting "a character (Caddy) of obsessive multiperspectival interest and suppressed narrative access and voice," suspended "between life and death, ... presence and absence." Pointing out numerous similarities between *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in terms of their recurrent metaphors and imagery, Mallios likewise perceives Caddy as being akin to James Wait in that they are both figures of "subversion and resistance" (356) – which analogy he sees as being indicative of how Faulkner's book "precisely ... [turns] away from it [Conrad's novel] as an 'intentional' (in both the customary and the rhetorical sense) object" (357).

Unlike other critics, Mallios rarely if ever evokes the literal similarities between the Faulkner novels he discusses and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* with the notable exception of the metaphor "dolls stuffed with sawdust" (Faulkner 175-6) appearing in both books. Instead, he focuses on the similarity of patterning, for the detection of which he has a particularly keen eye and an intelligent sensitivity – both of which, however, occasionally put him at risk of overdrawing or appearing to be one-sided, as the only Conrad text on which Mallios focuses in relation to the five Faulkner

novels is precisely *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* On the other hand, this may seem perfectly understandable, given the book's revelatory and revolutionary impact on the racial and racist America of the 1920s, where – for ideological reasons – Conrad's novel appeared under the curious title *The Children of the Sea* and where – as Mallios stresses – it enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the first half of the twentieth century.

Mallios sees the reason for Faulkner's ultimate internalization of this Conrad novel in *As I Lay Dying* in the politics of the latter, which unmistakably links it to the former in that it gives a voice to the voiceless. However, despite the almost exclusively white racial milieu of Faulkner's book, Mallios identifies the voiceless as African-Americans rather than poor whites, thus shifting the apparent focus of the book from class invisibility to the invisibility of race. This may, of course, be purely a matter of interpretation – all the more so as Mallios provides sufficient evidence to justify his "blackface" reading of *As I Lay Dying*. However, the same evidence may easily support another interpretation, whereby the tropes of darkness, blackness, blood, whipping and slavery may serve as an ideological point of reference to class conflict rather than functioning as mere markers of the recognition of socio-racial affinity.

Our Conrad is absolutely revelatory as regards the extent of Conrad's "heterotopic" impact in America – and this applies not only to American letters or Southern literature, where it seems to have led to an almost programmatic restructuring of the notion of Southern writing. It makes the reader aware of the unbelievable range and appositional nature of the ideological and literary appropriations of Conrad in the United States, both during his lifetime and after his death. It is thoroughly researched and documented in areas that to date have not received sufficient critical attention – areas such as Conrad's inspirational role as an unwitting *provocateur* of the ferocious public debate on the state of Southern letters and the level of public culture in the South or any factors relating to more than the economic security of the region and the issue of racial discrimination, all of which eventually led to the emergence of the Southern Renaissance.

Furthermore, Mallios's study will be of use to researchers (including specialists in American literature), not only in the field of Conrad-Faulkner studies or studies of the impact of Conrad on other American writers, but also in a purely American (i.e. Southern) context, especially as regards the re-appraisal of some of Faulkner's fiction, notably his *As I Lay Dying* – not necessarily along the lines suggested by Mallios, but in apposition to them, something which his very argument to the contrary succeeds in provoking, thus – unexpectedly – proving the viability of his contrapuntal approach. The book sheds new light on Conrad's all-pervasive and immersive impact on Faulkner's way of thinking and writing about the racial Other and his opening up to the issue under the influence of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Mallios's study is likewise thought-provoking in its incisive and sensitive discussion of Faulkner's "significations" on Conrad's book in his consecutive novels – starting with *Soldier's Pay*, through *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August* to *Intruder in the Dust*. Mallios convincingly demonstrates the progressive evolution of Faulkner's

handling of the issue of race under Conrad's subversive influence, brilliantly identifying the subtleties of patterning underlying the above-mentioned Faulkner novels in relation to Conrad's pivotal *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*

Thus, in terms of enhancing the importance of the book as far as Conrad's literary output and world literature in general are concerned, Mallios appears to have done for *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* what Keith Carabine has done for *Under Western Eyes*. On a larger scale, his study also demonstrates how the "delayed repercussions" of the first American edition of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in the South and in the United States in general revealed the undercurrent of ideological, cultural and racial tensions that America was not yet ready to admit to in the 1920s.

Peter Mallios likewise renders Conrad a service in connection with Achebe's accusations in demonstrating just how courageous and unique the author's statement against racial invisibility in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* was for its time. Another service Mallios renders to Conrad is in throwing light on the ensuing moral and social confusion as well as analysing the little known reasons for Achebe's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* and relating them, among others, to the (Southern) American ideological misreadings of the writer. Mallios also opens our eyes to the faults of Faulkner criticism resulting from critics' ignorance of or simply ignoring of Conrad's overwhelming, albeit absolutely autonomous presence in Faulkner's works – at the same time emphasizing the paradox of the growing autonomy of Faulkner's own voice, this being a consequence of the growing pervasiveness of Conrad's presence in it.

Mallios's fascinating discussion of American appropriations of Conrad sparkles with the author's nuanced sensitivity to both Conradian and American issues and reveals his great erudition in both areas. The book impresses the reader with its sheer scope of vision, the enormity of the material covered and its brilliant, multifaceted, contrapuntal approach. Though occasionally repetitive as far as facts and quotations are concerned – especially in the latter half of the book (which happens when the writing process is extended over a longer period of time) – and despite its sometimes well-nigh Faulknerian sentence structure and Conradian word order – Mallios's study is lively and lucid, abounding in recapitulations for the sake of clarity amidst the brilliantly convoluted contrapuntal appositions discussed in every chapter. A slight discrepancy that can be detected between the dynamics of the general line of argumentation and the detailed literary analyses of two of Conrad's novels against those of Faulkner and Fitzgerald may be indicative of a change in the book's original purpose, but that does not in the least detract from its present value, erudition and novelty.