

The Novel as Criticism

Michael John DiSanto, *Under Conrad's Eyes: the Novel as Criticism*
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Some comments on a book by the editor of three Edgeways books may escape the charge of what Leavis called “flank-rubbing” if the remarks are not uniformly favourable. Dr DiSanto’s subject is genuine and his treatment of it thorough. The great novels are (amongst other things) criticism—of life, as Arnold said, and life includes earlier thought both in novels and in other works of the human mind. For instance examples of the creative criticism of one novelist by another were long since pointed out by Leavis in Henry James’s reworkings of George Eliot, not always for the better.

The novel is a form of thought, and can even argue a case or support a position. *Hard Times* is as good a short refutation of empiricism and utilitarianism as you will find, and Dickens certainly sides against Gradgrind and Bounderby but, it is necessary to add, in his own way, the way appropriate to a novelist with a Shakespearean command of imaginative language. Novels are not argumentative or didactic in the same way as philosophical argument of the kind, say, of Locke or Hegel. The artist, to state the obvious, doesn’t argue in the same way as the philosopher even if the philosopher has to make art to do philosophy, as in the *Symposium*, or speaks through personae, as in much of the work of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard (or for that matter Carlyle). There are necessary *how* questions both about the novel as a form of thought and the novel as criticism, and the shortcoming of Dr DiSanto’s book is that he is not sufficiently aware of them.

“Decoud is a lesson about the dangers of skepticism,” says DiSanto (p. 123) and on the same page “Nostromo is a lesson about the dangers of relying on public approbation . . .” This is not simply wrong, but it needs developing. *Nostromo* (of all novels) is not didactic in the sort of way that naturally gives rise to the word *lesson*. In his recent introduction to his selection of Lawrence’s criticism Dr DiSanto himself objects to Lawrence’s characterisation of the “pollyanalytics” as a sort of prose commentary on the novels. That there are different forms of thought does affect what they say as well as how we have to think about them.

Again and again DiSanto tells us that Conrad is ambivalent about the ideas of Carlyle or Nietzsche. The novel as art makes this all but inevitable if one is looking for clear arguments. Both Carlyle and Conrad are saying “This is how it is,” but with the novelist there has to be an element of take-it-or-leave it. Is Stevie in *The Secret Agent* a sort of prophetic innocent or just an idiot? The novelist is not having it both ways if he gives us a picture that can be seen in either aspect, even if the novelist’s own opinion is clear. (I remember an earlier discussion when I argued that Joe Gargery is a clear example of Christian patience even though the reader may be exasperated by him/it in a way Dickens did not intend.) DiSanto is illuminating about Stevie’s moment with the cabbie and pity for the horse, and gives direct parallels with Dostoevsky and Nietzsche amongst others. But the *what* of what Conrad is saying in Stevie is the image and the action itself. I take Stevie, named after the first martyr, as a wonderfully clear example of Christian innocence (“unless ye become as little children . . .”), able with the wisdom of babes and sucklings to ordain strength. But you could really get hold of the story and think differently. Conrad’s own very

characteristic phrase about “blown to fragments in a state of innocence”, with the remains collected by shovel, raises the possibility of concentrating on the comic-macabre, and Mr Verloc is not unreasonable to think of Stevie as just a bungler and a nuisance.

“Go the bloody hard way.” Dr DiSanto’s not working far enough through his thoughts about how the novel as criticism is affected by the novel as novel, sometimes leads him astray in his judgements. I exclaim when he tells us that George Eliot has no pity for Bulstrode (“the narrator’s pity is reserved for Lydgate alone”, p. 125) and on the other hand I also exclaim when the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* is characterised as a “sick skeptic” and Mr Kurtz as a “degenerate hero”. This comes into the discussion of the relation of Carlyle’s notion of heroes to Conrad’s. (Carlyle in Conrad is rightly one of Dr DiSanto’s major themes, though he should have done more with “The Secret Sharer” and “The Shadow Line” as well as *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostramo*.) I can’t see anything “sick” in Marlow, at least before he decides to hide the truth from “the Intended”, and DiSanto is just wrong when he presents Marlow as a disciple of Kurtz (p. 52). The misjudgement, as I can’t help thinking it, comes from not sufficiently allowing the tale to be a tale. In the tale, as best I can read it, Kurtz is not a degenerate hero but a sham posing as a hero, clearly depicted as such and recognised as such in Marlow’s narrative, though not in the image of himself he imposes on some of the other characters.

Heart of Darkness is perhaps Conrad’s nearest approach to the didactic. There are surely no ambiguities about how we are meant to take the French cruiser shelling the bush, the grove of death, or Mr Kurtz’s turning himself into a god. All the same, the artist here is not working in quite the same way as Mark Twain in *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*. *Heart of Darkness* is so much stronger and deeper than Conrad’s Congo Diary partly because the judgements are there in the art, not in discursive prose.

How to think about a novelist’s judgements is the great question. To say how a novelist may *answer* a philosopher demands serious consideration of what kinds of answer art can give (and what kinds of answer philosophy can give). This is what is insufficiently present in Dr DiSanto’s book. He has opened up a real subject, and I think he should persevere in his line of thought and go further into thinking about forms of thought. For instance his own book couldn’t have been a novel, could it? Why not?

I.R.

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