



Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*. New York: Penguin Press, 2017, 375 pp.
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Reviewed by **Tobias Wilson-Bates**

Maya Jasanoff's *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (2017) traces the path of two intertwined transformations: the first is the burgeoning ubiquity of global industrial capitalism via Britain's naval dominance, and the second is the conversion of a Polish youth, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, into the canonical author, Joseph Conrad. Jasanoff divides her book into four sections: Nation, Ocean, Civilization, and Empire. Each roughly correlates to a chronological review of Conrad's life and the works that emerged from his various experiences. Jasanoff is a historian and her keen eye for the contradictions that emerge from the historical record displays the depth of her scholarship.

Contradictions, it turns out, are an essential component of the study because Conrad's own accounts of his life rarely corroborate the evidence. In a scene from his childhood Conrad recounts watching his father instructing a nurse to burn *all* of his father's papers as the young boy looked on. Jasanoff points out, though, that later in life Conrad was gratified to review these self-same works and letters when visiting Poland. Far from appearing to ridicule Conrad's fabrications, Jasanoff uses his tendency to fabricate as a way to illuminate authorial choices relative to his historical moment.

The book's greatest strength is this meticulous recovery of how Conrad mediated his material reality. By aligning the historical context of imperialism, technology, economics, and ideology with Conrad's careful revisions of those phenomena, an image emerges of the overriding principles that orchestrated Conrad's *oeuvre*. To particular moments of historical shift, such as the exponential growth of

British shipping, the disappearance of a Polish nobility in the face of Russian expansion, or the jarring transition from sail to steam power, corresponds, according to Jasanoff, a popular hunger for stories to understand the new world order. As Erich Auerbach describes Stendhal existing in a reality suddenly torn asunder with possibility and his own fictions and social classes emerging from the cracks, Jasanoff depicts Conrad as a storyteller struggling through ruptures in history.

The push and pull of Conrad's relationship to his historical moment is most clearly articulated in Jasanoff's chapters considering *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Nostramo* (1904). She places the first novel in the context of the Congolese rubber trade's staggering imperialist brutality, but thoughtfully distinguishes Conrad's actual experience of the region from the escalating hellscape that emerged soon after he left. She further details how *Heart of Darkness* was adopted as a tool for activists looking to expose the monstrosity of Belgium's colonial project even while Conrad remained noncommittal about the possibility of the book containing an explicit political message. The image of Conrad that emerges is of a man whose greatest successes were due to careful notations of his experiences around the world even as he sought to distance himself from his lived experience by layering his storytelling with a deeply cynical worldview. Jasanoff makes the shrewd observation that the work most acclaimed in his time for its realist aesthetic, *Nostramo*, is actually the very moment in which Conrad departs from history entirely to enter the imaginary world of Castaguana. By exploring this paradox, Jasanoff offers the reader a kind of skeleton key for unlocking a complex imperial imaginary. Conrad's ability to produce the imperialist fantasy of an untamable landscape populated by noble nihilism ultimately freed him as an author from the complications of revising his own experiences into fictional accounts.

At times Jasanoff's approach of reviewing Conrad's major works alongside his life experiences that potentially inspired them comes across as a bit too tidy. Her reading of *The Secret Agent* (1907), a novel he published in 1907, alongside the childhood experiences of his father's radicalism depends upon a series of assumptions not particularly supported by the novel itself. Taking the novel as a sincere if cynical depiction of revolutionary energy or terrorism appears to miss the mark by some margin, and the Greenwich Outrage, the inspiring incident for the novel, receives far less attention than Jasanoff's loose familial conjectures. However, the scholar does not set out to close read Conrad's novels, but rather to make sense of how the author acted as a herald of what we now recognize as globalism. The novels appear largely as plot summaries to make the insistent and significant point that the vast majority of Conrad's creative content was derived from combining his own experiences with stories from people he knew and places he visited.

In "Death of the Author" Roland Barthes argues that to refuse the author as the ultimate meaning of a text is the properly revolutionary activity of writing. Liberated from the theological stasis of the text's authorial "secret," a work may exist simultaneously across its many possible interpretive paths. Perhaps this imperative

goes double for the parade of dead white men that have so long formed a seemingly impenetrable phalanx across university curricula and conversations about capital “L” Literature. Jasanoff’s biography does not skirt this issue, but approaches it head on: “Often enough,” she writes, “I’ve questioned my own attachment to this dead white man, perpetually depressed, incorrigibly cynical, alarmingly prejudiced by the standards of today.” Barthes argued that we should replace the auratic figure of the author with the “scriptor,” a figure that doesn’t birth ideas but rather weaves together pre-existing narratives into new revelatory patterns. *The Dawn Watch* offers a powerful example of just this activity, and the scriptor in question, Konrad Korzeniowski, is revealed as the careful weaver who spent a lifetime building Joseph Conrad.

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