

The Range of Intertextual Resonances: Conrad as a Popular Writer

József Szabolcs Fagyal

Glazzard, Andrew. *Conrad's Popular Fictions: Secret Histories and Sensational Novels*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 2016. 234 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-55916-6. Hb. \$95.00.

Andrew Glazzard is a Senior Research Fellow and Director of the National Security and Resilience Studies research group at the Royal United Services Institute, where, as he says on LinkedIn, his team “tries to work out what can really mess things up for countries and societies, and what we can do to prepare or respond.” In addition, as he playfully reflects on his alternative occupation, he “moonlights as a literature academic.” As the most recent product of his nocturnal work, he published his first book, *Conrad's Popular Fictions: Secret Histories and Sensational Novels*. The literary scholar benefits from his insights into the workings of national security, as it is obvious from some of the chapter titles: “Armed with the Defensive Mandate of a Menaced Society,” “The Inciter Behind,” and “The Cowardly Bomb-Throwing Brutes.” Through nearly two hundred pages, Glazzard examines themes such as espionage, diplomacy, investigation, and terrorism in Conrad’s work, tracing them back to popular contemporary texts Conrad might (or, as he admits, might not) have read (20).

In spite of his seemingly non-academic background, Glazzard is a well-versed scholar on the subject of English *fin de siècle* literature and culture. His Ph.D. dissertation (2013) examined Joseph Conrad’s use of character types from popular fiction and undoubtedly served as the basis for *Conrad's Popular Fictions*, since the book is built upon five pillars, all of which are common character types in turn-of-the-century popular fiction: detectives, informers, spymasters, terrorists, and swindlers (21).

In spite of Glazzard’s two fields of activities, this book is definitely (and I dare say, solely) for literary scholars. One does not, however, have to be particularly knowledgeable about Conrad philology to enjoy reading this monograph. Glazzard, himself a member of the Joseph Conrad Society, does not write for an elite and exclusive audience. On the contrary, he often brings memorable and easily understandable examples from contemporary England and even from Conrad’s private life, for, as he contends, “this book is strongly concerned with history because genres are, by their nature, historically determined” (18). Glazzard has also written on Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett, which further enables him “to use contemporary

texts in an attempt to reconstruct what Conrad or his readers might have expected to find in a particular genre” (21).

Glazzard’s analysis and reading of the texts draw on the influence of several critical schools, among others, post-colonial and psychoanalytic criticism. What is apparent from the introductory chapter onwards is that he is truly keen on revealing Conrad’s working methods and tracing elements of his fiction back to popular literature—even if he has to resort to paratexts during the process. Glazzard’s technique might come into conflict with some of the most famous proclamations of Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author” (1967), according to which “no vital ‘respect’ is due to the Text: it can be *broken* . . . ; it can be read without the guarantee of its father, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy” (161). Without challenging Glazzard’s author-centric method, a few examples of his discoveries suffice to illustrate his general approach to identifying Conrad’s sources. He regularly weaves the content of authorial notes into his own argument and relies on information available to Conrad only through his “omniscient friend,” Ford Madox Ford (60). Besides their correspondence and Ford’s own personal documents, Glazzard also reckons with Conrad’s assumed private library when making references to contemporary popular fiction. Moreover, he takes into account the presumed readings of the entire Conrad family with such precision and elaborateness that one could reconstruct the family’s bookshelf and subscription list. Yet, and this point cannot be stressed enough, he does so without being too hypothetical, digressive, or annoying. In order to see what Conrad inherited from the popular genres of his time, it is necessary to examine his *oeuvre* in its broader social, political, and cultural contexts, and that is exactly what Glazzard does. He has done commendable research in this field and may even leave a lasting contribution to the already substantial Conrad philology. All the more so, because he is not afraid to question Conrad’s paratextual statements. For instance, by examining the “synchronicity of creation and inspiration,” Glazzard suggests that in the “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad commits the fault of self-mythologizing by claiming that Sir Robert Anderson’s *Sidelights on the Home Rule Movement* “acted as a catalyst on his creative consciousness” (67–68). As Glazzard puts it, this cannot be true, simply because the first three chapters of Conrad’s book had been already written by the time *Sidelights* was published (68).

Even within the five major categories of figures, Glazzard often makes further subdivisions based on how they were present in Victorian and Edwardian literary consciousness. The most fascinating example of tracing a

character type back to its literary predecessors can be found in chapter four, where he differentiates six varieties of the terrorist/anarchist/revolutionary figure in Conrad's fiction: "revolutionary supermen, idealistic heroines, fashionable revolutionaries, propagandists of the word, anarchist-terrorists, and technologists" (114). No doubt, Conrad was thoroughly interested in this figure, partly due to his personal connection with *The Torch*, "the most noted British anarchist newspaper of this period" (Donghaile 145). Besides the five subtypes, the figure of the millionaire, who represented the "true anarchist" for Conrad, also deserves an honorable mention at the end of chapter four, even though it never appears in any of Conrad's works, because, as the writer himself put it, he did not have the "necessary talent" for the task (143).

The two central questions Glazzard addresses in his book focus on Conrad as an experimental and as a popular writer. How and in what sense is Conrad experimental? Likewise, what could be meant by popular when we talk about a major modernist figure? By the concluding chapter, Glazzard formulates a rather explicit answer to the first question. He emphasizes that Conrad is often labelled as an experimental writer due to the formal innovations of his work, "its intricate narrative structure of embedded stories, its persistent use of doubles and binary opposites, its evanescent heroine and villain, its insistent intertextuality" (179), but he is seldom recognized as an author experimenting with genres. Indeed, one might forget that Conrad was not only a writer of nautical fiction, but also a versatile author. As Glazzard puts it, "[w]hat is different about Conrad's experimentation is the range of source genres and his appropriation of 'high' literary forms as well as 'popular' ones" (180). In one of the most exciting parts of the book, he claims that it was Conrad's desire for commercial success that served as a motive to write a "fine-weather book" (177), that is, *Chance* in 1913.

Already in the introduction, Glazzard highlights his dual use of the word "popular." First, he uses it in reference to "any work or author that we can confidently identify as achieving a high degree of commercial success relative to the average," and secondly, the word is employed as shorthand for *popular genre* (22–23). Therefore, if one really has to name a popular novel by Conrad, it is probably *Chance* or *The Secret Agent*. The latter sold modestly and the former—ironically, in spite of its open attack on commercial morality (143, 174)—granted the author financial security for the first time in his career as a writer. Glazzard, however, is more interested in how Conrad adopted figures and themes of popular fiction in order to reach a bigger audience. He was not an innovator of popular genres; on the contrary, he wished to produce a higher class of literary fiction (the opposition between

the literary and the popular was very much present around the turn of the century), but he had to realize that “genre is inescapable” (5). Yet, it must be made clear that Conrad did not embrace the narrative strategies of popular fiction. The discussion whether this was a declaration against popular genres or not comprises one of the most finely argued sections of Glazzard’s book. Although Glazzard admits that he focuses primarily on Conrad’s urban fiction rather than his sea stories, it would be worth thinking about how traces of popular literature are present in his most canonized works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Nostramo*, and so on.

A substantial work using an innovative approach, *Conrad’s Popular Fictions* could potentially serve as a reference point for future research on some of Conrad’s less frequently discussed writings. It is also recommended for those who are interested in turn-of-the-century English literature, culture, and the period’s sociological background.

University of Debrecen

Note

My research was supported by the New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Human Capacities.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. Print.
- Donghaile, Deaglán. *Blasted Literature: Victorian Political Fiction and the Shock of Modernism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010. Print.