

English Studies in Canada



Alexia Hannis, The Discerning Narrator: Conrad, Aristotle, and Modernity

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Volume 47, numéro 4, décembre 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112741ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932535>

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Éditeur(s)

Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE)

ISSN

0317-0802 (imprimé)

1913-4835 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Baldwin, D. (2021). Compte rendu de [Alexia Hannis, *The Discerning Narrator: Conrad, Aristotle, and Modernity*]. *English Studies in Canada*, 47(4), 119–123.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2021.a932535>

Reviews

Alexia Hannis, *The Discerning Narrator: Conrad, Aristotle, and Modernity*. University of Toronto Press, 2023. 147 pp.

Alexia Hannis's Aristotelian reading of Conrad offers two especially important scholarly contributions: she makes the case that Joseph Conrad is a deeply, and classically-inflected, philosophical writer and also that the classical thinker with whom he has the most affinity, Aristotle, offers us a philosophy not of ideological certainty, nor of rigid systematization, but rather of uncertainty, particularity, and wonder.

Soundly grounded in historical context, Hannis shows how pervasive Aristotle was in Polish culture from the sixteenth-century onward and in the nineteenth-century *gymnasium* curricula that shaped Conrad's own education. Working from references in letters and essays, and offering close readings of a five works spanning Conrad's writer's life, she offers a compelling defense of Conrad's Aristotelian sensibilities and understanding. Doing so, she goes against much mid-twentieth-century criticism that reads Conrad as a nihilist and against poststructuralist readings that see his works as fundamentally self-deconstructing and in no way teleological. Instead, guided by the artful tellings of various discerning narrators, Hannis offers an ethical analysis of his narratives in which skepticism and

uncertainty coexist alongside the pursuit of truth in an intelligible, but fundamentally mysterious and chance-ridden cosmos.

Chapter one sets up historical context and shows how Conrad saw himself at odds with the ideologies of modernity even as he himself was an innovator of modernist form. “Conrad’s greatest challenge as a modern novelist,” Hannis writes, “was to work with the disappearance of the omniscient narrator’s authority without abandoning the truth” (24). It is a bold statement, and risks misunderstanding: “truth” in this context is not about ideological certainty but, rather, about the capacity to acknowledge what are often ethical dilemmas grounded in shared experience with real consequences—and to glimpse more than we think but less than the Enlightenment demand for certainty would admit.

Central to this chapter is Hannis’s concern with the Aristotelian concept of “action” as an underlying idea, or constellation of ideas, about human nature and the nature of reality that unfolds through a work of art” (24). Building on quotations from Conrad himself showing the centrality of this term, she elucidates a rich and subtle understanding of the term, most needful in a critical context in which the term gets flattened and even caricatured. For example, Yael Levin, in her otherwise nuanced and thought-provoking study (*Joseph Conrad: Slow Modernism*, Oxford University Press, 2020) claims that Aristotle’s “prioritization of action” implies that “everything outside its scope is insignificant or secondary” (32). But Hannis shows that such a dichotomy is misleading and that “action” for Aristotle and for Conrad is not reducible to “plot” or mere event, nor is it antithetical to reflection. Rather, drawing on the *Nicomachean Ethics* in addition to the *Poetics*, she argues for a richer understanding in which “action” is an interior as well as exterior flourishing, an embodiment of the human that includes narration and thought itself.

Chapter two revives interest in Conrad’s second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, by considering it in light of Aristotelian tragedy, reading its protagonist as a study of failed nihilism. Hannis shows how a work that might rightly be viewed as aesthetically inferior nevertheless shows Conrad’s early attempts working through his understanding of human character and tragic form. She shows that those who reject an Aristotelian reading of the novel because of the contemptible nature of its protagonist miss the subtlety both of Aristotle’s discussion of a worthy tragic hero and of Conrad’s own democratized and reimagined tragic hero, classically Aristotelian in virtue, but hidden, true to modernist form, on the periphery of the narrative.

Chapter three turns to one of Conrad's acknowledged great novels, *Lord Jim*, and re-evaluates overly cynical readings of its eponymous character, arguing that Conrad's modernist narrative voices combine to defend a problematical figure of ancient heroism doomed in modernity. Analyzing the defining moments of the action—Jim's jump off the *Patna*, his appearance at the hearing, his political actions in Patusan, his mistake with Gentleman Brown, his final offering himself up to Doramin—the chapter is full of valuable observations about the novel that quietly resist the accumulated clichés about it. As one small example, Hannis writes, "It may seem objectionable that Jim names Jewel, and yet Jim himself is named by the Bugis. Thus naming appears in the novel as an act of honouring the other rather than a straightforward exertion of power," and adds, "Lord Jim, for example, is both 'master' and 'captive'" (57, 120n). In three brief sentences, she has gently pushed back against a whole critical paradigm that might reduce human relationships to mere power, instead admitting a loftier motivation here that seeks to grant virtue its due, while nonetheless maintaining that doing so is inevitably mired in the complex dynamics of an embodied context. Nor, despite this invitation to philosophical contemplation, does she sacrifice a literary sensibility in the process, as she remains ever mindful of narrative voice. The chapter culminates with a discussion of Marlow, the narrative voice, and how his act of seeing Jim, discerning Jim's virtues and dilemmas and narrating that truth, itself constitutes an action that is heroic in the Aristotelian sense.

Chapter four considers how Aristotle's concept of discernment informs Conrad's comic short story "Falk," showing how this variant of reason—attuned to the particularity of human experience dependent upon conditions beyond its control—shapes the compassionate narration of the story. The story, about a man who under extreme conditions had once been driven to cannibalism and now shyly courts a young woman whose guardian feels nothing but dismissive disgust at his revelation, is the occasion for Hannis to extend Conrad's Aristotelian philosophical preoccupations into the modern territory of Nietzsche's thought, combining classical ethics with modern cultural critique. For if the elemental action of the protagonist Falk illustrates "the man of nature" (82) subjected to the extremes of nature and illustrating the "nature of nature" itself (82), it is structured as a profoundly modern story disclosed to and dismissed by an inner audience that evokes Nietzsche's "Last Man" (72). Only a "discerning narrator" who observes both of them in context can rescue Falk's story and its unbearable particularities of experience for the humanity of the reader.

The final chapter further develops these ideas on the particularity of human experience by looking at chance and fragile contingency signaled by the title of Conrad's late novel, *Chance*. Now little known, *Chance* was Conrad's first truly popular novel, his first bestseller. Begun early in his writer's career and completed late, it is uncharacteristic of Conrad's corpus in general because of its happy romantic ending, but it is an ending that is fitting for an Aristotelian book, if, as Aristotle says, all things aim at some good. Here Hannis focuses on the Aristotelian idea of prudence, or rather, to use Marlow's phrase from the novel itself, "practical sagacity" (84). She describes its ethical vision focused on "character and intention" in contradistinction to "modern consequentialism and rule-bound ethics" (86). There is no space here to do justice to this chapter, except to say that it invites readers to return to and appreciate this complex and unexpected novel—one that unsettles the assumptions of those whose opinion of Conrad is shaped primarily by *Heart of Darkness*. With its focus on chance and skepticism as fundamental components of an Aristotelian world-view, humble before a mysterious cosmos, the chapter might also challenge the assumptions of those whose opinion of Aristotle is overly shaped by system.

The book's conclusion is entitled "Speakings," a nautical term referring to "reports of ships met ... ending frequently with the words 'All well'"—a definition offered by Conrad himself in *The Mirror of the Sea*, his book on his experience of the life of the sea (130). The metaphor is apt, both because this study seeks to be so faithful to Conrad's art in which the sea is a defining experience and a guiding metaphor and also because the metaphor expresses a teleological Aristotelian sensibility that has guided the book throughout. To what end, then, has it been directed? How might modern readers conclude "all well" in an art that so profoundly critiques modernity? Her landfall returns to the Aristotelian idea of "action," and to the act of compassionate insight engendered by Conrad's narratives, an act in which readers themselves are invited to participate. To read Conrad, and to read Hannis on Conrad through Aristotle, is to look toward a "joyous outlook on practical wisdom," toward a "hopeful response to ... an impoverished sphere of action," and ultimately toward an "impassioned ethic of wonder" (104–5).

This study does not claim to be comprehensive, nor to offer a study in the classics but, rather, to challenge our assumptions about Conrad's art and to ask the questions that arise once we admit a premodern tradition that informs it—a tradition in which truth is not judged by the Enlightenment demand for certainty but can coexist alongside uncertainty, emerg-

ing from the embodied particularity of experience, as seen in Aristotle's dialectic with Plato. How does the philosophical quest for truth relate to the form chosen to convey it? Might a poetic approach to truth challenge a philosophical approach to truth as well as instantiating it? To look back at the ancients is to revisit these old questions which endure in a twenty-first century context.

Beautifully written, persuasively argued, interpretively helpful, and splendidly contemplative, Alexia Hannis's study is a significant addition to Conrad studies and also to nineteenth and early twentieth-century British and European literature more generally, steeped as they were in the classical tradition. Hannis interprets this tradition freshly, reminding us why we should continue to study it—and also why we should keep reading Conrad.

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Tilottama Rajan and Joel Faflak, eds. *William Blake: Modernity and Disaster*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. 328 + xii pp. \$90.00.

This volume is first and foremost a collection of brilliant essays by some of the most eminent scholars of Romanticism, contributing some of their very best work. For that reason, it's a stimulating read that has no major standouts because each contribution brings a striking perspective to bear on works that challenge the most dedicated interpreters. After reading the contributions together (a few have been published previously), I came away from the book feeling like an exciting new era in Blake studies is exemplified in its pages and that many chapters would be suitable for sharing with graduate and even upper-level undergraduate students, which is always a plus, considering the dwindling readership for literary criticism in Romanticism. Here, you'll find essays that ponder Blake's fascination with the body, medicine, antiquarianism, apocalypse, the modern nation-state, and more. Mostly concentrating on the prophetic works as well as the epics *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the essays are also notable for attending to the intricate interplays between word and image as they expand on these topics.

Added to this general strength is the collection's stated purpose, announced in its title and in its introduction, to focus on Blake's attunement to "disaster" and to the modern age's anxious attempt to overcome disaster with its own "disastrous import" (3). By naming the multiple catas-