Border Crossings: A Review-Essay

By Gerlinde Röder-Bolton

Anthony Fothergill, *Secret Sharers: Joseph Conrad's Cultural Reception in Germany*. Berne: Peter Lang, 2006. pp. 274

JOSEPH CONRAD WAS SCEPTICAL about translations of his work into another language. Such scepticism is not unusual among writers, but, in Conrad's case, this questioning was rooted in his sense of personal identity and nationality. In a letter to his French translator, Henry-Durand Davray, quoted in this study, Conrad offers some insight into how his consciousness of difference impacted on his sense of the difficulty of translating his work:

> But do not forget that it is written for the English – from the point of view of the effect it will have on an English reader. That is always my object. That's why I am so much an English writer who lends himself so little to translation. A national writer like Kipling, for example, translates easily. His interest is in the subject: the interest of my work is in the effect it produces. He talks about his compatriots. I write for them. Thus he can interest foreigners very well – for me it is more difficult indeed – perhaps impossible. (15)

Although he identifies himself as "an English writer," Conrad also positions himself apart from "the English." For him, the difficulty about translation into another language is not merely a concern for the literal accuracy, the correct choice of word or phrase, or even the rendering of thought and meaning into another culture, but also a concern for the effect on the reader. In the face of these difficulties, Fothergill persuasively demonstrates in *Secret Sharers* not the impossibility of translation – as anticipated by Conrad – but the unforeseen possibilities of cultural transmission to a non-English readership particularly at moments of their society's political and cultural turmoil or of profound change and uncertainty.

As the title of Fothergill's accomplished study indicates, *Secret Sharers* is not concerned with examining the problematics of linguistic translation and their ever evolving cultural and historical perspectives and requirements: a critical, linguistic analysis of Conrad-translations lies outside the scope of this first comprehensive study of the cultural reception of Conrad in Germany. Instead, it is an analysis of "how, under very specific and changing political and cultural conditions, readers brought to their reception of Conrad's works a conscious awareness of their own 'horizon', which was altered in dialogue with Conrad's" (22). Fothergill also seeks to take into account his own perspective, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as he and his readers in turn translate the different cultural and political circumstances of the German readers he considers. Fothergill's study examines the cultural translation of Conrad's work in Germany through such different political and cultural landscapes as the Weimar Republic, the Nazi era, and divided East and West Germany.

The personality, reputation, and entrepreneurial skills of a publisher have a decisive influence on the reception of an author. If this author happens to be a foreign writer, then, inevitably, the competence and linguistic sensitivity of the translator also play a crucial role. As Fothergill's research clearly demonstrates, in Germany Conrad was fortunate on both accounts. His champion was none other than Samuel Fischer, the

politically liberal, culturally enlightened, and commercially able Berlin publisher. To be an author of the famous S. Fischer Verlag was, in Fothergill's words, "a form of cultural label" (40). Conrad shared this enviable position with the major writers of the day, such as Thomas Mann, Gottfried Benn, Robert Musil, Alfred Döblin and Hermann Hesse. Like them, he also benefited posthumously from S. Fischer Verlag's far-sighted publishing.

One of Conrad's earliest translators was Ernst Wolfgang Freissler whom Samuel Fischer had also engaged as commissioning editor of all his foreign language publications. Freissler's involvement in translating Conrad had started long before he joined S. Fischer Verlag in the 1920s. Fothergill's Appendix of German translations of Conrad's works until 1939 reveals that Freissler (under the pseudonym "E. W. Günther") had already translated *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in 1912, *A Set of Six* (in two parts) in 1912 and 1914, and *Under Western Eyes* in 1913 for the publisher Albert Langen in Munich. Samuel Fischer's determination to lure Freissler away from Langen and to engage him as his own translator of Conrad is the only indication offered by Fothergill as to the quality of Freissler's translations.

In the first chapter, "Cultural Translation: Joseph Conrad in Weimar Germany," Fothergill traces ten years of the posthumous publication history of Conrad's writing in Germany from 1926 to 1936, starting with the impressive complete German edition of Conrad's work by S. Fischer Verlag (1926-39). The chapter also discusses Conrad's contradictory responses during his lifetime to popular marketing strategies in publishing, whether it was the question of his inclusion in the Tauchnitz editions of English reprints or the implications of the phenomenon of the bestseller, which was putting new pressures on publishers and authors alike.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the critical responses in papers and magazines which followed the publication of the translated works as they appeared in the Fischer Collected Edition. Particularly noteworthy here is Fothergill's reference to Jewish responses to the perceived thematic concerns with displacement, exclusion, stoicism and the burden of fate as suffered by Conrad's characters and, to some extent, by Conrad himself.

After this historical overview, Fothergill, in his second chapter, brings into dialogue Thomas Mann and Joseph Conrad. Conrad first came to Mann's attention at a lecture given by John Galsworthy on Conrad and Tolstoy in The Hague in 1922. Mann was intrigued by a writer, as yet unknown to him, whose name was placed alongside that of the great Tolstoy. Captivated by Conrad, he read and re-read his translated works throughout his life. In 1926, he wrote the introduction to the German translation of *The Secret Agent*, the first volume in the S. Fischer Conrad collection.

Fothergill argues that "comparative cultural understanding can be considered as a whole range of correlations from direct influence to perceived affinity." In general, "affinity can provide a powerful conceptual tool for bringing writers into dialogue and open up more channels of insight than just a one-to-one conception of 'influence'" (71).

Fothergill applies this interpretation of affinity to his comparative study of Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" (1902), offering fascinating insights into "similarity in difference and difference in similarity" (71) in the two works. He discusses ways in which the different modes of narration in the two novellas effectively reveal and conceal powerful needs and desires, and how both texts end with a complex lie. By the time Mann wrote the introduction to *The Secret Agent* during the post-war period of the Weimar Republic in 1926, his interest in Conrad had moved far beyond the purely aesthetic and literary. Now, Conrad was for Mann also the voice of the political moment.

Fothergill demonstrates how Mann, in this introduction, not only invites the German readers to engage with Conrad but also uses Conrad to support the fundamental shifts in his own political position in the aftermath of the First World War from "patrician anti-democratic nationalism ... to a politically engaged republican position" (79). With the end of the First World War, the entire aristocratic political structure was swept away and a new era began with the Weimar Republic (1919-33). Fothergill negotiates the complex cultural and political events through which, for Mann, the writer's role had changed from "artist-observer to a much more involved political-cultural participant" (86). Problems of history pre-occupied Mann, and he looked to Conrad for ways of articulating the historical event in literature. How could history be represented if the knowledge of history was unreliable, and man was not so much a subject of history but its unconscious object? This chapter concludes with an inquiry into "the problems of historical understanding and representation" (91) both in *The Magic Mountain* and in *Nostromo*.

In the following chapter, Fothergill paints a sombre picture of the ideological control, censorship, and repression that increasingly determined cultural production and communication during the Third Reich (1933-45). Yet he also brings to light how the mechanisms by which this political control was exercised were less efficient and coordinated than the Nazi authorities intended them to be. Fothergill places Conrad within this highly politicized and repressive environment and suggests ways in which Conrad's work (while officially banned) could still be read and was, indeed, perceived as "an alternative voice of humane resilience" (104).

In times of tyranny and terror, diaries and letters become sites of persistent, hidden resistance. Fothergill illustrates Conrad's role as beacon or landmark within such an environment of institutional restriction and intolerance. For Gerhard Nebel, the former teacher and writer sent to a labour-unit on the Channel Islands, the diary is "a weapon of self-defence" (115). Conrad and other great European writers sustain him as he fights for his own intellectual survival. The letters of the poet Gottfried Benn similarly contain numerous allusions to Conrad. Benn's frequent use of the quotation from *Lord Jim* "To follow the dream and again to follow the dream – and so on – always – *usque ad finem*" manifests the way in which Conrad, for Benn, had come to occupy the position of "internalized point of philosophical and moral reference" (119).

An investigation into secretive or camouflaged writing, by the very nature of such writing, will remain unpredictable and haphazard, but might also yield unexpected finds. In the pursuit of such informal or hidden sources, Fothergill maps the circuitous route which led him to the contemporary novelist and admirer of Conrad, Lothar-Günther Buchheim, and from him to the artist Max Beckmann and the multiple meanings behind the underlinings in Beckmann's copy of *Heart of Darkness*. It then brings him to the novelist Joseph Roth, an enthusiastic reader of Conrad, who introduced the Polish journalist Maryla Mazurkiewicz Reifenberg to the works of her fellow countryman. Reifenberg subsequently wrote a number of essays on Conrad for the liberal, non-Nazi newspaper, *Frankfurter Zeitung*. This paper was published by her husband Benno Reifenberg and eventually banned by the authorities in 1943. Her articles, by necessity, eschew open political criticism but nevertheless adhere to the principle she found in Conrad of being "duty-bound to an indestructible sense of the truth" (131).

Fothergill then delves deeper into the cultural realities prevailing in a Germany dominated by Nazi-ideology and paranoia. In the fourth chapter, "'Conrad the Jew': Literary Criticism as a Political Act," he very effectively sets the scene with a lecture given by Wilhelm Stapel at the university in Munich in 1936 and later published as a pamphlet. In this lecture, Stapel brands "Josef" Conrad, the cosmopolitan "Polish Jew," as the personal embodiment of a malign international Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy to

infiltrate and appropriate German cultural life. In Stapel's view, Conrad fulfilled the major criteria for this political and racist agenda: Conrad was published in Germany by a Jewish publisher, Samuel Fischer, he was one of the most popular foreign authors, and he was also among the most extensively translated European writers in Germany. Conrad's highly suspect, so-called "Jewish" cosmopolitanism, combined with the Nazi prejudice against Poland as a "second-rate, inferior cultural pretender" (145), strengthened Stapel's argument of a persistent Jewish infiltration of German culture. As Stapel does not offer any criticism of Conrad's writing as such, Fothergill concludes that he had probably not read a word of Conrad's work.

The professional occupations of publishers, booksellers, and literary critics were already discredited during the Third Reich for being dominated by Jews who, according to Nazi propaganda, exercised control over the dissemination and critical mediation of cultural values in the country. Thus, in the wake of Stapel's lecture, all forms of cultural criticism were banned by the Nazi authorities. Indeed, the term cultural "criticism" was forthwith to be replaced by cultural "appreciation," in other words, by an endorsement of Nazi-prescribed art.

Within this increasingly totalitarian environment even reading and writing about certain classical authors became a political act of defiance that required considerable courage. Fothergill pays tribute to the way in which the blatant mistakes in Stapel's lecture provided an unforeseen opportunity to Hermann Stresau to mount a legitimate defence of Conrad (and his German publisher) by publishing as an article the biographical chapter from his forthcoming book, *Joseph Conrad. Der Tragiker des Westens*. Fothergill's study powerfully evokes the complicated day-to-day realities of cultural and intellectual life for those opposed to the ideologies of the Nazi regime, and he sensitively mediates between their world and that of the modern reader. He offers insights into the difficulties not only of Stresau's efforts to have his book on Conrad published in 1937, but also into the complex, hidden ways in which Conrad and his fiction was mobilized in Germany to articulate and sustain a spirit of opposition to the dominant culture. At the heart of this dissident affinity with Conrad, Fothergill argues, lay the tragic realisation of an indifferent universe. "Here," Fothergill says,

> Stresau evokes the very powerful trope of "der unbehauste Mensch," the unhoused, unaccommodated man. It is a motif full of terrible significance for those in the Germany of the 1930s and early 1940s who, in active or passive opposition to the Nazis, felt no longer at home in their homeland... Stresau uses the figure of Conrad and the ironic tragedy of his fiction to articulate a sensibility of desire and failure by those who came to adopt a form of "inner exile" as a means of survival. (155-56)

Cultural transmission of humane values continued in Germany not only despite of tyranny and danger but also because of it.

Fothergill now proceeds to explore a channel of cultural transmission and interpretation in Germany that on the surface is so extraordinary, given the findings in the previous chapter, as to draw our attention to particular possibilities of reading Conrad at times of extreme danger and uncertainty. Since Conrad's works were officially blacklisted and read mainly in secret defiance or written about in disguised and encoded form, a Nazi U-boat is possibly the most unlikely site for an open literary encounter with his writing. Yet Fothergill, citing the diary entries of a young war correspondent, takes his readers on board the U-96 during a violent storm in the Atlantic to witness the boat's captain gripped by the truth of a passage in *The Mirror of the Sea*. Overwhelmed by the writing, the young man copies the entire powerful passage into his diary. Conrad appears, to use Fothergill's words, "as a literary epiphany" (172).

Fothergill's source for this scene lies in Lothar-Günther Buchheim's well-known and highly successful novel *Das Boot*. Buchheim based this novel on his own war notebooks and experiences on board U-96 in 1941-42. His model for the captain was the U-boat's commander, Captain Lehmann-Willenbrock, perhaps the only Nazi commander who read Conrad – or dared to read this forbidden author – in the officers' mess of his vessel. Conrad resonates not only in *Das Boot*, but in all of Buchheim's writing. As Fothergill shows, cultural transmission here has been so powerful as to permeate Buchheim's own ways of seeing and thinking. Conrad is his teacher and model. Buchheim is, Fothergill says, "as close to a lifelong secret sharer as can be imagined" (174). Buchheim's first encounter with the author that was to influence his life had occurred in the offices of the S. Fischer Verlag. As Conrad's novels could not be purchased openly in a bookshop, he was given the copies as a present by Peter Suhrkamp who, as a non-Jew, had taken over the running of the publishing-house in 1936. Fothergill charts the enduring impact of Conrad on Buchheim and his writing career, even to Buchheim's foreword to *Jäger im Weltmeer*, a volume of war photographs published in 1943 but that became widely available only in 1996 as a reprint.

After the historical locations of the Weimar Republic and post-war West-Germany, Fothergill next examines cultural transmission and translation of Conrad taking place behind the Iron Curtain in the eastern part of the now divided country. This time, the reader Fothergill selects is Christa Wolf, the important German novelist from the former German Democratic Republic (1949-90).

In *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987), Wolf's fictional female narrator, also a writer, listens to the terrifying news on the radio of an unfolding nuclear disaster. That same day, her brother is undergoing a serious operation for a brain tumour. Torn between extreme public and private fears, the narrator explores the conflicting nature of scientific progress and confronts personal questions of complicity and guilt. In the evening, when she is looking for something to read to help her fall asleep, she chances on a thin volume by an unknown author that had been strongly recommended to her, which turns out to be Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. As she begins to read, the words seem to speak to her directly in what is presented as a moment of recognition and discovery. Fothergill's comparative study of Conrad's and Wolf's fictionalized experiences (Conrad's journey up the Congo and the news of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in the Soviet Union) in the two works reveals "the centrality, perhaps not immediately apparent, of Conrad for Wolf" (205).

Through fascinating discussions of the recurring image of the "blind spot" in *Störfall* and of Wolf's penetrating exploration into the notion of "contamination" Fothergill opens new ways of reading Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The notion of the contamination of language – possibly disguised political criticism – links Wolf's personal experience of two political systems and her knowledge of a third, each of which manipulated language for its own purposes.[1]

"Christa Wolf," says Fothergill towards the end of the chapter, "has to confront the whole Marxist basis upon which she had up till then founded her adult utopian beliefs in the capacity of science and rationality to achieve the moral and material goals for all" (222). This is true of the narrator in *Störfall*, but a great deal more is at stake for the novel's author. Wolf's total commitment to Socialism had followed the sudden end to her Nazi childhood, her family's enforced departure from their home in what is today Poland, and her shocked realization of the extent of the crimes committed in the name of Nazi ideology. Strong feelings of shame, guilt, and responsibility led her to embrace a political system that was conceived as the exact opposite to Nazi Fascism. After the utter failure of one utopia, she heavily invested in another.

Wolf's novels – from *Moskauer Novelle* (1961) to *Der geteilte* Himmel (1963) and *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968) – chart her personal political journey. From being a high-level, active participant in the building of the GDR, she came to distance herself from a state apparatus that became progressively obsessed with restrictions and control. In *Nachdenken über Christa T.* she goes beyond the official political programme to explore new ways of translating imaginatively the possibilities of the Socialist idea. This caused her considerable difficulties with the authorities, but the fact of her dissent brought her to the attention of West-Germany. Yet Wolf remained an iconic figure in the GDR for some of the younger generation of writers, like Brigitte Reimann, who looked to her as a model for an artistic way forward as a novelist in a Socialist environment. Wolf's active defence of Socialism as the preferable alternative to Fascism as well as capitalism continued even as the GDR was collapsing in 1989.[2]

The implications of the singular environment in which reading and writing took place for Wolf and, above all, the exceptional fact of her later writing (including *Störfall*) being published simultaneously on both sides of a pernicious political divide are left unexplored in this chapter. We are apt to forget today the extreme nature of this boundary that Wolf was able to cross with comparative ease. She was even allowed to accept guest-professorships in the United States, the Cold War arch-enemy of the Soviet Union, and give lectures and accept prizes in West Germany, a state from which the GDR had separated itself by what was then the most ferociously defended border on earth. This position of privilege concealed – at least for the West – Wolf's continuous surveillance since 1969 by the Stasi, the State Secret Police, of which she was aware.[3] The archives of secret Stasi-files also contain, in two slim volumes, evidence of Wolf's own earlier involvement as a Stasi-informer from 1959 to 1962.[4] This complex political history needed to be factored into the reading of *Störfall*.

In a political and social landscape of surveillance and control and with a readership from two opposing political environments, Wolf's writing is not so much encoded as camouflaged. It is the result of exceptionally careful thought and a now clear understanding of the limits and possibilities of literary production in the given circumstances. Conrad's presence in *Störfall* was made possible because Conrad was a published author in the GDR. Even so, the first translation of *Heart of Darkness* in 1958 came with a health warning from the advisers for public libraries which insisted that reading Conrad was suitable only for critical and ideologically secure readers.[5] In other words, Wolf's writing flourished in a restrictive, contradictory and dangerous environment. After unification in 1990, this position laid her open to severe critical attacks on both side of the political divide, but might also go some way to answer Fothergill's question: "If the issue is her not adopting a policy about nuclear power what is she interested in [in *Störfall*]?" (210).

Störfall provides Fothergill with enough scope for his excellent skills as a literary critic, but it is not one of Christa Wolf's major works.[6] More important perhaps, Wolf is also not a "Conradian" writer. She is not like Mann or Buchheim, who translated Conrad into their thought and work. Frank Förster's bibliography of the literary reception of Conrad in German-speaking countries lists *Störfall* as the only entry for Christa Wolf.[7] At the same time, Conrad has another champion and great admirer in Germany in the novelist Brigitte Kronauer. In articles and reviews, she has written knowledgeably about Conrad and has also provided an after-word to a new translation of *A Smile of Fortune* (*Ein Lächeln des Glücks*) in 2003. As a writer, Kronauer is fascinated by the notion of ambiguity. In Conrad's writing, she has found a master of this iridescent quality. Her novel *Berittener Bogenschütze*, published the same year as Christa Wolf's *Störfall*, takes as its central character a lecturer in English with a research specialty in Conrad.[8] Together with

Conrad's unexpected presence in *Störfall*, this shows Conrad's continuing relevance in modern Germany.

Fothergill concludes his excellent study with a reflection on "the task of 'making you see', that aesthetic and ultimately also historical task of rendering the Real" (225) that occupied Conrad as well as the filmmaker Werner Herzog. Fothergill's focus here is not on film-adaptations of Conrad's works but on cultural transmission "at an imaginative rather than literal level" (225). Fothergill finds fascinating parallels, for instance, between Herzog's "rhetoric of truth through work and effort" (227) in his writings on the making of his films (and evident also in the films themselves) and in Marlow's representation of his task of finding Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Above all, however, Fothergill's interest lies in the way in which both Conrad and Herzog – at their different historical moments – seek to interpret and represent "almost *unimaginable* 'real' experience, and make *that* into a central theme" (230).

Reading Conrad opened to Herzog new ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Conrad influenced also his choice of central characters with their dreams and obsessions. They are, – like Conrad's Charles Gould, Nostromo, and Martin Decoud – at once attractive and a source of deep scepticism. This leads Fothergill to investigate in depth the idea of history-making and its representation in *Nostromo* and *Aguirre*. He concludes with a fascinating analysis of "three modes of historical voice" through which novel and film attempt historical representation (246).[9]

Fothergill's thoroughly researched study uncovers many new and unexpected contexts in which Conrad was read and in which his German readers translated him into their own historical and cultural space. His focus on the engagement of a number of writers (and one film-maker) with Conrad at vastly different historical moments powerfully reflects on the enduring quality of Conrad's writing and opens new ways for our own reading of Conrad. Fothergill's own elegant prose makes this original account of a neglected area of Conrad studies a delight to read.

Gerlinde Röder-Bolton
Department of Languages and Translation Studies
University of Surrey, Guildford

© Gerlinde Röder-Bolton

---

[1] Wolf has lived under the political systems of the Third Reich and the GDR. She also visited West Germany.

[2] Wolf was among the writers and intellectuals who, in 1989/90, advocated state reforms in the GDR rather than its dissolution and merger with West Germany.

[3] "Stasi" is an abbreviation of "Staatssicherheitsdienst." Wolf's surveillance by the Secret Police started in 1969. Among the files created by the secret police, 47 volumes on Wolf survived the Stasi's shredding of files in 1989. Christa Wolf writes about her surveillance by the Stasi in the short narrative *Was bleibt* (1990).

[4] Günter Gaus's interview with Christa Wolf in 1993 for the television series *Zur Person. Porträts in Frage und Antwort*, repeated on in March 1999.

[5] Johanna Waligora-Rittinghaus, "Das Herz der Finsternis," *Der Bibliothekar*, 13.7 (1959): 766-68, published on CD in Förster*, Literarische Rezeption*.

[6] See, for example, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968), *Kindheitsmuster* (1976), and *Kassandra* (1983).

[7] Frank Förster, *Die literarische Rezeption Joseph Conrads im deutschsprachigen Raum* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2005).

[8] See also Gerlinde Röder-Bolton, "'The Emptiness of All Things under Heaven': Joseph Conrad and Brigitte Kronauer's *Berittener Bogenschütze*," *Conradiana*, 38 3 (forthcoming 2007).

[9] Before the end of the chapter, Fothergill turns briefly to *Fitzcarraldo* and this film's concerns with the duality inherent in the will to power, in its aesthetic representation on film as well as in Herzog's act of filming.