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## Review of David Adams, *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel*.

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**David Adams, Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. 249 pp. (+ xi) ISBN 0801441617 (paper).

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Once considered incidental, the topics of nation and empire have moved squarely to the forefront of British modernist studies. Fredric Jameson and Edward Said are only the best known of critics who have urged us to place our understanding of modernist formal innovation and psychological exploration within the geopolitical contexts of the rise of nation states, the global expansion of capital, and the conquest of non-European peoples. Of course, from *Heart of Darkness* to *A Handful of Dust*, the colonies and the colonized have always been there in modernist British fiction; it is only fairly recently, however, that these issues have appeared as integral rather than subsidiary to modernism itself -- as not merely an available subject matter but as a thread woven inextricably into the fabric of modernity and, consequently, into modernism as a cultural movement.

Yet as David Adams observes in his accomplished study, *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel*, despite this overdue attention to the imperial context of modernism, "a reader's expectation that [modernist British novels] will comment usefully on Europe's relations with particular colonies is generally disappointed" (6). Very few British authors from Conrad to Waugh provide an analysis of colonialism and its effect on colonized people that satisfies a contemporary reader familiar with the ideas of Fanon, Spivak, and Said; even Forster's *A Passage to India*, which Adams justly admires, may, he concedes, feel lacking when it comes to the representation of Indians themselves. Thus, although Conrad's bitter sarcasm toward the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Belgians in the Congo may be evident even to the untutored undergraduate, his novella is now accompanied in the *Norton Anthology* and in college syllabi across the country by Chinua Achebe's pointed attack, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," as if in apology for the now too-plainly-visible prejudices of the earlier work. If the pedagogical ubiquity of Achebe's essay is a symptom of a not wholly acknowledged professional anxiety over the treatment that colonized peoples have received from Conrad and other canonical modernists, *Colonial Odysseys* may offer timely therapy, for it attempts to explain not so much how British modernism understood colonial experience

as rather why it could not fully understand that momentous historical encounter.

Adams's book is particularly ambitious because it effectively fuses two projects: in addition to an analysis of the British modernists' representation of colonial exploration, it also places these same fictions -- "stories in which characters journey from the familiar world of the West into an alien colonial world" (1) -- within the tradition of the classical epic journey. Hence the title *Colonial Odysseys*, gesturing at once to the contemporary geopolitical situation of the novels and to the classical texts whose form, structure and incident they often imitated -- and never without a pronounced ironic accent. These modern stories are in fact notable for the absence of the *nosto* traditional to the epic voyage, and they generally contain a pronounced element of *thanatos* instead: characters die on their journeys rather than returning safely to the home port. (The most famous modernist odyssey, Joyce's *Ulysses*, thus receives only brief treatment, since it lacks the morbidity, the pessimism, and the abortive homecoming that for Adams constitute this subgenre.) Happily, however, Adams's dual focus, which keeps in its sights both the classical literary tradition and the global political scene, does not in the least blur his vision, but indeed allows him to look beyond familiar assessments of both travel writing's cultural function and of modernism's Greco-Roman turn.

Given this ambition, it is not surprising that Adams's study ranges widely, not only offering interpretive readings of works by Conrad, Forster, Woolf, Waugh, and Henry Green, but also surveying British Hellenism after Matthew Arnold, late Victorian and Edwardian adventure tales, and an array of literary theorists old and new. Gently but unmistakably challenging both Jameson's Marxism and Said's Foucauldianism, Adams advocates steadily but never shrilly for the importance of issues he calls "metaphysical" that in his view underlie the experience of modernity every bit as much as the geographical dispersal of labor or the deployment of power through knowledge-production: "[A]ny analysis of the novel's involvement in national and imperial culture must also eventually account for the way the genre responds to metaphysical questions" (48). From where, he asks, do people derive a deep sense of meaning or value when traditional religious answers have been abandoned or discredited? What kinds of human activity can fill this void, which Adams calls, after Salman Rushdie, a "god-shaped hole"?

To address these questions, Adams draws not so much upon Jameson, Said, or their acolytes as upon the German philosopher-anthropologist Hans Blumenberg -- an idiosyncratic if not downright obscure choice whose inclusion might, in less skilled hands, sink a project such as this. But Adams's careful prose and breadth of reference bring the reader up to speed

on Blumenberg and deftly position the German thinker's philosophy with respect to critical touchstones (Lukács, Auerbach) more familiar to the average scholar of British literature. Blumenberg, who sometimes sounds like a kinder, gentler Heidegger ("[H]e acknowledges," writes Adams, "that culture is fundamentally an effort to be at home in the world" [76]), is most crucial to Adams because of his critical concept of "reoccupation," a concept at the heart of this book's argument. Reoccupation, in brief, is the process by which we compensate for the lost totality of a theological worldview with human constructs such as adventure, empire, or indeed fiction itself. As such it is a peculiarly modern process and one that, for Adams at least, seems destined to fail. The recognition of this failure is the primary function of the modernist colonial odyssey.

After a brief introductory reading of *A Handful of Dust*, Adams's first chapter traces the theme of the Ulyssean voyage from Homer through Virgil and Dante to Tennyson. (His comparison of Tennyson's Ulysses to a worn-out colonial administrator is both hilarious and astute.) It then turns to the rise of Arnold's Hellenic ideal in the popular adventure tales of writers such as Rider Haggard and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Adams keenly discerns that classicism and Hellenism had by the later nineteenth century become deeply ambiguous in British culture. Although Hellenism functioned as a counterweight to Hebraic severity, an attempt "to recover a sense of the adequacy of human forms" (21), it also became identified not so much with the modern European civilization that derived from it but instead, paradoxically, with the very peoples whom Europe was in the process of subjugating. "When I think of the Greeks I think of them as naked black men," says Miss Allan in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*; a contemporary of Arnold described Homer as "a savage with the lively eye" (19). Such comments lead Adams to the shrewd conclusion that both the immanence of Hellenism and the romance of imperial adventure drew their appeal from an underlying disenchantment with modernity, rather than from an acceptance or embrace of it. Though Adams does not mention it, Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" seems an important antecedent here, in its comparison of Homer to a newly discovered ocean and Keats himself to the *conquistador* Cortez.

Adams is, however, careful not to reduce the complexities of the major British modernists to the easy formulas of popular adventure tales; if the travel story naively instituted the romance of adventure as ideological buttress for conquest, the novelists of the early twentieth century generally exhibited no such optimism or naivete: "Rather than using adventure as a means to invest the colonies with the fullness of romance, the modernist British odysseys employ a parallel maneuver with opposite results: they project onto colonies the discontent of modernity" (25). Thus despite whatever political shortcomings we might find in the modernists'

representation of the colonized (and it is all too easy to find them), these novels still provide a complex engagement with fundamental questions of modern existence. Adams concludes the chapter with a survey of Forster's career, describing a movement from the Hellenism implicit in the Mediterranean settings of the early fiction to the mystical interest in the Hindu rejection of form that emerges in *A Passage to India*. (That work, incidentally, Adams arbitrarily designates as Forster's "best novel by far" [31]; Forster's own choice, however, was *Howards End*.) Adams reads *Passage* as a renunciation of Hellenistic immanence in favor of a more difficult transcendence, a transcendence that, crucially, recognizes the inability of imperial conquest to restore the totality once provided by a religious worldview. This indeed is Adams's recurring conclusion: that the modernists, whatever their political blindnesses, recognized that empire, travel, and Hellenism could not perform the work of "reoccupation."

But why *should* empire perform this work? And what exactly is the relation between political conquest and spiritual disenchantment? In what way might filling the blank spaces on the map, as Conrad's Marlow famously puts it, compensate for a theological or psychological void? How can playing God possibly console one for the death of God? The second chapter ventures some answers to these questions through a somewhat eclectic theoretical tour of the ideas of Mary Louise Pratt, Said, Lukács, Jameson, and the aforementioned Hans Blumenberg; it also addresses nationalism in Joyce, redemption in Nietzsche, and the Freudian uncanny. While this chapter does at times feel desultory -- the reading of Joyce spends far more time on five or six critics than on *Ulysses* itself -- it offers, among other satisfactions, sharp observations on critical misreadings of Said, a provocative account of Freud's career trajectory, and a useful thumbnail sketch of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*. Most importantly, however, the chapter stabilizes the book's theoretical frame by attempting to connect the conquest of foreign lands with the metaphysical (or ideological) work of reoccupation. For, Adams remarks, the colonial odyssey is not "strictly speaking, a desertion of home ... [but] an expansion of home, reflecting a desire to be at home everywhere" (47). In conquering the globe, Europe sought quite literally to domesticate it, to make it home. In this way "metaphysical" as well as economic concerns propelled imperial ambitions. And by bringing this insight to bear on Lukács's famous description of the novel as the epic of transcendental homelessness, Adams suggests that empire and novel might in very different ways -- for Adams never falls into the trap of equating political and artistic enterprises -- attempt the hugely ambitious task of restoring meaning to existence. (It would be interesting to see how Adams might address current-day "neoimperial" invasions, whose architects seem utterly unaware of the death of God; empire, such invasions remind us, is more likely to be justified by the presence of theology than by its absence.)

In his long, three-part chapter on Conrad, Adams devotes significant attention to "Karain," *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Nostramo*. (In addition, *The Secret Agent*, along with Henry Green's *Party Going*, is discussed in an epilogue.) Despite excessive description of British coinage in the subchapter on "Karain" (peculiar for a critic with such pointed words for new historicism), the scope of the chapter permits an artful synthesis of Conrad's career; Adams is able, for example, to interlace his readings of *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* in a manner that reveals their interconnectedness without ignoring their differences, and to suggest how *Nostramo*'s concerns with the foundation of a nation state lie on a continuum with the personal moral crises of Conrad's earlier fiction. The main focus of the chapter, however, is what Adams calls the problem of redemption, which he sees as a consequence, or perhaps a variety, of reoccupation: "The process of reoccupation produced a White Man's Burden -- a human assumption of divine responsibility for total redemption -- that does not derive from empire but rather is projected onto and at times perhaps intensified by empire" (83). The nub of Adams's argument here is that many, if not most, of Conrad's major characters share an overpowering sense of obligation to redeem the dead, and that in telling the stories of Jim and Kurtz Marlow takes up this same burden. Indeed, Conrad assumes it too, both in his fiction and criticism, even though, as Adams demonstrates, he dramatizes quite powerfully the dangers of such grandiose rescue fantasies. Conrad, in short, "would like his art to compensate for the absence of an omniscient and beneficent deity" (90), but recognizes that it cannot -- indeed should not. Adams humanely argues that disavowing the burden of redemption might actually free the modern subject to "practice a less exalted egoism, a less ambitious solidarity" (152). Although surrendering the impulse to rescue the world is no easy renunciation (and literary critics can be as prone to rescue fantasies as Conradian adventurers), Adams suggests that the modern subject, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, ultimately can only stand by in mute horror at the wreckage that modernity leaves in its wake.

Although, in Adams's view, Woolf addresses the same issues of reoccupation and redemption as Conrad, she more vigorously resists the impulse toward totalization. Adams's chapter, in fact, usefully draws connections between the two authors, both in its discussion of Woolf's specific borrowings from Conrad and in its apprehension of broader thematic continuities. He also connects Woolf to Forster, paying careful attention to Woolf's youthful Hellenism, including her trip to Greece in 1906. And just as Forster came to discern the inadequacy of his Mediterranean ideal, so Woolf also came to regard both the colonial voyage and ancient Greek culture with increasing irony and distance. South America in *The Voyage Out*, like Forster's India, challenges Hellenic immanence with its perceived formlessness; this is a critical first step, Adams maintains, in Woolf's recognition of the inapplicability of Hellenism to the modern world. And while *The Voyage*

*Out* offers Woolf's sole literal example of a colonial odyssey, Adams catalogues a series of metaphors -- images of roads, globes, sea-voyages, tunnels -- that pervade Woolf's corpus and in which the odyssey motif persists. In the transformation of these metaphors over the course of Woolf's career, Adams sees a rejection of the death drive that dominates *The Voyage Out* and an increasing liberation from the pull of reoccupation, so that ultimately Woolf is able, for example, to playfully mock the colonial odyssey as it appears in the internal fantasy life of Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. By at first displacing impulses of redemption and reoccupation, and later surrendering them altogether, Woolf clears a space for more contingent, fragmentary truths that do not posit their own totality, a space in which the female artist can begin to create. Although at times in this chapter the notions of empire and nation may seem somewhat remote concerns, the discussion caps a challenging, intelligent and scrupulously researched argument that reinvigorates the metaphysical concerns that Adams sees as central to modernism and modernity.