

JOSEPH CONRAD'S JOURNEY INTO THE DARKNESS OF SELF

Magda Velloso Fernandes de Tolentino

— UFMG —

The depth of Conrad's nature and the foundation of his philosophy remained Slav; he shared the Russian novelist's sense of mystery, their tragic obsession with the unknown, their haunted preoccupation with human misery. His work is steeped in pessimism. He proclaimed that he desired to be first and foremost an artist, and his art is related to Continental realism.

Most of his novels are concerned with the sea. He had an uncommon angle of vision, was original in his narrative craftsmanship. His characters are brought before the reader not directly but through conflicting and fragmentary images formed by various witnesses. He makes, as it were, a preliminary sketch and then proceeds to fill it in and enrich it. Perplexity, apparent contradictions, a kind of mystery, are the result of this method. Even the explanation of the action may be deferred for a long time and the story keeps to the end a certain air of strangeness.

The strange foreign tales are a background for the display of native English character. Conrad admired British sailors for their coolness, for the discipline which ruled aboard their ships. He was equally fascinated by the English language, and by the possibilities it holds for narrative and description, but he enriched it with his characteristic foreign qualities.

Pole by birth, he admired the qualities of courage, capacity for self-sacrifice and staunch silent endurance of the English nature, to which we find rich reference in his novels.

Joseph Conrad is listed by Dr. Leavis (1) as one of the four or five major English novelists who are "distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity, as well as being very original technically".

Conrad writes not about any settled "worlds" (as Jane Austen and others listed by Dr. Leavis), but about the dangerous edges of the earth. He is concerned with codes of honour rather than with manners, with heroism and disgrace rather than complicated moral success or failure. He took the violence and treachery of man, of nature, of one's own inner nature, for granted.

His technique is very original, the organization in his novels expresses a scrupulous, sceptical intelligence; instead of relating adventures straightforwardly, from one episode to another, he likes to begin in the middle, or at a climax, and then work back to what led up to this climax. See the building up of Kurtz's character in Heart of Darkness, when we know that Marlow's meeting him is the acme of the story. The interest is then shifted from what happens next to satisfying an acute observer's curiosity about what lay behind the happening. Marlow's memory pieces together and relives the journey into the Belgian Congo. Conrad descends narcissistically into his own world by means of Marlow, who in his turn has already descended into a dark, morbid underworld (like that of Virgil, Dante or Faust) and found there a self-sustained world. The experience is hallucinatory, a journey into the unconscious or to the end of the world, Marlow's quest for balance in a black jungle. The African jungle is the "objective correlative" of the possible rankness of the human heart. Marlow's journey upriver follows

(1) Leavis, F. R. The Great Tradition.

the experience of Conrad himself under the same circumstances related: as a replacement for a dead man. The tale handles distressing personal experience such as extends a man's knowledge of himself and of what the world is like. Conrad himself stated that "before Congo he was only a simple animal". (2)

Marlow undergoes a discomposure of the self as he grows, but the feeling of growth and fuller participation in the human condition is valuable to him. He observes humankind as he travels upriver; his companions are disgusting traders, whom he calls "pilgrims", who fire at the natives by the river bank just for the fun of it.

As we approach his destination we experience many penetrations at once: into a wild African territory; into the darks of time; into mingled social forms neither barbaric nor civilized but profoundly disordered and spoiled; into the darks of moral anarchy; and into the darks of the self that the sense at once of repulsion and fascination disturbs.

When Marlow meets Kurtz, in the climax of the tale, he finds an eloquent man who, carried away by loneliness, drink and a growing megalomania, has become a bloodthirsty tyrant, more terrible than the savage chiefs he oppresses. He is regarded with awe. He is dying of fever and has hallucinations; his own diseased mind is taking revenge on him instead of his victims. He stands for a certain hollowness in the heart of darkness, the heart of hell.

Kurtz's fascination for Marlow is the former's will to power, superhuman, brutal. Cruelty and sadism are indistinguishable from the vision Kurtz embodies, a vision of power and control which the ivory provides for him. The ivory,

(2) Karl Frederick R. Joseph Conrad. The Three Lives.

by the way, is a symbol which shows to what extent man will go for something which is neither vital nor an addition to a more comfortable life, but merely an object of ornament. It can also lead us to the "ivory tower" metaphor for unawareness of, indifference to or isolation from concerns held to be important. It stands for egotistical self-isolation, snobbery and dreamy inefficiency, and holds the stigma of pusillanimity, all of which can apply to Kurtz, as we find out through Marlow's unravelling of his personality.

So, in the end, Marlow, once supposed to bring light into darkness, finds, in the core of the forest, civilization among the savages, who have their own code, and savagery among the pseudo-civilized man.

The point of view in Heart of Darkness is dualistically presented through the existence of two first-person narrators: one among the group of listeners who attend Marlow's tale on board a ship on the River Thames, and Marlow himself, who tells of his experience in the jungle.

The first narrator is important inasmuch as he gives the reader an image of Marlow: a contemplative fellow who is always narrating his "inconclusive experiences". He gives us a vision of Marlow sitting in the meditative position of a Buddha and describes him physically as a man with "sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect". He is laconic in his description and we feel a considerable distance between them, although we feel that he, the first narrator, is an interested listener.

He yields the narrative to Marlow as soon as we get a shrewd idea of the kind of person Marlow is. Marlow's own account is given in a confidential tone, created with the aim of bringing the listeners to accompany him in his journey into himself. The tone suggests many forms of stillness and inertia

blent with the darkness: a brooding immobility accompanies the unfolding tale. Marlow is the central character and introduces what is most important: the inner tale. The first narrator only makes a frame to what Marlow is about to tell. But all the time it matters to us, readers, whose voice we are listening to or whose tone is prevalent. The shifting of viewpoints has opposite results: it brings some unsureness to the reader at the same time that it elicits an activity of clarification.

Marlow's probing into the forest and into darkness is like the moving of a camera: it is as if Marlow himself were holding the camera and we, readers, were following him as film spectators. He moves forward registering impressions and describing people, scenery and action. We see every one of these elements through the focusing eyes of this camera - Marlow's eyes. And, not unlike a cameraman, he registers the scenery and adds his personal touch - after all, Marlow's remarks on the "inscrutability, inconceivability and unspeakableness" of the situation he is facing is an intrusion in the narrative and an open comment, repeatedly recurrent, on an otherwise merely implied atmosphere of darkness and horror.

Through the narrative Conrad shows how Marlow managed to penetrate into the depths of man's soul, how the experience has shaken him and how it has affected his way of being, even as to his deportment.

So Conrad, in his notable attempt to postpone the crisis, concentrates the force of his narrative on the building up of atmosphere, be it through the medium of one or the other of the narrators. This atmosphere in Heart of Darkness determines the unity and total effect of the story, with the heavy tropical air of the African jungle hanging like a miasma over the uncanny phenomena of nature, twisting humanity, as it were, into weird inhumanity.

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