



**The Author-Narrator Nexus:
A Meta-critical Study of Joseph Conrad's Selected Novels**

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The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous— so full of hope
— *Collected letters of Conrad 2*, pp. 348-49)

Abstract

The present paper seeks to show the complex ways in which Conrad has exploited the author-narrator nexus in his treatment of thematic, character, and temporal representation in order to shape and modulate the authorial and narratorial points of view. The paper does this through a “meta-critical” analysis of four major novels, perhaps some of the most accomplished of Conrad’s texts. The paper ranges widely, in meta-critical fashion, over these primary texts (with greater emphasis here and there on one than the other). However, it also draws on Conrad’s non-fictional writings, such as letters and critical essays in effort to highlight Conrad’s narrative involvement in his fiction as the secret author and narrator of his work.

Keywords: Author-narrator, Joseph Conrad, Novels

1. Introduction

Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski was born in Partitioned Poland in 1857 and died in England 1924. Conrad was born into a tumultuous world. His native Poland was partitioned seven times between 1772 and 1918 by Prussia, Austria and Czarist Russia, resulting in, or following from, unspeakable atrocities and ruthless exploitation by the major powers against the colonized Poles (Blum, 1967; Davies, 1981). In fact, virtually all the major wars of modern Europe were fought on Polish soil. By all accounts, Conrad is one of the foremost European writers of his generation and beyond. He is easily one of the most distinguished literary writers and intellectuals whose works are still studied today in higher humanistic education (Hawthorn, 1992; Coroneos, 2002). His works, especially the fictional ones, are a major point of reference in early European and English modernism. His narrative techniques, innovative plot construction,

also called "covert plotting", trans-textual narration, and Janiform (looking at two sides at once), tragic vision transformed the way novels were written in the 19th century and since, and, at the same time, make Conrad stand out among the major European and English writers to date. Eastern and Western influences mark his outlook and literary practice; he was a merchant seaman who served in French and British merchant navies/service (Lord, 1998; Knowles and More, 2002). Sea and ocean travel held a fascination for Conrad throughout his life. His "sea years" saw him travel to virtually all parts of the world, from Southeast Asia to African (central Africa; the Belgian Congo) and South America and Australia. His travels in the Congo are documented in his famous "Congo Diary" (1890s), a precursor to *Heart of Darkness* (1894). He settled in Britain (Essex) in 1878; on March 24, 1896, Conrad married Jessie Emmeline George

(1873-1936) and had two children (all boys).

Conrad's background was completely cosmopolitan (multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-national). Conrad's fiction emerged against the background of the following, specifically 19th century European contexts: the problems of aggressive 19th century nationalism in Europe; the contradiction of personal and cultural exile: belonging to two cultures and yet not identifying with either of the two. Note that Conrad was an émigré, a Pole, who moved from a largely traditional and Catholic Poland to the most advanced industrial, secular, and modern country of his time— England. He even called himself a "homo duplex".

Some of the major issues of his time were the persistence of war and strife; the problems of "human nature"; science and technology and the loss of certainty (about the world, history, and the efficacy of individual character and action); the problems of "progress". In Conrad's time, "progress" was seen as an absolute and positive break with the past, as the continuous self-justification of the present by means of the future. This means "things" must not remain as they were originally made (GoGwilt, 1995).

In Conrad's time, it was claimed that "modernity" or the modern world did not, and should not, take its models from the "past" or "inherited tradition" but from the future, and by means of the future that it gives itself, before the past, with which it compares itself. Finally, Conrad faced what he called "the problem of language" in relation to "distinct and clear ideas" and "meaning". Conrad faced the difficult issue of whether language was a transparent means of communication or not. For example, can we, using language, say what we mean or mean what we say in the light of the supposed fluid nature of language?

Conrad's novels are usually narrated by a character-narrator in the novel; for example, Charlie Marlow, the narrator in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. However,

Marlow is not to be taken as Conrad's "alter-ego" because even Marlow's words are narrated by an omniscient narrator (a narrator outside the story). Therefore, Marlow only "voices" certain parts of the narrative/story (since yet another narrator reports what Marlow says and acts, as in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*). Conrad is a master of what has been called "frame narration", a device whereby the narrative is framed by a narrator. The result is the presence of multiple points of view within the larger story.

In his fiction, Conrad seems to suggest, through his narrative manipulation of point of view and character, that the language in which we express our most heartfelt commitments is, in reality, fragile and *contingent*. We may call this Conrad's "ironism", a situation in which one is always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change; or that one is always aware of the fragility and contingency of the very words that they use to communicate with others or with their internal states of mind. We can see this in a character-narrator such as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, and to a great extent in Jim in *Lord Jim* and James Wait in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. Conrad holds that the human experience of the world as a whole is essentially disjunctive (disruptive and disrupting or bewildering and not objective or based on facts). For Conrad, nothing has eternal validity; all truths or perspectives are relative to something else. He also holds very corrosive or unstable and un-stabilizing views against the idea or notion of a fixed perspective. For him, all true and good perspective should be shifting or unstable for good or bad. Conrad seeks to undermine any confidence in the communicative power, and mediating potentials, of language. Conrad is also a Sceptic (or a philosophical pessimist): he holds that morality (a sense of right or wrong or of proper and improper) is a very fragile human construction (morality is not natural, he argues, but has emerged from

our need to survive and reconcile with nature. So for him, morality is nature's orders, namely what we do is based on our need to order to survive and perish). For Conrad, the universe is empty and meaningless (as we can see in *Heart of Darkness* and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*). That is, the world lacks any inherent meaning beyond the stories we tell about us and the world. Some recurrent themes in Conrad's fiction include: conflict between the individual and society; human isolation; beleaguered solidarity; the vanity of romantic aspirations; the myopia of prejudice; and the recognition that loyalty may entail treachery.

According an influential German literary scholar and a leading Romantic author, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, literary form such as poetry or the novel, is the symbol of the interconnected and flowing life of the spirit, that is the "objective reality" itself, and that it is, in many ways, "the original as yet unconscious poetry of the spirit" (Schelling, 1978, p. 12). From this perspective, organic form is a centre to get at and to realize. One implication of this view is that the novelist, for example, is always standing behind his or her work, both in metaphorical and categorical senses.

That argument has implications for the kind of critical approach that this paper has adopted, namely that even the narrator in a novel is not remotely removed from the real author of the work. The narrator is actually a ploy used by the author to "speak" and "make sense" *on behalf of the real author*. Friedrich Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* that art of the text is reality and truth themselves; for we readers of a text "are merely images and artistic projections of the great author, and we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 17-18). In the same vein, long ago, Longinus (100 AD) formulated the idea that poetic or

literary excellence was always based on the author's *emotional* and *intellectual* profundity and seriousness and that sublimity (the sublime) would always be an *effect* of the *spirit* (of possible human inventiveness).

Theoretical Framework

This is a "meta-critical" study of four of Joseph Conrad's novels, namely *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), *Lord Jim* (1900), *Heart of Darkness* (1902), and *Nostramo* (1904). Jozef The concept of meta-commentary is a species of "meta-critique". Methodologically, a meta-critique identifies a relevant *absence* in a text or theory, and thus indicates an incompleteness, theory/practice inconsistency, "detotalization, split or reification of some kind" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 354). This mode of textual interpretation enables the critic to unite the criticism of texts (and consciousnesses) and their conditions of existence; to illuminate or explain a writer's textual practice and ideological (cognitively defective) conceptions while critiquing such. The critical objective of deploying this theoretical-interpretive frame is to underscore the links between author and narrator on the one hand and author and text on the other. The result is to demonstrate Conrad's narrative involvement in his fiction as both the secret author and narrator of his novels.

The European Man Writ Large

In *Lord Jim*, Marlow insists that he is a member of an "obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct" (pp. 43 – 44). This is no doubt an allusion to Marlow's, and by extension Conrad's, activity as a merchant sea man, an activity that inevitably associates him with the "ruling class of the British Empire, the heroic bureaucracy of imperial capitalism which takes that lesser, but sometimes even more heroic, bureaucracy of the officers of the merchant fleet as a figure for itself." (Jameson, 1981, p. 265).

It all sounds like the old Tuan Jim, who always dreams of confronting ‘savages on tropical shores, (quelling) mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean (keep) up the hearts of despairing man – always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book’ (p. 11).

The argument is that for Conrad, imperialism, despite its moral questions, is a concrete incarnation of the positive values of work, duty and loyalty, and stoical submission (to the Empire) – values which the uncivilized world over must be taught by European “adventurer.” It is this desire, no doubt, that accounts for Marlow’s – and to a certain extent, Kurtz’s – divided self, his ambivalence, and his subdued racism in *Heart of Darkness*. In a famous passage in *Lord Jim*, Tuan Jim is said to have achieved great successes for subduing the natives; but the seal of such success rests upon “the conquered ground for the soles of his feet, the blind trust of men” (p. 206). Yet, this great achievement, we are told, lies in his inherent ability, as the white lord of the Malays, to vanish the “stillness and the gloom of the land without a past” (p. 206). In another passage, Gentleman Brown is said to have “overcome them all ... women, savages” (p. 289). Marlow interjects that he himself does not “begrudge him this triumph in *articulo mortis*” (p. 289).

This is the sense in which it is detectable within Conrad’s writings, the attitude that imperialism does bring progress to those “quiet corners of the world” in spite of his denunciation of the brutal aspects of Belgian colonization in the Congo. The idea is that such “tribal societies” had better be welded into truly organic wholes. This is consistent with Conrad’s “organicist idealism.” In *Lord Jim*, for instance, Jim is said to have brought light and “things” to all those “placid, colourless forms of men and women peopling that quiet corner of the world ... (p. 257). In fact, Marlow expresses a surprise as to Jim’s belonging to this world of savages. In *Heart of*

Darkness, Marlow finds the British variant of colonization quite “humanitarian” and “progressive.”

There was a vast amount of red-good to see at any time because one knows some real work is done in there ... where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the Jolly lager-beer (p. 36).

Indeed, Conrad himself frequently, and almost nostalgically, writes of that “liberty which can only be found under the English flag”, the “Pax Britannica that embraced the world.” (Watts 1982: 24). This is equally reflected in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in which Conrad writes of Great Britain as “immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions, ... A great ship! ... ship mother or fleets and nations! The flagship of the race ...” (135) And as Cedric Watts has added, Conrad sees British colonization – despite its many brutal practices in Ireland and elsewhere – as “relatively paternalist and less ruthlessly exploitative than that of other nations” (Watts, 1980, p. 63).

But even where Conrad denounces colonial exploitation, he does so from a conservative perspective, typical of someone himself fleeing, according to Eagleton (1976, 135) from “materialism” and commercialism”. And though Conrad himself did at one time serve the ends of “materialism” and “commercialism” in his days as a merchant seaman in the service of British merchant capital and free trade imperialism. Thus Conrad, far from rejecting imperialism actually reinforces its ideology in several complicated ways, though this is not necessarily a conscious process. One example, of this is his open defense of the British Empire, where he writes, “The great British Empire went over the edge, and yet on to the inclined plane of social progress and radical reform” (Watts, 1980, p. 59). Such open endorsement of imperialist exploitation is also reflected in Conrad’s interest in what Watts calls ‘one-man

imperialism – that is, “the small personal empires established by adventurous Europeans in far-off places” such as the one established by Sir James Brooke on Sarawak Island, in the Far East (Watts, 65). In the early years of the 19th century, James Brooke proclaimed himself the “first White Rajah of Sarawak”, subdued the natives, and declared the land his personal property – until 1946 when the British government took over the island for military purposes. In a letter to Lady Margaret Brooke in 1920, Conrad writes:

The first Rajah has been one of my boyish admirations, a feeling I have kept to this day strengthened by the better understanding of the greatness of his character and the unstained rectitude of his purpose (*Letter to Cunningham* Graham; quoted in Watts 1980, p.66).

It has even been suggested that Conrad was greatly influenced by the life of such great colonialists as James Brooke when writing *Lord Jim*. This is admissible because Jim’s “adventure” too, like Brooke’s, is described in a very jingoistic and romantic style in *Lord Jim*. He is, as Marlow tells us, perched “high in the sunshine on top of that historic hills of his. He dominated the forest, the secular gloom, the old mankind. He was like a figure set upon a high pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, and perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old, that have emerged from the gloom” (Conrad 1975, p. 201). And as Marlow adds, he is a “symbol”, that is, a representative of daring, romantic ideal. In fact, Jim’s “civilizing mission” is stressed by Marlow as “that white figure in the stillness of coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma (Conrad, 1975, p. 253). This “vast enigma” is in reality, the non-European environment: “only a speck, a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all

the light left in a darkened world” (Conrad, 1975, p. 253).

Not that for Conrad the British Empire “is a bread-and-butter question”. It is that for him imperialism or colonization is nothing but a form of “aggressive attitude” on the part of conquerors – so that imperialism, for example, exists because human individuals are lacking in restraint. For Conrad, then, imperialism is partly the consequence of the need of nations and trading companies to “expand”. Though Conrad is critical of what he calls the “utilitarian lies” of European nations, he views their colonization of other regions of the world as “irrational” that is, a purely instinctual drive for conquest and wealth— something called “atavism” (a return to the primitive urge to conquer and pillage others).

The Living Self and the Dying Other

What is, however, curious about this is that this “atavism” is seen by Conrad as “necessary” for both the European nations and for what he calls “the dying nations” – for different reasons, though. In a letter to C. Graham, Conrad writes:

The living nations will gradually encroach on the territory of the dying... It is not to be supposed that any one nation of the living nations will be allowed to have the profitable monopoly of curing or cutting up these unfortunate patients ... we shall not allow England to be at a disadvantage in any re-arrangement (Quoted in Watts, 1980, p. 66).

Although many might not see Conrad's view as indicating his admiration for imperial schemes, Cedric Watts claims that Conrad's use of the terms “living” and “dying” is an attempt at mocking Lord Salisbury's distinction between “living” and “dying” nations”. But if this is indeed the case, we need not worry about Lecoud's

remark in *Nostramo* that barbarism goes about “yelling, half-naked with bows and arrows” or that it wears “the black coat of politicians” (Conrad, 1977, p. 231). As for Conrad, however, his jingoistic enthusiasm does not stop merely at the level of the struggle between the living” and “they dying” nations, but extends as far as racial prejudice. In other words, Conrad does work with a dualist version of the so-called White Man’s Burden, at least in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, where he depicts the black man, James Wait, as a “burden” to both the ship and the colonizing nations. Conrad’s representation of Wait as ambiguous, diseased, and over-sensitive is a “reflection” of his view the black people as “children of Nature”. For example, the crew in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* finds it difficult to have a consistent view of Wait; his “evasion” of work makes him a threat to the cohesion of the authoritarian values of the ship. As the narrator says, Wait is “hollow” with “the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger’s soul” (Conrad, 1979, p. 27). In fact, Wait is said to be so “evil” and “dark” that he appears to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanated from him, a subtle and dismal influence a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil” (Conrad, 1979, p. 39). Not that James Wait is simply a burden; it is just that by arousing in the crew sympathy and the feeling of humanity, he represents the “weaker races” that invariably slow down the advancement of indispensable European social values. Which is why he needs to be raised up and so made “possible”. It is in this sense that Wait is, in the words of the narrator, a “hateful burden” to the crew. And as a burden, Wait is said to be served “in his bed with rage and humility” (Conrad, 1979, p. 41), for he has also found “the secret of keeping forever on the run the fundamental imbecility of mankind” (Conrad, 1979, p.

41). However, as part of the “defective race”, Wait is simply “a dying man” (Conrad, 1979, p. 41) – with “heavy lips protruded in an everlasting black pout” (Conrad, 1979, p. 97).

Indeed, Wait is rather seen as no more than a four-legged animal, for he is repeatedly asked. “What’s the matter with your hind legs?” (Conrad, 1979, p. 46). This animal imagery is extended to Wait’s physical and mental condition, in that the narrator suspects that “a nigger does not know” his actual state of mind (Conrad, 1979, p. 46). Which is why Wait is described as “unique, and as fascinating as only something inhuman could be” (Conrad, 1979, p. 117). That is, his ambiguity and defects are as “disquieting as the failure of some law of nature” (Conrad, 1979, p. 117). This is obviously an allusion to Negroes’ alleged “genetic defect”, a theory prevalent in Conrad’s day.

In fact, the narrator concludes that Wait “was demoralizing” (Conrad, 1979, p. 117), that is, resembles – true to his race – “a disinterred black skull” (ibid). This is why Wait appears to the crew as a “black beast” (Conrad, 1979, p. 65), whose voice is “almost extinct” (p. 65). This is also why Wait is said to be fascinating; why his alleged pre-human existence reminds the crew members of “moral courage” (Conrad, 1979, p. 48). This, however, brings to mind the moral guilt of imperialism, for it is said that “neither could we pity him without risk to our dignity” (Conrad, 1979, p. 68). This means that though the black man needs to be pitied, his “horrible” condition is one of his own making. This is why Wait’s “death” does not come as a surprise precisely because he is already on the verge of extinction and also for the simple reason that he has all alone – much less his race – been “a sentimental lie” (Conrad, 1979, p. 30).

This invariably drives home the point that Conrad views the plunder of Africa – or, in his own words, the “dying nations” – as “necessary” for in the case of Wait it is clear that Conrad constructs Wait's being as a

burden, a form of “weightiness”. For example, the side of the ship on which Wait is laid up is said to be slightly submerged, possibly to indicate his “weight” (burden), as if weighted down by him (a burden on the “white” ship; the “white” ship’s “burden”). In fact, we are told that the sea itself is forced to protest Wait’s presence on the ship:

Never before had the gale seemed to us more furious, the sea more mad, the sunshine more merciless and mocking, and the position of the ship more hopeless and appalling (Conrad, 1979, p. 66).

It, therefore, appears that Wait is such a “burden” to the white crew members to the extent that they go on “dragging along with care that pitiful, that limp, that hateful burden” (Conrad, 1979, p. 133). The implication of this is that Britain – “the ship mother of fleets and nations”, or the world as a whole, would be a better place without the “niggers”, without the natives of Africa, without the James Waits. Only in this will the world be relieved of Evil and “humanizing” influences; only then will falsehood cease to triumph; only then will stupidity, pity and sentimentalism perish; only then will “the latent egoism of tenderness to suffering” (Conrad, 1979, p. 117) cease to resemble that art-animal, part-human “savage” that stirs in the jungle, in the huts of “wild men”.

Thus, by implication, Conrad regards black people as bounded by wild nature. They are incapable of making Nature operate according to their Will. This is the sense in which Conrad and his narrator, Marlow, view the natives of Africa are not “free”, that is, they are not the products of their purposeful action, but of Nature in its most primitive beginnings. This is perhaps what the white crew members on the “Narcissus” suspect when they say: “And we hated James Wait ... that limp, that hateful

burden ... neither could we pity him without risk to our dignity” (Conrad, 1979, pp. 67 – 68). Thus one would be justified to think that the narrator of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* share the same view. For example, Ian Watt has written that “Conrad habitually uses the derogatory racial terms which were general in the political and evolutionary thought of his time”. (Watts, 1980, 159).

Cannibals, Savages, and Wild Men

In *Heart of Darkness*, narrates how the Africans on the Congo River are so Savage as to resemble no human beings at all.

And between whiles I had t look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved Specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler ... to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breaches, and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs (Conrad, 1975, p. 70).

This drives home the point that Marlow habitually resorts to using animal imagery when discussing Africans, as when, for example, he says that the fireman on the vessel “caught to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, (Conrad, 1975, p. 70). This is a clear and unambiguous allusion to the civilizing mission of the white race (“full of improving knowledge”). Marlow somewhere adds that “the [ship’s] boiler seemed to have a sulky devil in it” (Conrad, 1975, p. 70). In another passage, Marlow tells this little tale:

A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the back, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of hive ... (Conrad, 1975, p. 105).

Other passages are worth quoting in full:

In front of the first rank, along the river, three men, plastered with bright red earth from head to foot, struggled to and from restlessly. When we came abreast again, they faced the river stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce river-demon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail ... they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sound of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany (Conrad, 1975, pp. 108 – 109).

Ian Watt has argued that "*Heart of Darkness* is not essentially a political work"; or that "Conrad mainly followed his own direct imaginative perceptions, and in so far as he treated the Africans at all, it was essentially as human beings seen from the inward and subjective point of view which characterizes *Heart of Darkness* as a whole" (Conrad, 1980, 160). Watt's argument rests on shaky ground: below are cited passages in which Conrad apparently relies on his so-called "imaginative perceptions", and also where he treats the Africans as "human beings":

Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails (Conrad, 1975, pp. 42 – 43).

The man seemed young – almost a boy-but you know with them It's hard to tell. (Conrad, 1975, p. 45).

[The boat] was paddled by black fellows...they had faces like grotesque masks ... (Conrad, 1975, p. 40).

...one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink ... (Conrad, 1975, p. 45)

There's something pathetically childish in the ruins of grass walls (Conrad, 1975, p. 48).

It had loops to go over his ears, in the evening he could be seen squatted on the bank rinsing that wrapper in the creek with great care, then spreading it solemnly on a bush to dry (Conrad, 1975, p. 60).

It is clear from the above quotations that Conrad does not, as Watt would argue, treat the Africans as human beings. Chinua Achebe argues that, on the basis of the demeaning representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, "Conrad [is] a thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe, 1990, 11). Achebe adds that "Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe, 1990, 3). In fact, on every page of *Heart of Darkness* Africans are animals, "sixty pairs of eyes", "shadows", "phantoms" "visions" and "angles" – that is, their concrete materiality is nullified. Yet we agree entirely with Watt that Conrad surely "followed his imaginative perceptions", for it will then be unimpeachable that the racism we ascribe to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is, in reality, Conrad's – even by Watt's argument. A related issue: how can it be

said that Conrad opposes the plunder and extirpation of the Africans?

The preceding argument might, however, explain why Kurtz, in his desperate quest for ivory, represents the practical expeditions of “the Company” which Marlow, too, represents in the Congo. It is in this sense that Kurtz and Marlow are not really, or fundamentally, opposed, for “the company”, they represent is the embodiment of imperialist social relations. So when Marlow tells us that Kurtz is hollow at the core, it all sounds ironic, for how can Kurtz be hollow at a when he has successfully entrenched imperialist relations in the native environment?

Marlow does apparently regard Kurtz as having been claimed by the African wilderness. In this sense, he is, for Marlow, *less than human*. So in effect Marlow rejects Kurtz principally because of his supposed, “immersion in the African wilderness”. Now, notice the apologetic, and the severely evasive, tone of the following passage:

Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him ... Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I cant' say. I think the knowledge came to him at last ... he was hollow at the core (Conrad, 1975, p. 97).

And though Kurtz is said by Marlow to have “taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” (Conrad, 1975, p. 85), he is prevented from returning to the African jungle by Marlow. This is, as Berthoud says, Marlow’s “last ditch affirmation of the reality of the civilized against the primitive. His success in bringing Kurtz back to his cabin, therefore, is some sort of spiritual victory” (Berthoud, 1978, 38). This is true for somewhere in the text, Marlow confesses that the himself has

“turned mentally to Kurtz for relief – positively for relief” (Conrad, 1975, p. 102) having, in his own words, “breathed an atmosphere so vile” (Conrad, 1975, 102). Thus, Marlow does admire Kurtz, for, as he says, he himself finds that “Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man” (Conrad, 1975, p. 102) and that he and Kurt are partisans “of methods for which the time was not ripe” (Conrad, 1975, p. 102); and that, in the last analysis, “I [Marlow] did not betray Mr. Kurtz” (Conrad, 1975, p. 105).

Symbolically, then, Marlow’s journey to the “heart of darkness” is a voyage into the African’s – or the black’s – ethnic and cultural being as a *past country*, a past he finds to be bereft of light, progress and human meaning; a place where it is written that “men who come out here should have no entrails” (Conrad, 1975, p. 51); a place where the past comes “back to one ... in the shape of an unrestful [ungraceful] and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence” (Conrad, 1975, p. 66); a racial past in which “twenty cannibals [are always] splashing around and pushing” (Conrad, 1975, p. 67) – a past full of “rush walls of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the drop of heavy ad motionless foliage” (Conrad, 1975, p. 68). Marlow conveys this when he says, in a highly evocative passage, this:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart darkness. It was very quiet there... We were wonderers on pre-historic earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have financed ourselves the first of en taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the coast of profound anguish and of

excessive toil. (Conrad, 1975, p. 68).

Thus, for Conrad, the African environment does not, in the least, resemble a human world, its natives are “prehistoric men” in whose world one is always “cut off from the comprehension of [their] surroundings; in which the intruding representatives of European Progress European glide “past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories” (Conrad, 1975, pp. 68-69): “[The Africans] howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces... ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough (Conrad, 1975, p. 69).

Marlow’s narrative reinvents the Africans as cannibals. For Marlow, the Africans are cannibals because they lack restraint, that is, are still enmeshed in savagery. Marlow informs us that his dead African helmsman “is of no account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara” (p. 75), and that for this reason, he would rather give him up to the fishes, rather than become “a first-class temptation and possible cause some startling trouble” (Conrad, 1975, p. 88). The supposition is that his fellow Africans, who naturally being cannibals, would find the corpse “a first-class temptation”.

Conrad’s subtle suspicion that Africans could indeed be cannibals betrays his conception of black people as part of primitive nature, ‘smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid or savage” (Conrad, 1975, p. 39). This state of nature is for Conrad no more than the logical, and direct, extension of the nature of their race. This means that the blacks “know” themselves only through their own primitive action that is, what they do is themselves. This is, in fact, the philosophical origin of Marlow’s famous remark that the Africans “have no clear idea

of time ... still belonged to the beginnings of time – had no inherited experience to teach them as it were (Conrad, 1975, p. 75.).

Blood Consciousness: Racial Solidarity

In a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad wrote: “Yes, dear Edward. But have you ever had to keep an enraged Negro armed with a razor from coming aboard, along a ten-inch plank, and drive him back to the wharf with only a short stick in your hands?” (Conrad 1972: 34). This obsession with the race is reminiscent of Marlow’s admiration for the White Race in *Heart of Darkness*, as opposed to the so-called Savages, Marlow’s romantic admiration of a white man, is representative:

I took him for a sort of vision.
I saw a high starched collar,
white cuffs, a light alpaca
jacket, snowy trousers, a clear
neck tie, and varnished boots
... Hair parted, brushed, oiled
... He was amazing ... I
respected his collars, his vast
cuffs, his brushed hair
(Conrad, 1975, pp. 45-46).

There is detectable within *Heart of Darkness* a striking contrast between the Negroes and the European colonialists, called the Pilgrims. This is discernible in the fact that while the natives are seen by Marlow as “shadows”, “bundles of acute angles” (Conrad, 1975, p. 45) or “moribund shapes” (ibid), terms which deny their concrete, physical existence, the European colonialists are described as “amazing, miracle”, with hair “parted, brushed oiled” (p. 45) or people of “character” (Conrad, 1975, p. 46), terms which reinforce and affirm their materiality and humanness.

This feeling of racial solidarity is also visible in *Lord Jim*, where we are told that people with the European mind, usually have “a tenacity of purpose, a touch of altruism ...” (Conrad, 1977, pp. 198 – 199). Yet, this is what Dain Warris, the Malay, is said to lack, in that he has not “Jim’s racial prestige and the refutation of Invincible,



supernatural power. He was not the visible, tangible incarnation of unfailing truth and of unfailing victory' (Conrad, 1977, p. 272). Above all, however, Dain Warris is "still one of them". While Jim is "One of us. Moreover, the white man a tower of strength in himself, was invulnerable, while Dain Warris could be killed" (Conrad, 1980, p. 272).

This is consistent, by implication, with Conrad's projection that the white man alone is the source of "wisdom and courage" (Conrad, 1980, p. 272). In a letter to C. Graham, Conrad responds to the suggestion that the European race could be doomed, by saying: "It would be a pity. It would narrow life; it would destroy a whole side of it which had its morality and was always picturesque and at times inspiring." (Conrad, 1969, p. 62). So, it is not surprising at all when Conrad in *Lord Jim* writes that Jim "came from the right place; he was one of us. He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith, and upon the instinct of courage" (Conrad, 1980, p. 38).

In the same manner, Marlow evokes the image of Jim, the white man, as standing in the midst of "those dark raced men, his stalwart figure in the white apparel, be gleaming clusters of his fair hair, seemed to catch all the sunshine that trickled through the cracks in the closed shatters of that dim wall, with its walls of mats and a roof of thatch. He appeared like a creature not only of another kind but of another essence" (Conrad, 1980, p. 174). It all sounds as if Jim is descended from the alleged "the lords of humankind". But then, what do we make of the statement that courage and victory could only be "endurable and enduring when based on a firm conviction in the truth of ideas racially [European] in whose name is established the order, the morality of an ethical progress" (Conrad, 1980, p. 255)? Thus, while Conrad at times attacks imperialist plunder of "tribal societies", he

at the same time celebrates its tendency to weld such societies into truly organic units. For Conrad, then, "tribal societies" are not the sort of arenas in which the romantic ideal of human relations can be presented in their ideal formal purity; rather, they are the place where the "inner life" is repressed, that is, exiled beyond articulation. But European colonization can be seen to change all this – its merchant navy represents the place of real business, a place where "human relations can be presented in all their idea formal purity" (Jameson, 1981, 210). It is also the place from which Conrad himself, for example, on so many occasions in his life, contemplated "that dreary prose of the world which is the daily life in the universal factory called capitalism" (Jameson, 1981, p. 210) As for the colonialists, Conrad sees in them the amazing capacity to defy "death in a thousand shapes; the unknown seas, the loath some and strange diseases ... they appear magnified, not as agents of trade but as instruments of a recorded destiny, pushing out into the unknown in obedience to an inward voice, to an impulse beating in the blood ... They were wonderful". (Conrad, 1980, p. 173). Thus, even when I moments where Conrad is critical of imperialist practices, he does so as to be expected, from position of its anti-romantic face, its violence and homogenizing cultural practice. For example, the colonialist Tuan Jim is described as "an obscure conqueror of fame", and his exploits – as a white lord of the Malays – as "the alluring shape of ... an extraordinary success!" (Conrad, 1980, p. 313).

This suggests why Marlow views imperialism as both "good" and "bad" – that is, good because it brings "order and progress" to savages; bad because it threatens to discredit the romantic appeal of its claims to be a civilizing force. Notice that Marlow/Conrad sees imperialism as the embodiment of Duty and work, ideals which he sees as timeless and indispensable – indeed a form of moral imperative, crucial

especially for those “savages” who have not “any clear idea of time” and who still belong “to the beginnings of time” (Conrad, 1975, p. 75).

It has indeed been suggested that Conrad’s subtle glorification of European colonization of non-Western people in *Nostramo* is at bottom, the consequence of the dissolution in practice of his “organic society” which later discovered in industrial society a mode of “authentic being”. While Conrad was writing *Nostramo* (1900 – 1904) the European colonial project was expanding rapidly, so that Conrad repeatedly found it more convenient to attack what he prefers to call “material interests” rather than the specific arrangement of the colonial project. True, Conrad portrays the horrible effects of Gould’s silver mine on the life of the natives of Sulaco, but he fails to see those effects in the context of the competition and hunt for sources of raw materials throughout the world, and the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.

In the case of the San Tome’ silver mine, its owners have indeed worked it “by means of lashes on the backs of slaves” (p. 52), but it is still clear that it is no more than an appendage to the capitalist world market, a reservoir of cheap labor and raw materials, necessary for the take-off of the industrial economy within the leading European countries. But these are what *Nostramo* reinvents as “material interests”, a term which is never specified or made practically tenable.

The San Tome’ silver mine and the social classes its wealth has generated are certainly at the centre of all the outrages of imperialism in Sulaco, the “stories of political outrage; friends, relatives, ruined, imprisoned, killed in battles of senseless civil wars barbarously executed in ferocious proscriptions” (*Nostramo*, p. 88); the extirpation of the whole clans of Indians, the feeding of the mine with their bodies, the corpses “thrown into its maw”— all these were the results of the extension of capitalist relations to the

colonial territories, rather than the development of what Conrad euphemistically calls “material interests.

To this extent, then, if in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad offers a romantic critique of imperialism, in *Nostramo* he offers a mechanical “materialist” one. Yet Conrad could discover in Germany and Russia’s partition of his native Poland an evil worse than European colonization of Africa, Asia, and South America. His eloquent condemnation of the colonization of Poland leads him to call it “the crime” (Quoted in Watts, 57) As for subjugated Poland, Conrad upholds her as “that country which demands to be loved as no other country has ever been loved...” (Quoted in Watts, 57). As for Russia, his arch-enemy, Conrad bitterly regards her as “a yawning open chasm between East and West; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of the mercy every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience” (Quoted in Watts, 57).

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown how, at least in the specific case of Conrad, author and narrator share the same perspective or attitude to the non-European Other. The most important authorities on Conrad are agreed that Conrad has exploited the author-narrator nexus in his treatment of thematic, character, and temporal representation in order to shape and modulate the authorial and narratorial points of view. By juxtaposing Conrad’s narrator’s view of the narrative events with Conrad’s own non-fictional writings, such as his letters and critical essays, one could detect a remarkable similarity of perspective and narrative attitude between Conrad and his narrator, Marlow.

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