

THE TRAVEL OF ONE'S SELF INTO THE OTHER-A POSSIBLE ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S LITERARY WORK

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Abstract: For a long time, and perhaps even still, there has been no similarity between the anthropological research and the literary text. Postmodern literary criticism has developed new perspectives that connect anthropology with literature.

*Our approach based on a research study abroad should be considered an interdisciplinary one that aims at looking into the literary text through anthropological lenses. Rethinking and reevaluating Joseph Conrad's literary work from this angle claims a new approach of the self as related to the **other**. Like the anthropological fieldworker, Conrad's characters make an ethnic leap into the **other's** culture, and this immersion is not only a physical movement into space, but also a psychological journey into the **other's** space and self. Such ideas as transculturation, cultural displacement and assimilation, identification with the other, *L'autre c'est moi-meme* converge into the same direction.*

Keywords: literature, anthropology, self, otherness, transculturation

Traditionally anthropology and literature have been separated through their objects: the first is about patterns of human behavior and culture, the latter about text and literary analysis. However a new wave of "symbolic anthropology" has been developed by some anthropologists as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, or David Schneider, out of whom Geertz is probably the most explicit as concerning the similarity between culture and text.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) he states that culture is a system of signs and symbols that should be interpreted as we would a text. The new modern type of writings is also an organic one and should be looked at in the same direction. Reflections on the two disciplines complicity have been growing after 1973 with Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. A new focus appeared that of textuality, to be found in anthropology and this has led to borrowing of techniques and theories by ethnographers who experienced with such literary devices as intertextuality, juxtaposition, etc. Ethnography is to be seen here as methodology of anthropology.

Both Geertz and Clifford analyze the writings of Borislav Malinovski, a famous anthropologist, in parallel with those of Conrad's. This was possible with the evidence of the Malinovski's diary published posthumously. The parallel mirrors similarities in situations and in concerns (Conrad's Polish exile, his becoming author in English, his approach of the exotic) between the anthropologist, Malinovski and the modernist writer. Moreover Clifford shows that Malinovski among the Trobrianders experienced a "crisis of self", the same with the one attributed to Jim and Kurtz, Conrad's characters.

The two are even more connected to one another by the paradigms of their writings: self and the *other*. Here is what a young ethnographer, Loring Danforth writes about in *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* whom we quote from with some ellipsis:

"Anthropology inevitably involves an encounter with the Other. All too often, however, the ethnographic distance that separates the reader of anthropological texts and the anthropologist himself from the Other is rigidly maintained and at times even artificially

exaggerated. In many cases this distancing leads to an exclusive focus on the Other as primitive, bizarre, and exotic. The gap between a familiar "we" and an exotic "they" is a major obstacle to a meaningful understanding of the Other, an obstacle that can only be overcome through some form of participation in the world of the Other."

Clifford Geertz claims that only a few anthropologists, Malinovski being one of them, may be recognized as having a distinctive literary style. In his diary self and the *other* are revealed by means of introspection from a double perspective: the author's and the ethnographer's. The self is unveiled by the author to the anthropologist and vice versa, and this shift becomes possible in the literary text.

Conrad's works, like the anthropology which they were so often allied with, chartered new geographical routes from Congo to Borneo, from South America to Malaysia, in which he depicted the contacts and conflicts of so-called primitives and European peoples. The journeys traced literal wanderings, and also, perhaps more significantly, involved psychological journeys. Almost by definition, anthropology traced journeys to distant lands.

Michael Levenson comments: 'And in the view of Heart of Darkness that has prevailed until recently, the fiction has been regarded as a paradigm, almost a defining instance of interior narrative. Within this conception, Marlow's journey, only incidentally involves movement through physical space; in essence it represents a "journey into self", an "introspective plunge", "a night journey into the unconscious" (Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf*(Cambridge University Press, 1991, p 5-6).

If for the anthropologists the journeys are mere acts of fieldwork, Conrad's works on primitive culture turn into psychological journeys, exhaling cultural anxiety.

John Griffith in "*Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma*(p.5) speaks about the *anthropological dilemma* that applies not merely to the scientific concerns of anthropology or the analysis of particular cultures, but more widely to the cultural attractions and animal aversions which have become known as "primitivism". The journeys of these Victorian writers coincided with the philosophical meanderings of anthropological writers like the founder of cultural anthropology, E.B. Tylor."

"The anthropological dilemma, which arose in the light of Victorian science and travel literature concerned the ability of people of one culture(particularly 'civilized' societies) to penetrate the thought of another society('the primitive').(p10)

Conrad's writings reflect from a modern perspective, transculturation, meaning not only the physical, field approach of another culture, but also a relation between the self and the world, that raises the question of whether there is a world to which the self belongs.

Michael Levenson comments on a condition that persists all through Conrad's work, a radical disorientation that shadows any stable relation between the self and the world, and that raises the question of whether there is a world to which the self belongs. Levenson's comment suggests a similar problem to that posed in relation to anthropological fieldwork, in which the fieldworker is questioned a stable sense of self identity. Like him, Conrad's characters make 'an ethnic leap' into 'others' culture and this immersion is not only a physical movement in space, but also a psychological journey into one's self and into the *other's*. When Jim, for example, climbs over the wall into Patusan, he makes a leap into the unknown and it is the kind of 'ethnic leap' that both Conrad and his characters make. Here, we disagree with John Griffith who affirms that "Unlike the anthropologist, though, Conrad's characters are often unable fully to penetrate the *other* culture."

Boris Malinovsky, a famous anthropologist in his diary, finally, claims the opposite. Both the fieldworker and the author are able to penetrate other cultures at even dislocation. Anthropologists as James Clifford, Clifford, Geertz recognized the difficulties of transcultural identification.

Marlow is also aware of this sense of cultural isolation in *Heart of Darkness*. In relating his journey down the African coast, he remarks: “The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things”.

The fieldworker is often caught paradoxically between worlds as ‘friend and stranger,(...)as participant and observer’.

Like the anthropologist who engages in fieldwork, Conrad’s characters often isolate themselves from their own culture. The sense of isolation is also emphasized in *Lord Jim*: “It is when we try to grapple with another man’s intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence(LJ 179-80).

The question is to what degree are these ‘leaps’ possible? Do Conrad’s characters abandon their cultural identifications? Do they cut themselves off from their own cultures?

Seemingly Jim and Kurtz do that. But what about their own selves?

‘Jim took the second desperate leap of his life-the leap that landed him into the life of Patusan, into the trust, the love, the confidence of the people’(LJ 380). Only through abandoning his identification with his own race is Jim able to establish his status in the community of Patusan. Similarly, Kurtz purposefully cuts himself off from his own culture of another but not by negating their own selves. They insert into the *others* trying to go native and give themselves a secondary identity. The motif of *going native* exists in anthropological literature, too. Conrad’s characters do not cease to an ethnic surrender, they transcend their selves into the *others*.

Still there are differences regarding how deep this immersion is: Marlow is more an observer than a participant trying to keep distance while the process of *going native* works with Kurtz. The differences between Marlow and Kurtz reflect the two different temptations of Victorian anthropology: the first tries to impose the moral standards of the society, the latter is that of entirely *going native*.

Our approach doesn’t claim to be a thorough analysis of the travel of one’s self into the *other* , it is only one of the ways of revisiting and reevaluating Conrad as a modernist writer from the perspective of ‘High Science’, how anthropology is often called. The travel becomes a return voyage between ‘High Romance’ and ‘High Science’.

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