

JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to depict Conrad's main concern with character while tracing the life of a man in such a way as to illuminate the innermost recesses of his soul. For such an approach to be successfully promoted Soja's Thirdspacing based on the Firstspace of object, Secondspace of thought and Thirdspace of experience will be turned to good account. In spite of the darkness from the end of the novel which is no more defined than at the beginning of the narrative, this darkness continues to exist as something subconscious, mysterious, ambiguous, impenetrable and the only form of enlightenment cognitively explained by us concerns the price of understanding its secrets which amounts to the wisdom acquired by the narrator, on the one hand and the soul –madness of the second character, Kurtz, on the other.

Keywords: Conrad, Soja, Thirdspacing, Heart of Darkness, Marlow, Kurtz

Conrad has been regarded as “the first important modern novelist in English” (112) by David Daiches because of his metaphysical vision which distinguishes itself through the significance of the world he creates which is different from the public significance of the world created by XVIIIth and XIXth century novelists due to the “existentialist crisis” (14) implanted into his novels. The obscurity, vagueness and ambiguity of the first person narration, overcharged with the mystical and mythical connotations, has made us turn to good account a cognitive approach in order to depict and interpret Conrad's unusual African experience.

For the meaning of Conrad's novella to be properly tackled, a short presentation of its subject-matter would be relevant. Following closely Conrad's own frustrating experience in the Congo, the novella depicts the sea voyage undertaken by Marlow, a sea captain of the *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, towards the remotest part of the Congo.

Through the influence of his well-off aunt, Marlow got appointed “skipper of a river boat” (39) that was to take him to the heart of the dark continent, very much alike Conrad himself. Unlike Conrad, Marlow was rather sceptical from the very beginning and this could be noticed in his hesitating suspicious manner of tackling the Congo issues in Brussels.

The story depicts Marlow's journey from London via Brussels, to the dark Congo and the “Inner Station” in search of Mr Kurtz, an idealist who had contemplated to bring civilization to Africa, only to be finally drawn into its savagery and declare, in his dying outcry “The horror! The horror”. Whereas Conrad returned ill and with an intense sense of failure obviously without having encountered any magnificently ill-doer Kurtz-like figure, Marlow, as the captain of the boat, took very seriously the responsibility of rescuing Kurtz who died on his boat. Moreover, once returned to London, he has to report Kurtz's death to his fiancée, choosing to tell her a lie

over the “revelation” of the moral anguish he has experienced during the last minutes of the agent's agony. Being asked by her what Kurtz's last words were, he claims that “the last word he spoke was – your name” (79).

Mention is also to be made of the fact that the story contains a second story recounted by Marlow, on a ship in a London port, to an audience consisting of a Lawyer, an Accountant and a Director of Companies.

Malcolm Bradbury in “The Modern British Novel” approaches Marlow as “not just the experiencer of the tale, but its constructor, interpreter, investigator, decoder, an intruded presence between tale and reader” (129). Marlow even upholds his own view of the story when he says that “the meaning of an episode is not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (31).

The last syntagm “the spectral illumination of moonshine” suggests that the metaphysical aspect arises at the level of an image, offering us “a lesson of anthological amplification” (Bachelard, 244). The novelty of the image and its amplification through references to Marlow's experiences into the nature of darkness are meant to show that space is nothing but “a horrible outside-inside” (Bachelard, 244). Hence, the ambiguity associated with it.

Before pointing out the “horrible outside-inside” of Kurtz's unuttered words and intensions, his fears of having no hiding inner place to take refuge or no outer space to run to, Conrad's gradual evocation of the physical background, with his focus on the details of dangers and difficulties, will be analysed via Soja's cognitive theory.

Soja's “Thirdspace” described by him as an encouraging manner of thinking differently about the “inherent spatiality of human life” (1) is based on the awareness that “we have always been intrinsically spatial being active participants in the social construction of our embracing collectively created spatialities” (1). Greatly indebted to Henri Lefebvre, Soja is concerned with exploring the “limitless dimensions of our social spatiality” and with unifying “historicality, sociality and spatiality” as a way of “threading through the complexities of the modern world” (6).

Interestingly, Soja's has exemplified how life-stories are as significantly spatial as they are temporal and social, turning to good account his triple awareness of the connections between space, time and social being. Soja's central argument is based on the “ontological, epistemological and theoretical rebalancing of spatiality, historicality and sociality as all-embracing dimensions of human life” (10). His method called “Thirthing-as-Othering” (10) is a rather “dialectically reasoning mode” (10) of relating “spatiality, historicality and sociality” (10).

Soja describes the spatiality of human life as a Firstspace perspective focused on things, as Secondspace conceived “in ideas, in representations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms” (10), whereas “the exploration of Thirdspace can be described in terms of a journey to 'real-and-imagined' places” (10), creatively inquiring into the “connected spatialities of race, class and gender” (10).

The inquiry into the “connected spatialities of race, class and gender” is also an important issue of investigation for Conrad himself, and, by extension, for Marlow, his alter-ego. Foucault himself has filled Thirdspaces with the “trialectics of space, knowledge and power”, issues that prove to have represented the basis of Kurtz's philosophy of life.

Since knowledge is assumed to be more easily absorbed by the historical imagination of all those concerned with the Congo as “things” and “thoughts”, we will closely identify them in Conrad's narrative and comment upon them in relation to Soja's Firstspace of objects and

Secondspace of thoughts (ideas). Very much like Hayden White who “unconsciously subordinated spatiality to history”, Conrad is also concerned with the history of the Belgians' first expedition to the Congo when they established trading stations and administration centres, proving that “the Congo natives were susceptible of civilization and that the Congo basin was rich enough to repay exploitation” (12).

However, Conrad's personal experience in the Congo revealed him how “the vilest scramble for loot” has disfigured “the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (12). Marlow's concern for details brings into bold relief sand-banks, marshes, forests, woods (30), snakes, birds (31), hillsides, groves (58), trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons (61), stations, hovel (67), steamboat, shoal, bushes (79), ivory (85), ivory (95), knobs (96), rust, fillings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills (111).

Paying attention to “the surface reality” (17) while struggling to keep the ship afloat and to get it upriver saves Marlow from “reverting to savagery” (17), claims Paul O'Prey in his Introduction to “Heart of Darkness”. The description of things, of details of sensation and action also reveals Marlow's inner thoughts. A first clue regarding the close connection between the Firstspace of objects and the Secondspace of thoughts, of inner truths is surfaced in the following quotation: “When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality, the reality, I tell you – fades. The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same” (21).

Several critics have regarded the journey depicted in the novel as “a journey into Marlow's subconscious”, or, like Albert J. Guerard, “as a psychological-anthropological 'night journey’”, “involving profound spiritual change in the voyager” (15). In its classical form the journey is a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light (in Conrad, 15).

Closely related to such assumptions is the thought entertained by Marlow regarding the atmosphere of the journey: “Going up that river was like going back to beginnings, when vegetation ... and the big trees were kings” (15). “Going back to beginnings” can be tackled from a twofold temporal and spatial perspective. Spatially speaking, it resembles “a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light” (Guerard in Conrad, 15). Soja's preoccupations with spaces that “difference makes” (11), through reconceptualizations of the frontiers of Thirdspace, have also covered “the connected spatialities of race, class and gender”.

Bell Hook's essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” commented upon in Soja's contribution focused on Thirdspace, contains reconsiderations on “the lived spaces of representation as potentially nurturing places of resistance, real-and-imagined, material-and-metaphorical meeting grounds for struggles over all forms of oppression” (12), where they are encountered.

Critics have generally paid little attention to Conrad's natives, to their marginal position and to their social, political, historical “marginality as a space of radical openness” (12). Soja's Secondspace of thought and Thirdspace of experience will be employed as entries to decoding and investigating the natives depicted in the novel, their behaviour and the jungle as “the lived space”, as a potentially “nurturing place of resistance” (12).

Bachelard's dialectics of “outside-inside” (238) will be also turned into account through a series of images meant to direct the readers' thoughts towards the positive and the negative aspects of marginal existence. The dialectics of the “outside-inside” is more or less consciously employed by Conrad while he contemplates his characters, mostly his natives. Their physical background (the jungle) being full of superstitions, of “incomprehensible mystery” (Conrad, 19) is still rooted in an “implicit geometry ... which spaces out” (Bachelard, 239) both the narrator's

and the readers' thinking.

Conrad lessons us into understanding such a physical space as “the space of shadows” in Henri Michaux's terminology (in Bachelard, 244). Michaux opines that “the horrible outside-inside” is the true genuine space. The further claims that some “shadows straining themselves for the last time, make a hopeless effort 'to keep them joint’”, adding that “they didn't get on well” (244 – our transl).

From the page 77 onwards, Conrad attempts to orchestrate in an extremely original manner the “outside-inside” dialectical association and to keep the two adverbs joint. Due to the thick fog, the jungle of both banks looked quite impenetrable to Marlow, while he was sailing down the Congo river towards Kurtz's Inner Station. This outside “impenetrable” appearance further enhanced by “the river-side bushes” that “were certainly very thick” was doubled by “the undergrowth behind” that “was penerable” (77). The last syntagm is a clear clue regarding the “outside” dimension of the landscape, further associated with the fact that “eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us” (77).

In spite of the danger of being attacked, Marlow suddenly realized that the idea of attack was “inconceivable” due to the “nature of the noise – of the cries” (78) they had heard. “Unexpected, wild, and violent as they had been, they had given me an irresistible impression of sorrow” ... “The action was very far from being aggressive – it was not even defensive, in the usual sense it was undertaken under the stress of desperation, and in its essence was purely protective” (78).

The “outside-inside” dialects suits Hook's approach to the “margin as a space of radical openness” as “a place of resistance”, as “ground for struggles over all forms of oppression” (in Soja, 12). After a short period of perfect silence, Marlow and the rest of crew “were being shot at” with arrows by the natives forcing them “to close the shutter on the land-side” (81). There followed rifle reports from the ship, and “the tumult of angry and warlike yells” from the shore accompanied by “a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth”, “a great commotion in the bush” and the cease of “the shower of arrows” (82).

The “outside-inside” dialectics conveniently applied by us as a methodological grid to depict the blend of morality and adventure in Conrad's novella has led us towards the concept of “restraint” (16), regarded by Paul O'Prey as a major theme of the novella. Quite surprisingly and paradoxically, the only individuals in the story that have any real restraint are the “half-starved cannibals” (17), on board of the steamer who, to our surprise and to Marlow's surprise as well, restrain themselves from eating up the pilgrims.

“Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience, can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze ... It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly” (76).

On the other hand, Kurtz, Marlow's sole goal of the journey, has “no restraint, no urgent work and no belief” (O'Prey in Conrad, 21). His lack of “faith” and “extremism” (21) are in opposition with the genuine “belief” (21) considered by Marlow as essential in order to face darkness. The above-mentioned negative features are further enhanced by his immense greed for money and power. Due to them, Kurtz is incapable to properly tackle the “forces of savagery” (21) that are both inside and outside himself.

Foucault's explorations of thirdspaces as “the space in which we live, which draws us out

of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs” (in Soja, 15) are filled with the “trialectics of space, knowledge and power” and they will be also taken into account while depicting Kurtz's character. Kurtz's obvious preoccupation of exercising his power over the natives is most of the time hidden by his eloquence. Power and malevolence are revealed in their extreme manifestation under the form of the heads on the poles outside his house. They actually testify to the fact that “Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence” (104).

The quotation can be interpreted resorting again to Bachelard's “outside-inside dialectics”. The “heads on the poles” are the visible shreds of evidence of his inner disturbed self. At the opposite pole, there are items of information, regarding Kurtz's fiancée, the Penelopian-like woman patiently and determinedly waiting for him to return rich and healthy, so that they could finally get married (towards the end of the book we learn that his fiancée's relatives were to blame for his journey to Africa because they rejected him for his poor social status, unconsciously pushing into his gradual moral involution).

Pierre Reverdy in “Risks and Dangers” was wandering whether “a simple word, a name, would be enough to shake the walls of your power” (in Bachelard, 244). It seems that his fiancée's name which remains unknown to the readers up to the end was not enough “to shatter the walls of his power” and make him human again. Kurtz's nightmarish life was simple because it was radical.

In spite of “all his promises and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart” (120), nothing remained of it but a memory for his fiancée. Since Kurtz was for Marlow “as enigmatic as the darkness in which he dwelt” (20), the development of Marlow's perception of him is accomplished in an atmosphere of cognitive vagueness. Marlow's expectations related to Kurtz are mainly based on rumours, hints acquired from “smiles of indefinable meaning” or from “unspeakable rites” (21).

The only concrete source for better perceiving Kurtz is the latter's report on the “Suppression of Savage Customs” described as “a phrase or two of mealy-mouthed reformist exhortation that would not do credit to a Maugham missionary let alone the 'extraordinary man' Kurtz is supposed by all accounts to be, so that the 'irony' of the scrawled outcry at the end of the report – 'Exterminate all the brutes' – is about as subtle and unexpected as the missionary's falling for the local call-girl” (21).

Marlow's conclusion regarding the report amounts to the fact that he characterized the peroration as “magnificent”, adding that “It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august benevolence” (21). Marlow's main concern was to find Kurtz and talk to him in order to complete the descriptive grid according to which it clearly appeared that “Kurtz had been essentially a great musician ... a universal genius ... and an extremist” (115). To this Marlow added “It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through” (115) and his “impenetrable darkness” (111).

Previous to reaching such conclusions, Kurtz was mainly a “word” (20) uttered mostly in fear by those concerned with him, or, more strongly, at the end of Marlow's journey to the “real” spaces of the Congo jungle, a “voice” (110). Marlow tried to grasp the hidden vibrations and the possible meanings that were reverberating in Kurtz's voice, concluding that “It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart” (110).

Relying heavily on Soja's Thirdspace of experience rendered concrete as a journey to

“real” and “imagined” places, we are convinced that no other modern novelist could have more inspiringly depicted the last moments of the dying Kurtz. The image of the dying man is amplified through the suggestion that “he struggled” (110), that “on that ivory face” all one could see was “the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair” (111). Wondering whether Kurtz was living his life again” in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge”, Marlow heard his cry “in a whisper at some image, at some vision”, a cry that “was no more than a breath – ‘The horror! The horror!’ (111).

The “outside-inside dialectics” reveals, through the audible outer “cry”, “the inner punishment of turning himself into a mere echo of the futile, vain noise that he had once been before” (Bachelard, 244).

We can conclude saying that the “outside-inside dialectics” is raised to the rank of the absolute. These two ontologically charged adverbs are not part of an artificial syntax. On the contrary, they seem to weld the nouns and verbs in such a way that Kurtz's whispered noise finally melts away inside his being destroyed by the existential punishment of having lived “in the world of wrong aims” (Bachelard, 244).

Soja's Firstspace of objects, Secondspace of thought and Thirdspace of experience have been instrumental to increasing our comprehension of Kurtz's dramatic end. Ill, unable to exculpate himself of his former abuses and mostly fearing death, Kurtz realized that he had no place where to run to or to take refuge because space was nothing but “a horrible outside-inside” (Bachelard, 245). This “outside-inside” dialectics points out the split personality where the inner and outer selves instead of cognitively merging into a harmonious relationship, irrationally part from each other as if they had never peacefully coexisted.

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