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“The Self, the Other, and the World: Epistemology and Ethics in Joseph Conrad’s Oeuvre”

A summary

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse six of Joseph Conrad’s texts, namely: *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897), *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim* (1900), “Amy Foster” (1901), “The Secret Sharer” (1910) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911),with particular reference to the issue of the protagonists’ confrontation with three kinds of alterity, that is the self in the face of limited self-knowledge and man’s natural proneness to self-deception; the ultimately unknowable other person; and the external world which constitutes a challenge for man in the form of the dangers of the natural world, mortality, cruel fate, the inexorable forces of history or the general sense of hostility of the universe. The first-person narration in all of the discussed texts invites a discussion of the subjective perception of man’s identity, interpersonal relations and individual response to the challenges posed by the circumstances.

Prior to the discussion of the texts, Chapter One provides the background of the analyses. Firstly, it presents Conrad’s own unstable identity, his sense of alienation and rootlessness, his yearning for a coherent consciousness, and his epistemological scepticism. However, despite the fact that both Conrad’s narrative techniques and the subject matter of his works indicate his doubts about (self-)knowledge and communication, the very act of storytelling constructs human interrelations that bridge the gap between individuals, introduce a sympathetic rendition of the human lot, help to attain self-knowledge by presenting communal truth and testify to the possibility of communication. Secondly, this chapter introduces the concept of alterity as understood by Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Conrad’s texts discussed in this thesis seem to lend themselves to an analysis through the prism of Levinasian thought. The philosopher underlines the fundamental unknowability of the other for whom one is always responsible and with whom one enters a relationship that defines one’s identity and helps transcend the self. Levinas also mentions death and the external world as forms of alterity to be faced by man.

Chapter Two focuses on the idea of the self as an other. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz’s self-willed alienation and pathological self-centredness lead to his self-mythologization, complete hollowness and utter disregard for the lives of other people, but also to morbid self-delusion. His case demonstrates that achieving self-knowledge may imply discovering terrible truth. At the other end of the spectrum, work that requires cooperation and solidarity is presented as an escape from the prison of subjective self-consciousness and a possible source of self-cognizance as it requires involvement in what is not-I. In *Lord Jim*, Jim’s imagination, day-dreaming, self-preoccupation, detachment from others and lack of an internalized system of values render him an other to himself. He either resorts to an ideal image of himself as a hero of adventure stories, or refuses to acknowledge his responsibility for others and his failure, or constructs a new identity for himself that remains at odds with the truth about his past, all of which deepen his self-alienation and taint his relations with others. In “The Secret Sharer”, the young, inexperienced and excessively self-conscious captain feels a stranger to himself and needs to construct his authority and assert himself in a test situation. In *Under Western Eyes*, Razumov’s wrong conviction of man’s power to define himself and his lot, and his conscious non-commitment to others paradoxically lead to his entrapment in a false identity. He becomes a toy in the hands of others and is forced to acknowledge human interdependence, the necessity of engaged relationships and the fact that human subjectivity arises thanks to others.

Chapter Three deals with the relation between the self and the other person in the texts and demonstrates how, in accordance with the moral imperatives formulated later in Levinasian ethics, Conrad highlights the necessity to take responsibility for the incomprehensible other regardless of the circumstances, and the protagonists’ failure or degradation when they shirk this duty. In *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* the crew’s self-interested and sentimental identification with Jimmy and apparent sympathy for him are fuelled by self-pity and undermine the solidarity of the group. In *Heart of Darkness* the arbitrary opposition between Europe and Africa serves Europeans as a foil for their own identity, while colonization is portrayed as prompted by ultimate greed and unconcern for the other. Most of the relations in the novella are deeply flawed: there is no dialogue between the races, but also no communication among the Europeans, while Kurtz’s ultimate contempt for others is rooted in his complete lack of reciprocity. Against this background, Marlow’s humane attitude to the natives, his sense of fellowship with them alongside his acknowledgment of their otherness, his empathy and his sense of responsibility for Kurtz constitute a marked contrast. He also testifies to the Conradian conviction that self-knowledge is dependent on other people and that it is possible to perceive one’s potential self even in a completely contrasting person. *Lord Jim* dramatizes the social nature of the marine ethos (and code of conduct in general); the effects of the lack of the regulating influence of others; and the conviction that egoism and selfish idealism bar both human interrelations and the possibility to reach self-knowledge. Jim’s disregard for others, his remaining outside communal bonds and his self-interested relations with others result in his entrapment in his own self, in self-delusion, and in his moral failure to assume responsibility for those under his care. The novel also deals with the characteristically Conradian theme of sympathetic identification with the other and the idea of the other as a reflection of the self. “Amy Foster”, while presenting the dire consequences of the lack of imaginative sympathy, of the fear of the unfamiliar and the failure to overcome the insurmountable differences between people, at the same time exemplifies a touching instance of narrative empathy in the form of the layered narrative. Focused on the motif of shared strangeness of the two main characters and a surprising identification with an apparent opposite, “The Secret Sharer” echoes the conviction of the necessity of an encounter with the other for constructing a stable identity, achieving self-knowledge and efficiency, and being able to assume responsibility for others. The Levinasian view that the non-volitional and unconditional bond of responsibility for the other cannot be evaded can easily be traced in *Under Western Eyes*. The often irrational other demands from one an active response, even in ambivalent situations, but also may provide the much-desired acknowledgment for the self. Self-sufficiency is impracticable, while detachment from others results in lack of both self-knowledge and peace of mind. It is confrontation and communication with the other that constitutes identity and allows for self-development and self-revelation.

Chapter Four is devoted to the analysis of the protagonists’ confrontation with the external world as the other and the question of the extent to which man can shape his destiny. *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* explores the crew’s attitude to two kinds of alterity, that is death (and human mortality in general) and the (often anthropomorphized) dangers of the cruel nature that the sailors confront and that provide a test for their perseverance and cooperation. Facing this challenge successfully turns out to constitute a safeguard against self-deception and a basis for the crewmen’s solidarity, their readiness for sacrifice and their attainment of self-knowledge. In *Heart of Darkness* nature is presented as an ungraspable alterity in a twofold manner: as a concretized force cruelly indifferent, or even malevolent to man, or as a ubiquitous haziness that blurs human vision and understanding – a telling reflection of the general epistemological scepticism inherent in Conrad’s outlook and the spirit of the times. In *Lord Jim* nature – again, indifferent or outwardly malicious towards mankind – provides a test that Jim fails owing to his lack of self-knowledge, humility or self-possession. Caused by the rift between his self-image and reality, his refusal to confront the world is correlated with his abandonment of responsibility for others and, ultimately, the disintegration of his identity and his downfall. “Amy Foster” depicts Yanko as a victim of the hostility of the universe in an even broader sense. Apart from directly experiencing the cruelty of the natural world, he painfully feels the metaphysical void of the godless world in which the fate of man is both insignificant and incomprehensible. Apart from depicting the absurdity of fate, *Under Western Eyes* introduces a further dimension of the alterity of the external world – that of the social and political circumstances which, often marked by irrationality, entrap man in ambivalent situations from which there is no refuge.

As argued in the Conclusion, the characters presented in the analysed texts experience difficulties or some form of frustration either due to a conflict inherent in their nature, or deficient self-knowledge, or because of misunderstanding others and underrating their own responsibility for them, or owing to unavoidable external obstacles inherent in human existence. In general, complications arise when the three forms of alterity mentioned – that is the self, the other person, and the external world – are underestimated, or when their otherness and the challenge they pose remain unacknowledged. Human subjectivity exists solely within the context of self, other, and the surrounding circumstances. The call of the other, especially the other person, requires a direct and responsible answer which allows one to transcend the self, attain (self-)knowledge and escape from the trap of selfhood. Thus, for Conrad, ethics and epistemology are strongly intertwined. Characteristically, the very process of communication, be it between the teller and the listeners or the writer and the readers, echoes the above-mentioned link as it constitutes a sympathetic attempt to render communal truth and underscore human solidarity and interdependence.