Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland), vol. 18, pp. 43-56
Kraków 2011
Published online January 12, 2012
DOI 10.4467/20843941YC.11.005.0029

AN UNWRITTEN TRISTES TROPIQUES: CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND JOSEPH CONRAD

Marek Pacukiewicz

ABSTRACT

In an interview with Didier Eribon, Claude Lévi-Strauss admitted that he wished he had written Joseph Conrad's books. It seems that once he even started writing a "Conradian" novel entitled Tristes Tropiques, but the only known fragment of this novel would seem to be the description of a sunset, which has become part of another book of the same title containing reminiscences from his journeys. In what way, then, did Conrad influence this unusual book by Lévi-Strauss? There are certainly similarities between the works of both writers. Apart from a similarity of literary form and cultural substance, we can find a unique "optical experience" (Dariusz Czaja) in their descriptions of sunsets, which I interpret as a substructure of their studies of the world, culture and human knowledge..

Keywords: cultural anthropology, Conrad studies, Tristes Tropiques

AN UNWRITTEN *TRISTES TROPIQUES*: CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND JOSEPH CONRAD

Marek Pacukiewicz

The University of Silesia, Katowice

> "The operations of consciousness can also be read in these fluffy constellations".
> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*[1]

Tristes Tropiques is one of those extraordinary books whose meaning is an indescribable epiphany. Books like these engage in commonly used discourses (albeit arranged in a unique way) which appear to belong to familiar fields of literature and knowledge, but whose intensity of style and depth of conveyed experience take us to the limits of our knowing – to places from where we can easily see the road by which we came, as well as the horizon (as yet unidentified, perhaps, and confined to the realm of experience, but which any minute may become clear and obvious in its repeatability).

From the very beginning, this was a book that straddled the boundaries between various domains of human experience. Years later, Claude Lévi-Strauss admitted that he had allowed himself to be carried away – that he had "unleashed [his] pen" after losing all hope of continuing his academic career as an anthropologist:[2]

> I broke with my past, rebuilt my private life and wrote *Tristes Tropiques*, which I would never have dared publish if I had been competing for a university position.[3]

Be that as it may, this book – brutally frank as it is – can hardly be said to be a counterpoint to strictly academic writing in the way that Bronisław Malinowski's *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* was meant to be. Lévi-Strauss openly admits that the final pages of *Tristes Tropiques* do not quite ring true:

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[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*. Transl. John and Doreen Weightman. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 77–78.

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, Didier Eribon. *Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss*. Transl. Paula Wissing. Chicago: The Univerity of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 60.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 50.

> I remember that I was still trying my best to maintain a link with my ideological and political past. When I reread these pages, they have a false ring to them.[4]

This work reveals not so much the author, as his craft – not only in the sense of his literary techniques, but also in the sense of the craft of a *bricoleur* who is engaged in anthropology. And this is why we may speak of an epiphany. As we read *Tristes Tropiques*, we have the feeling that we have been through the issues of relativism and objectivism in the course of philosophical and anthropological research on culture so many times – both before and after Lévi-Strauss – and yet to this day his quiet narrative tells us more about these perpetual cognitive dilemmas than the complex analyses of researchers attempting to find solutions to problems. Despite its masterly construction, *Tristes Tropiques* is an incomplete narrative – not so much an open-ended work, as a mythomorphic structure brimming with an awareness that – however much we have to try – certain problems will never be solved. In this book myths accumulate layer upon layer, forming impenetrable, complex narrative structures that attempt to explain the world in an equally convoluted way. In doing so, however, they refer to what we are more familiar with, in the expectation that further interpretations will follow. Lévi-Strauss often said that his way of analysing a myth was to tell a myth.[5]

Here, of course, we cannot ignore the much debated question of ethnography as literature – which was raised at the time when *Tristes Tropiques* was published. The judges of the *Prix Goncourt* expressed their sorrow that they could not nominate the book for a literary prize because of its documentary nature. This also places *Tristes Tropiques* within a certain grey area – but what is the nature of this grey area? Clifford Geertz defines it by using two metaphors. Firstly, in this book we can find the archetypal anthropologist's dilemma: how to reconcile the function of the "pilgrim" (who came and experienced) with that of the "cartographer" (who understood and described).[6] Secondly, Geertz observes that *Tristes Tropiques* is a text which "absorbs the world's 'why' most shamelessly into a 'how to write'."[7] Lévi-Strauss is therefore a "founder of discursivity" in the "theatres of language,"[8] where several of his books or literary themes jostle with each other on the stage – a travel book, an ethnographic report, a philosophical discourse, a reformist treatise and (thankfully) a symbolic work of literature written in the European tradition:[9]

> [...] it is several books at once, several quite different sorts of texts superimposed one upon the other to bring out an overall pattern."[10]

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[4] *Ibid*., p. 80.

[5] See: Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked*. Transl. John and Doreen Weightman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 6: "… this book on myths is itself a kind of myth".

[6] Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 10.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 21.

[8] *Ibid*., pp. 20–21.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 33.

All this also leads Geertz to the metaphor of myth. For him, however, myths – as in *Tristes Tropiques* – are locked showcases or "self-sealing discourses,"[11] for "Lévi--Strauss doesn't want the reader to look through his text, he wants him to look at it."[12] For Geertz, the value of *Tristes Tropiques* is that it proves the existence of blurred genres in the modern world of discourses.[13]

Geertz's suggestions for interpreting *Tristes Tropiques* force us to reconsider the relationship between the concepts of myth and discourse – something that goes beyond the scope of this article. Let us note here that he suggests that dynamic discourse takes the place of myth and immobilizes it. By its very essence, however, a myth is dynamic and open to successive mythical wholes. Myths are always "in-terminable"[14] – and so cannot be locked away in the showcases of discourse. Perhaps this is part of the key to understanding the world of *Tristes Tropiques*, even if we assume that it is above all a world that exists as a literary creation. Whereas discourses are intertwined, myths transform each other as they accumulate layer upon layer to form a new whole. In this context, the metaphor of the mirror image is one of Lévi-Strauss's favourites: mythical cultural reality amounts to "…patterns in which, through the play of mirrors, reflections are equivalent to real objects, that is, in which signs assume the status of things signified."[15] Setting aside the question of myth being a mediator between life and fiction, let us first of all remark that myth operates by making use of certain wholes which can come together but which do not necessarily mix, as – even if they borrow certain elements from each other – they arrange them as integral configurations, narrations or worlds. All this leads us once again to the epiphany of the grey borderline area in *Tristes Tropiques* and perhaps sheds some light on the nature of this area.

I would like to examine this borderline quality of *Tristes Tropiques* by taking as my starting point a certain literary trope – or perhaps I should call it a certain literary myth – which, I hope, will help to explain things a little better. In an interview with Didier Eribon, Lévi-Strauss said that he often dreamt of books that he had never written:

> I have often had ideas for books that I did not go on to write.[16]

Now, one of these unwritten books that he had dreamt of writing may be considered to be none other than... *Tristes Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss not only admitted to being more than a little fascinated by Joseph Conrad – whom he described as his favourite author – but even said that he would like to have written his books. The result, I think, was that *Tristes Tropiques* was originally to have been a Conradian novel with

[11] *Ibid*., p. 48.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 29.

[13] Clifford Geertz. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 2000, pp. 19–36.

[14] Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked*, *ed. cit.*, p. 6.

[15] Claude Lévi-Strauss. *The Savage Mind*. Transl. John and Doreen Weightman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 36.

[16] Lévi-Strauss, Eribon. *Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss*, *ed. cit*., p. 108.

a classic Conradian plot: white men deceive some natives by making them believe that the sounds from an early gramophone are the voices of spirits. In the end, however, Lévi-Strauss only managed to write some fragments of what would have been the beginning of this Conradian novel: the characteristically Conradian description of a sunset:

> – It was to be called *Tristes Tropiques*. And it was vaguely Conradian. The plot came from a story I had read in the papers concerning a swindle committed on I don't know what island in the Pacific, in which a phonograph was used to make the natives believe that their gods were coming back to earth [...] Only the title remains. The title and the pages set in italics, where I describe a sunset. It was the beginning of the novel.
> – Would you have liked to be Joseph Conrad?
> – I would have liked to write his books, at any rate![17]

Lévi-Strauss's admission would seem to confirm the hypothesis that literature stands behind all field studies and – further – that various pre-texts which have been dressed up in the most surprising costumes and which hover between discourse and experience necessarily precede every anthropological text. *Ergo* anthropology is writing even before it has been written. Here once again we see the perversity and ambiguity of *Tristes Tropiques* – a book which in actual fact does nothing more than show the limits of such interpretations. Following in the footsteps of Geertz and Clifford, we have discovered important things – though we may have forgotten that we have discovered nothing that Lévi-Strauss himself has not already said in his book. The advantage that the latter has over us is that he presents us with a narrative in which "literariness" is only one of several ingredients. And the great irony is that – as if anticipating later interpretational and theoretical trends – in *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss also shows us that the act of writing does not necessarily have to be a problem of "literariness". One of the last chapters of the book is entitled *The Apotheosis of Augustus* and is largely devoted to summarizing a play of the same name which Lévi-Strauss wrote in the space of six days – "for six days, I wrote from morning till night on the backs of sheets of paper covered with words, lists, sketches and genealogical tables" – lying in a hammock during a break in his journey through the Amazon jungle, haunted partly by doubt – continually asking himself the question "Why has he [the anthropologist] come here?" – and partly by nostalgia – continually hearing the melody of Chopin's étude № 3 opus 10 in his mind.[18] What an appetizing interpretational titbit! An anthropologist who is beset by doubt begins to write on the back of paper used for recording research findings! Meanwhile, the anthropologist in question – having scrupulously summarized his "scribblings" – declares at the beginning of the following chapter that "the only justification for the dramatic fable described in the preceding chapter is that it illustrates the mental disorder to which the traveller is exposed through abnormal living conditions over a prolonged period."[19] The act of writing and the text do not have an intrinsic mean-

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[18] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, pp. 491–495.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 501.

ing, but are a certain cultural gesture that leads us towards further discussion of the work of the ethnographer. But what about the "unwritten", which has been unobtrusively inserted among the pages of that which has been written?

I would therefore like to ask: "Why Conrad?" in the full awareness that this is not only a question about the English author, but hopefully a line of investigation that may lead us to the grey borderline area. Here, of course, we cannot deny that – thanks to Lévi-Strauss's admission – Joseph Conrad in all seriousness does indeed begin to appear to be the godfather of modern anthropology. Malinowski wanted to be the Conrad of anthropology and Lévi-Strauss wanted to write Conrad's books. Such a totemic ancestor cannot be simply ignored! This is surely about something more than good writing.

Let us briefly recall the case of Malinowski: "Rivers is the Rider Haggard of Anthropology: I shall be the Conrad". In James Clifford's opinion, this declaration invites us to compare Malinowski's *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* with his ethnograhic texts, the difference between them being proof of Malinowski's autocreation – which in time becomes a stronger and stronger awareness of the fact that anthropological writing is a construct:

> The author of *The Argonauts* devotes himself to constructing realistic cultural fictions, whereas Conrad, though similarly committed, represents the activity as a contextually limited practice of storytelling.[20]

Dariusz Czaja is right, of course, in saying that we cannot accept a naive reading of the *Diary* as an "unmasking" and a journey to "the naked core of existence" by applying the "striptease to end all epistemology" principle.[21] At the same time, however, we need not necessarily accept Clifford's view that – conversely – this striptease might be the beginning of epistemology because the axis of that epistemology would still be the opposition (albeit in an "extra-moral" sense) of truth and falsehood. We can therefore treat Malinowski's declaration not so much as one heralding a fiction of the future (however we may see it), but rather as the basis for a change of cognitive perspective – meaning a simultaneous scrutiny of detail and context – resulting not only in a change in writing, but also in a change in methodology. Just as Conrad replaced stereotypes with the effort of observing an unfamiliar cultural context, so Malinowski replaced the universal and often superficial research of earlier anthropologists (based, among other things, on *a priori* concepts) with a thorough analysis of contextual culture.[22] Here I would like to stress that this is not at all a discussion about a method of research or a method of writing in the literal sense, but rather about accepting a particular point of view. In the work of these three authors – Conrad, Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss – looking (or "gazing") – with the eye of an experi-

[20] James Clifford. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 100.

[21] Dariusz Czaja. "Malinowski on Colour: Between Aesthetics and Anthropology". Transl. Maciej Bańkowski. *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 2000, №s 1–4, p. 384.

[22] I have discussed this subject in an article entitled "Conrad and Malinowski: the Predicament of Culture and the Anthropological Discourse". *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2007, Vol. III, p. 131.

enced observer! – is the source of cognitive epiphany as well as being a confirmation of the ontological significance of the context.

Reading *Tristes Tropiques*, one has the distinct impression that some of the subject matter has a Conradian ring to it. Anguished descriptions of the feeble manifestations of civilization among diamond prospectors and rubber collectors – those "touching Amazonian characters, so strongly marked by eccentricity and desperation"[23] – certainly bring to mind various social outcasts in Conrad's novels. It is no accident that we can find a similar motif in Werner Herzog's "Conradian" film entitled *Fitzcarraldo*. Similarly, the description of the nightmares connected with the journey through the Amazon jungle may be associated with the horror of Marlow's journey as described in *Heart of Darkness*, while the likening of Marlow to an anthropologist experiencing cultural shock after being "plunged" into an alien context would here seem to be perfectly justified.[24] Narrative transgression, singularity and even an elegant and subtly sarcastic style do not, however, provide a sufficient basis for a comparison of the two authors. Our aim is not to reconstruct the unwritten *Tristes Tropiques* in its hypothetical "Conradian" form or to discern that which is unwritten in that which has been written. Rather let us examine what little is left of that which is unwritten – that modest exercise in prose writing which is the description of a sunset – in order to find the "looking (with the eye of an experienced observer)," just as we found the point of view in Malinowski's "Conradism".

Dariusz Czaja has observed that Malinowski's *Diary* is largely "a journal of optical experience."[25] What is surprising is Malinowski's attachment to landscapes and his dogged persistence in describing them. "Behind the clumsy façade" erected by "numerous linguistic and imaginative clichés" we discern the essence of (expert) anthropological "looking": "[to] underscore their [i.e. that of Malinowski and Czapski, anthropologist and painter] need, their compulsion to note down those moments in which the world's opaque matter shines up with particular intensity." Like Czaja, I do not wish to create artificial and fictitious similarities, but merely wish to "prove the relationship between the principles and intentions of their perception."[26]

In Malinowski's *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* this epiphany takes on a singular form. Let us take the following description of a sunset:

> Oh, and among other things I'm interested in nature. On the previous evening: poisonous verdigris sariba plunged into a coloured sea of fiery or phosphorescent magenta, with occasional pools of reflected cold blue. Watery reflections of little pink clouds and the electric-green or saxe-blue of the sky. Yesterday evening: the sky and the sea were distinctly blue – a peaceful, full-bodied blue. Hills shimmering with deep purples and the intense cobalt of copper ore. And

[23] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, p. 477.

[24] See: John W. Griffith. *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller'*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, chapter entitled: "Cultural Immersion and Culture Shock in Conrad's Fiction". The author sounds a note of caution, however: while Marlow is indeed "plunged" into (or immersed in) an alien culture, he does not necessarily understand that culture in the way that an anthropologist does (the point of reference here being Malinowski).

[25] Czaja. *Malinowski on Colour*, *ed. cit.*, p. 386.

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 391, 390.

> above us two or three towers of clouds, stacked one on top of the other, blazing with a range of intense shades of orange, ochre and pink.[27]

The striking thing about this and many other passages in Malinowski's *Diary* is the exceedingly methodical nature of the description and also its repetitiveness and consistency. One could even venture the hypothesis that this description reflects Malinowski's highly methodical approach to field research as well as his great concern for the proper use of terminology, as is shown by his descriptions of colours. Here we can also see a characteristic stylistic exercise which sometimes crops up in the *Diary*: the first description gives the impression of being more of a technical listing of components, while the second is more lyrical. A similar repetition occurs when Malinowski describes another sunset:

> In the west: scarlet stains on a dark, cloudy sky – peculiarly bleak – like flushed cheeks on a sickly face that carries the mark of death (like deathly flushes on the cheeks of a sickly, dying face).[28]

In this passage we can also see Malinowski repeating himself in an effort to find the most suitable stylistic variant – which is somewhat surprising, given the "bleak" atmosphere and the association of the setting of the sun with death. Perhaps death here is merely a conventional cliché – or perhaps the repetition marks the victory of style over substance. Be that as it may, somewhere in this description of a sunset there is both looking (with the eye of an experienced observer) and rapture.

In the opinion of Czaja, a comparison of descriptions of sunsets made by Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss would be to the disadvantage of the former. Quality of style, however, is not our primary concern. According to Czaja, these descriptions of sunsets made by two anthropologists enable us to see that "anthropology takes its beginnings in revelation."[29] Lévi-Strauss's description of a sunset – a hazardous literary subject in itself – is part of the beginning of an unwritten novel. And it so happens that this is not a matter of "literariness", but of anthropology founded on looking (with the eye of an experienced observer). Moreover – as Czaja remarks – Lévi-Strauss admitted to having been fascinated by sunsets on his voyage to Brazil, adding that observing sunsets was a way of honing one's ethnographic awareness, although what he had in mind was above all the elusive intensity of (expert) looking or "gazing":

> If I could find a language in which to perpetuate those appearances, at once so unstable and so resistant to description, if it were granted to me to be able to communicate to others the phases and sequences of a unique event which would never recur in the same terms, then – so it seemed to me – I should in one go have discovered the deepest secrets of my profession.[30]

It was only later that Lévi-Strauss came to realize that in ethnography it was sometimes the first look (with the eye of an experienced observer) that captured what

[27] Bronisław Malinowski. *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu*. Ed. Grażyna Kubica. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002, p. 474.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 398.

[29] Czaja. *Malinowski on Colour*, *ed. cit.*, p. 396.

[30] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, p. 76.

was difficult to perceive "because of the intense concentration forced upon one by the brevity of the stay".[31] In the meantime, we can watch a sunset:

> At 5.40 p.m. the sky, to the west, seemed to be cluttered with a complex structure, which was perfectly horizontal in its lower part, like the sea, and indeed one might have thought that it had become detached from the sea through some incomprehensible movements upwards from the horizon, or had been separated from it through the insertion between them of a thick, invisible layer of crystal. Hooked to the top, and hanging towards the depths of the sky, as if through the effect of an inverted force of gravity, were drifting scaffoldings, bulging pyramids and frothy bubblings immobilized in the form of mouldings representing clouds, but which real clouds resemble when they have the polished surface and bulbous relief of the sun stood out in dark colours, with only a few touches of brightness, except towards the top where spurts of flame could be seen rising.[32]

What is perhaps striking in this description is not only a unique convergence of aesthetics and anthropology – noted by Czaja – but also the dynamic nature of the structure that is being described – a structure which undergoes continual changes and transformations at many levels:

> ... it became very difficult to follow the spectacle, which seemed to be repeated, at intervals of minutes or sometimes even seconds, in distant parts of the sky.[33]

At the risk of vulgarizing these descriptions made by Malinowski and Lévi--Strauss – turning the setting of the sun into a sort of anthropological Rorschach test and wondering what the anthropologist sees in it: a *corpus inscriptionum* or "bundles of relations"[34] – I would like to go somewhat further and make the (possibly banal) statement that what is important is not only what one sees, but the seeing itself, which may be something even more significant than the perspective or point of view. Moreover, let us not forget that in actual fact Lévi-Strauss "supplanted the old ethnographic method of describing phenomena with presentations of their models."[35] He was therefore certainly not in the business of accumulating antiquarian curiosities.

In the course of this spectacle, in which edifices bathed in light from the clouds pretend to be clouds themselves and colours undergo rapid transformations induced by contrasts, Lévi-Strauss realizes that "night comes on as if by stealth":[36]

> Against this background of cloud which resembled a coastal landscape, as the sky gradually became less cluttered, there could be seen appearing beaches, lagoons, swarms of little islands and sandbanks, all flooded by the inert ocean of sky, which peppered the dissolving mass with

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[34] Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Structural Anthropology*. Transl. Claire Jacobson, Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. London: Basic Books, 1963, p. 211.

[35] Ewa Kosowska, Eugeniusz Jaworski. *Antropologia literatury antropologicznej. Przypadek Clifforda Geertza*. [In:] *Antropologia kultury – antropologia literatury. Na tropach koligacji*. Ed. Ewa Kosowska, Anna Gomóła, Eugeniusz Jaworski. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2007, p. 128.

[36] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, p. 83.

> fiords and inland lakes. And because the sky bordering on those cloudy arrows had the appearance of an ocean, and because the sea normally reflects the colour of the sky, the heavenly picture was the reconstitution of a distant landscape on which the sun would set once more. Besides, one had only to look at the real sea far below to escape from the mirage.[37]

Despite the continuation of the sunset above the clouds, the sea reins us in towards the ineluctable end of the spectacle:

> Soon they were no more than hollow, feeble shadows, like the flats of some stage set, which are suddenly revealed in all their shoddy, provisional fragility when the lights have been extinguished, so that one can see that the illusion they created depended not on themselves, but on some trick of lighting or perspective.[38]

One might think that once again illusions offer us a point of reference, revealing a point of view: the theatre of the setting of the sun exposes the lies of literature. There must be something more to this, however: if the setting sun is at some times an architect and at other times a painter (as Lévi-Strauss claims), then it follows that an anthropologist cannot simply be a writer.

There are many descriptions of sunsets in Conrad's novels. Often they expose illusions, presaging death and the end of a particular world, together with our knowledge of it. A sunset over the river Thames seems to "lead into the heart of immense darkness." In *The Lagoon* a sunset makes the protagonist think of a stage peopled with hazy, "exotic" stereotypes. Looking at a sunset, Nostromo becomes aware of the end of his dream about himself... I will quote only one passage – from the novel entitled *The Rescue*, which has often been seen as a clichéd work, but which in reality is a review of conventional wisdom about life and the world as delivered by a set of characters who find themselves in the middle of a shallow sea, contemplating the setting of the sun:

> The sun was no more than a degree or so above the horizon, and from the heated surface of the waters a slight low mist began to rise; a mist thin, invisible to the human eye; yet strong enough to change the sun into a mere glowing red disc, a disc vertical and hot, rolling down to the edge of the horizontal and cold-looking disc of the shining sea. Then the edges touched and the circular expanse of water took on suddenly a tint, sombre, like a frown; deep, like the brooding meditation of evil.
>
> The falling sun seemed to be arrested for a moment in his descent by the sleeping waters, while from it, to the motionless brig, shot out on the polished and dark surface of the sea a track of light, straight and shining, resplendent and direct; a path of gold and crimson and purple, a path that seemed to lead dazzling and terrible from the earth straight into heaven through the portals of a glorious death. It faded slowly. The sea vanquished the light. At last only a vestige of the sun remained, far off, like a red spark floating on the water. It lingered, and all at once – without warning – went out as if extinguished by a treacherous hand.
>
> "Gone," cried Lingard, who had watched intently yet missed the last moment.[39]

[37] *Ibid.*

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[39] Joseph Conrad. *The Rescue*. London: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1920, ch. I.

We know only too well that a moment's inattention will bring disaster on the gallant captain – the path of gold leads to his undoing. Even so, he must make sure, by asking his first mate whether the sun has set on time. And that is just one of the things that Lévi-Strauss admired in Conrad's work:

> The same relationship of the author to his characters, whom he doesn't order about and who, as in life, remain opaque, will appear again, but much later, in Dostoevsky and Conrad.[40]

I think that Conrad would forgive Lévi-Strauss for mentioning him in the same breath as the Russian he detested so much (together the Frenchman Rousseau, whom he found irritating) just as he would forgive him for ostentatiously expressing his preference for mountains rather than the monotony of the sea – a sin which our French anthropologist may have expiated with his description of a maritime sunset. In Conrad's case, we are presented with something like a tragic irony: we know and even the setting sun knows how everything will end, but that does not excuse the characters from the necessity of thrashing around in the net that has been cast by the author of the plot. Who, therefore, is the Claude Lévi-Strauss who describes the setting of the sun – the author of an unwritten *Tristes Tropiques* or the hero of the written *Tristes Tropiques*?

We know perfectly well where the dilemmas that are presented to us by the setting sun are going to take us. They have already been formulated in the earlier chapters of *Tristes Tropiques* and will reappear in the chapters that follow. The real danger presaged by the illusion of the spectacle can take on various fictitious names and forms. It can be the Munde Indians, who are so wild as to be unknowable – or it can be the "pursuit of power", which leads us to various frontiers merely in order to enable us to show off our photograph albums at a later date. It is also "entropology", which in essence studies the processes whereby cultures disintegrate – and cautions us against them:

> A few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveller, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I might have seen, but failed to see.[41]

Can the description of a sunset be said to be "entropology"? To say that Lévi-Strauss is at one and the same time the author and the main character of his book is as banal as saying that he looks at a sunset at the same time as he describes it. This is partly reminiscent of the way in which Conrad once tried to define his role in the ostensibly autobiographical collection of essays entitled *The Mirror of the Sea*, whose main idea is so close to one of Lévi-Strauss's favourite metaphors:

> Love and regret go hand in hand in this world of changes swifter than the shifting of the clouds reflected in the mirror of the sea.[42]

[40] *Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss*, *ed. cit.*, p. 167.

[41] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, p. 51.

[42] Joseph Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924, p. 25.

It is only in the reflection – in the spectacle – that we perceive this obvious, repeatable fact. Conrad comes to understand the treacherous nature of the sea by comparing it to a mirror – and this makes a sailor of him:

> Its illusions were gone, but its fascination remained. I had become a seaman at last.[43]

What the critics expected of him, however, were "confidences". Years later, Conrad answered them thus:

> ...I can only say that this book written in perfect sincerity holds back nothing – unless the mere bodily presence of the writer.[44]

The book hides the presence of the author, but does not eliminate it. In later years Lévi-Strauss also admitted that it was possible to save something:

> Evanescent forms are becoming clearer, and confusion is being slowly dispelled. [...] Between these two cliffs, which preserve the distance between my gaze and its object, time, the destroyer, has begun to pile up rubble.[45]

All this leads us towards the epiphany of the grey borderline area – towards the setting of the sun. Claude Lévi-Strauss is not the first writer to have described it – nor the last – but he knows only too well how this drama will end and how it will be repeated:

> …with the beginner's lack of sophistication, I watched enthralled from the empty deck as, every day, for the space of a few minutes […] the rising and the setting of the sun presented the beginning, development and conclusion of supernatural cataclysm.[46]

– though he prefers sunsets, as:

> Dawn is only the beginning of the day; twilight is a repetition of it.[47]

In a sense, the setting sun reflects our earlier (expert) "looking" or "gazing" and therefore continues to "bounce" between the mirrors.

> "It has set at last," said Nina to her mother, pointing towards the hills behind which the sun had sunk.[48]

– we read in Conrad's first novel entitled *Almayer's Folly*. And on the first page of *A Personal Record* we read again:

> "*'It has set at last,' said Nina to her mother, pointing to the hills behind which the sun had sunk.*" [...] These words of Almayer's romantic daughter I remember tracing on the grey paper of a pad which rested on the blanket of my bed-place. They referred to a sunset in the Malayan

[43] *Ibid*., p. 142.
[44] *Ibid*., p. ix.
[45] Lévi-Strauss. *Tristes Tropiques*, *ed. cit.*, p. 51.
[46] *Ibid*., p. 76.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[48] Joseph Conrad. *Almayer's Folly*. New York: Dover Publications, 2003, ch. X, p. 94.

> Isles and shaped themselves in my mind, in a hallucinated vision of forests and rivers and seas, far removed from a commercial and yet romantic town of the northern hemisphere. But at that moment the mood of visions and words was cut short by the third officer, a cheerful and casual youth, coming in with a bang of the door and the exclamation: "You've made it jolly warm in here."[49]

On the one hand we have Nina waiting for her lover to come at nightfall, and on the other an officer of the British Merchant Service whose "sun of [...] sea-going was setting, too"[50] and who becomes a writer.

It is by no means my intention to show the sunset's "other side" or such like – in *Tristes Tropiques* the descriptions of life on the ship are equally significant. What is more important is to know how many things are reflected in the setting sun and how many themes it refers us to.

Claude Lévi-Strauss tells us nothing new. He repeats. This determines the nature of the grey borderline area mentioned at the beginning of this article: looking once again at the setting sun, our backs are once again turned to the world, which is repeated by the sunset. *Tristes Tropiques* has before it and behind it something which we know very well. This is why Lévi-Strauss's book and the works of Joseph Conrad appear to be similar: they are at one and the same time old-fashioned and refreshing in their outlook. Reading them, we do not even notice that we have heard these things so many times before. Clifford Geertz writes that the essence of *Tristes Tropiques* is "arranging and rearranging the materials the lives have somehow left behind" – which makes it a virtually hermetic museum showcase: "his books seem to exist behind glass."[51] Edward Said writes that Conrad shows us how "ideas are constructed (and deconstructed)."[52] For all this, however, we need a narrative and ... a sunset, which – thanks to its never-ending repeatability – prevents any closure of the narrative. Synchrony is made possible here again and again thanks to diachrony, because the setting of the sun is "in-terminable".[53] Always different, yet repeatable. Repeatable, yet heralding nightfall – the setting sun illuminates the essence of culture and the anthropology of culture.

This opening of finiteness which we find in *Tristes Tropiques* – and which can also be found in Conrad's novels – has been called the "ethic of lost presence" by Jacques Derrida:

> If Lévi-Strauss, better than any other, has brought to light the play of repetition and the repetition of play, one no less perceives in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and

[49] Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder, John H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 19.

[50] *Ibid*., p. 20.

[51] Geertz. *Works and Lives*, *ed. cit.*, p. 48.

[52] See: Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 29.

[53] Lévi-Strauss. *The Raw and the Cooked*, *ed. cit.*, p. 6.

> self-presence in speech – an ethic, nostalgia and even remorse, which he often presents as the motivation of the ethnological project.[54]

Derrida's opinion is that Lévi-Strauss made one of the first steps towards playing the game of the decentralized structure, but for some mysterious reason had a change of mind in the middle of the second step and withdrew. Here Derrida sees the effect of Rousseau's guilt and expresses the hope that it is still possible to find a positive, Nietzschean dimension of this structural game, in which the absence of the centre is not seen as the loss of the centre. We know from the anthropologist, however, that the setting of the sun is more interesting than the dawn, and so we cannot also expect him to provide us with "gay science" in *Tristes Tropiques*.

Derrida says that we may not have to differentiate and choose and that we should rather look for common ground or "difference".[55] But does not this mean an equally impossible, nostalgic return to the times (described by Lévi-Strauss) when the Greeks did not distinguish between "dawn and twilight" – or a return to the idealistic project of scholars? As Lévi-Strauss soberly observes:

> This confusion is the clear expression of the predominant interest in theoretical speculation and betrays remarkable neglect of the concrete aspect of things.[56]

In this way, *Tristes Tropiques* – written and also unwritten – takes us to the frontier – like the setting sun, which we can contemplate before it is identified as being a "palimpsest", a "blurred genre" or a "difference".

Translated by R. E. Pypłacz

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[55] Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, *ed. cit.*, p. 370.

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