

LETTERS AND BOOKS IN CONRAD'S *TYPHOON* – OR ON WRITING AND (MIS-)READING

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'Typhoon' belongs to that group of Conrad's works which has experienced alternating fortunes at the hands of critics'. At the very beginning it was classified as an uncomplicated story, whose "preoccupations are nearly all on the surface [...]. Thus 'Typhoon' requires no elaborate interpreting."¹ Jocelyn Baines believed that it was "one of Conrad's simplest, important tales, and has none of the ambiguous moral and philosophical overtones with which 'Heart of Darkness' or *Lord Jim* reverberate."² Frederick Karl wavered in his critical assessment of the novel, regarding it at one time as being "as dull as its hero MacWhirr,"³ and at another as "almost top-quality work."⁴ Recent criticism has re-evaluated the novella as "a remarkable part of the Conrad canon,"⁵ and "an artistic feat of the highest order."⁶

The earliest readings of 'Typhoon' remained within the limits of the realistic perspective and concentrated on Captain MacWhirr's heroic struggle with the storm.⁷ Conrad, however, in the *Author's Note* – added to the volume after several years – encouraged not only a literal, realistic interpretation of the story, but also a symbolic one:⁸

¹ Albert Guerard. *Conrad the Novelist*. New York: Atheneum, 1967, p. 294.

² Jocelyn Baines. *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960, p. 257.

³ Frederick Karl. *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969, p. 141.

⁴ F. Karl. *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979, p. 505.

⁵ William W. Bonney, "Christmas on the Nan-Shan: Conrad and the 'New Seamanship'". *Conradiana* 1978: 1, p. 34.

⁶ Paul Kirshner. "Introduction". [In:] Joseph Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 13.

⁷ Cf. Frank R. Leavis. *The Great Tradition*. London: Peregrine Books, (1948) 1983, p. 206.

⁸ *Typhoon* was first published (as a serialized version) in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1902.

From the first, the mere anecdote, the mere statement, I might say, that such a thing had happened on the high seas, appeared to me a sufficient subject for meditation. Yet it was but a bit of a sea yarn, after all. I felt that *to bring out its deeper significance, which was quite apparent to me*, something other, something more was required [...].

At its first appearance, “Typhoon,” the story, was classed by some critics as a deliberately intended storm-piece. Others picked out MacWhirr, in whom they perceived a definite symbolic intention. *Neither was exclusively my intention.* (emphasis added)⁹

What is even more significant, from Conrad’s correspondence – written at the time of composing ‘Typhoon’ – we gather that he aimed at something more than a mere sea story. He planned to create a comic story, a humoresque. In a letter to his agent James Pinker he clarified his literary objectives as follows: “This is my first attempt at treating a subject jocularly, so to speak.”¹⁰ “[I]t is quite *the thing that finds room in Xmas numbers.*”¹¹ So the short story from the very beginning was devised as a *Christmas story*.¹²

In the course of time critics have also perceived different aspects of ‘Typhoon.’ First of all, there are its comic and ironic dimensions. Ian Watt distinguishes fundamental types of humour, among others the humour of character, which he traced back to Charles Dickens.¹³ Charles Schuster also interprets the story within the mode of comedy, but he accentuates the role of language as a major element triggering laughter.¹⁴ There have also been many readings focusing on the language of the narration: symbolic, convoluted and deformed. According to these critics, the typhoon acts in the language itself and takes a stand against the concise and professional language of the captain.¹⁵

⁹ Joseph Conrad. *Author’s Note*. [In:] J. Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Stories*. Ed. John H. Stape. London: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 227–228. Joseph Kolupke however, points out that after research of the contemporaneous reviews of ‘Typhoon’ he has found no symbolic interpretations mentioned by Conrad in his *Note* (Joseph Kolupke. “Elephants, Empires and Blind Men: A Reading of the Figurative Language in Conrad’s ‘Typhoon’.” *Conradiana* 1988: 1, p. 72.

¹⁰ *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* [CL II]. Ed. Friedrich R. Karl et al. Cambridge: CUP, 1983–2008, Vol. II, p. 304.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 295; emphasis added.

¹² Yet, as was frequently the case with Conrad, his works at the end oozed beyond the devised thematic outline and word limit. The novella was to be short (Cf. CL II, 295). Conrad promised to finish the story promptly (Cf. CL II, 306). Yet towards the end of November he complains: The ‘Typhoon’ is still blowing. I find it extremely difficult to express the simplest idea clearly. It is a sort of temporary fog on the brain; and it has kept me back” (CL II, 307). He completed the story only on 11 January 1901, although it had been designed as a Christmas story.

¹³ Ian Watt. “Comedy and Humour in *Typhoon*.” *Essays on Conrad*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000, pp. 97–111. Cf. Leo Gurko. *Joseph Conrad: Giant in Exile*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962, p. 87; Charles Schuster. “Comedy and the Limits of Language in Conrad’s *Typhoon*.” *Conradiana* 1984: 1, pp. 60–61,

¹⁴ Schuster. “Comedy”, pp. 55–71.

¹⁵ Carolyn B. Brown. “Creative Combat in ‘Typhoon’”. *The Conradian* 1992: 1, pp. 1–16.

Similarly, the reception of the main protagonist has also gone to extremes. He has been considered to be limited,¹⁶ dull,¹⁷ ill-trained,¹⁸ a puppet¹⁹ and an imperceptive clod.²⁰ On the other extreme, the Irish captain has been regarded as a hero of truth – a real, genuine and admirable hero.²¹ This character has also been interpreted within the context of contemporary political rivalry²² and colonial expansion.²³

This paper concentrates only on one facet of the novella, which – in my view – constitutes its compositional frame as well as being a key thematic motif, namely that of letters and books.²⁴ In this perspective of written records (letters and books) various interpretations of the story (naval, comic and symbolic) converge as if in a lens. Furthermore, the essay attempts to uncover an intricate joke²⁵ that Conrad hatched for his readers in his *Christmas story*.²⁶

LETTERS

Letters are the framework of the whole story. The narration of the *Nan-Shan* voyage is opened and closed by snippets of correspondence penned by Captain Tom MacWhirr, chief engineer Solomon Rout and first mate Jukes. These letters broaden the novella's space in many different ways. Firstly, they incorporate the Captain's past, then introduce comments on the materialistic attitude to life of some members of the sailors' families, add religious references, and contrast Eastern and Atlantic sailing.²⁷

¹⁶ Paul S. Bruss. "'Typhoon': The Initiation of Jukes." *Conradiana* 1973: 2, p. 54.

¹⁷ Karl. *A Readers' Guide...*, p. 141; Bruss, "'Typhon': The Initiation..." pp. 48, 54.

¹⁸ Bonney. "Christmas..." pp. 21, 23, 30.

¹⁹ Schuster. "Comedy..." p. 56. He compares MacWhirr's mechanistic behaviour to "a piece of clockwork wound up once and for all and capable of working automatically," p. 57.

²⁰ Bonney. "Christmas..." p. 21. Bonney calls him even a 'psychic cripple', p. 23.

²¹ Gurko. *Joseph Conrad...*, p. 90. Polish readings were along the same lines. Cf. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. "Wywiad imaginacyjny z bohaterem 'Tajfunu'." *Orzeł Biały* 1945: 19 (154), pp. 6–7.

²² Anne Luyatt. "Voyage to the End of Strangeness in 'Typhoon.'" *L'Époque Conradienne* 1991: 17, pp. 35–48.

²³ Kolupke, "Elephants..." pp. 71–85; Catherine Rising. "*Typhoon*: Conrad's Tacit Recessional." *Conradiana* 2003: 1–2, pp. 123–132.

²⁴ Cf. John H. Stape. "Introduction." [In:] J. Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Stories*. London: Penguin Books, 2007, pp. xix–xx.

²⁵ Schuster also identifies a joke in 'Typhoon' but it is based on broader linguistic and narrative terms and involves all the characters and the narrator. (Schuster. "Comedy..." p. 69)

²⁶ It is a Dickensian story not only because of its Dickensian characters and humour but first and foremost because of its genre – the *Christmas story*. Dickens was a prolific author of those light-hearted stories published and read at Christmas time (none of the critics, as far as I know, has pointed out this analogy). To help the readers identify the literary convention, Conrad mentions the date of 25th December twice, although it was not the season of typhoons in the China Seas. And this convention, in turn, makes plausible the argument that Conrad wanted to poke fun at the readers.

²⁷ Only when this paper was completed did I find a similar idea in A. Luyatt's article, "Voyage..." p. 36; but she distinguishes different spaces.

Thirdly, in these letters we find reflections of writers and opinions of the addressees,²⁸ as well as significant information omitted in the central narration.

MacWhirr sends letters to his wife. His correspondence abounds in nautical detail, delineating the voyages to a dot. The Captain relates the weather conditions and the ports of call. Unfortunately, the chief addressee – Lucy MacWhirr – is not interested in her husband's reports. Starting with the opening phrase: "My darling wife,"²⁹ the spouse would skim through the text to come to the closing words: "your loving husband," (T 15) so as to make sure that there was nothing about his homecoming. Such a reception has led critics to conclude that these epistles must have been intolerably monotonous and "sterile."³⁰ But those who share such opinions seem to disregard the fact that, before being dispatched, these letters were surreptitiously read with great interest by the steward:

[T]he steward, between the scrubbing of the floors and the dusting of chronometer-boxes, snatched at every opportunity to read them. They interested him much more than they possibly could the woman for whose eye they were intended [...]. (T 14)

The last letter was so absorbing that the stealthy reader might have been caught red-handed (T 93). Let us take a closer look at this epistle. Here the Captain describes his emotional state during his struggle with the hurricane. The placing of this letter in the structure of the whole narration (chapter V) is not without significance, since in the previous chapter – when the *Nan-Shan* sailed into the eye of the typhoon, waiting for the final attack of the whirring monster³¹ – the narrator aroused the curiosity of the reader to an unimaginable extent (the suspense had been building up consistently from chapter II to V), while the following chapter (VI) opens with the morning after the storm. Hence the reader's eagerness to find detailed information about the crew's turmoil precisely in the captain's letter to his wife:

But Mrs MacWhirr, in the drawing-room of the forty-pound house, stifled a yawn – perhaps out of self respect – for she was alone.

She reclined in a plush-bottomed and gilt hammock-chair near a tiled fireplace [...]. Lifting her hands, she glanced wearily here and there into the *many pages*. It was not her fault they were so prosy, so completely uninteresting [...]. She couldn't be really expected to understand all these ship affairs. [...]

„...They are called typhoons... The mate did not seem to like it... Not in books... Couldn't think of letting it go on...”

²⁸ Bonney. "Christmas...", p. 24

²⁹ Joseph Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Tales*. Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 14. Further page references to this edition appear in parentheses.

³⁰ Bonney. "Christmas...", p. 24.

³¹ The etymology of the word *typhoon* is very informative: from Greek *Tuphōn*, Typhon in Greek mythology a hundred-headed fire-breathing monster believed to raise hurricanes and whirlwinds (Adrian Room. *Cassell's Dictionary of Word Histories*. New York: Cassell, 2000, p. 652).

The paper rustled sharply. "...A calm that lasted more than twenty minutes," she read perfunctorily; and the next words her thoughtless eyes caught on the top of another page, were 'see you and the children again...' (T 93)

The reader, like Mrs MacWhirr, makes him- or herself comfortable in an armchair, plumps up the cushions, hoping to acquire definitive knowledge, since the main narration was interrupted exactly at the moment of calm – those twenty minutes of waiting. The rustling of the paper misleads the reader into thinking that the wife was interested in the development of the foreboding signs and was turning the pages frantically to arrive at the description of the moment when the hurricane finally strikes. Unfortunately, when the reader reaches the crucial fragment it turns out that the wife puts the correspondence down with a sigh of relief, for she has not found the only piece of information she was looking for, i.e. the approximate date of her husband's return.

[T]he next words her thoughtless eyes caught [...] were: „see you and the children again..." She had a movement of impatience. He was always thinking of coming home. [...] Mrs MacWhirr glanced farther, on the alert. "...Do what's fair... Miserable objects... Only three, with a broken leg each, and one... Thought had better keep the matter quiet... hope to have done the fair thing..." She let fall her hands. No: there was nothing more about coming home. Must have been merely expressing a pious wish. Mrs MacWhirr's mind was set at ease [...] (T 94)

This time, when she has a chance to enhance her understanding about the perils of the sea and to go beyond the level of superficial weather reports and the enumeration of the archipelagoes passed, she rejects the deep reflections of her husband and the revelation of his true emotions. This time she acts like a typhoon which breaks off the sailors' utterances, suppresses them against their will, forcing them to remain silent.³² This is also reflected in the typography of the passage quoted above – it represents her mode of reading the letter: oppressively selective and extremely destructive. This kind of typography (a great number of ellipses) is identical with the one we encounter in the mariner's dialogues aboard the ship. They are disconnected, torn and ragged, which is conveyed by means of ellipses, the lack of capital letters and punctuation marks. Here is just one example of the mariners' speech which can be compared with Lucy MacWhirr's mode of reading:

"Ship... This... Never – Anyhow... for the best." Jukes gave it up. Then, as if it had come suddenly upon the one thing fit to withstand the power of a storm, it seemed to gain force and firmness for the last broken shouts: "Keep on hammering... builders... good men... And chance it... engines... . Rout... good man." (T 48)

Readers wrestling with this form of record gain analogous impressions when disentangling the already cited fragment of the wife's glancing over (definitely not reading) the letter: namely a sense of unsatisfactoriness, a lack of information or even

³² Schuster wrote very articulately about the limits of language and silence in "'Typhoon.' Creative..." pp. 63–68.

misinformation. Both in the case of the real typhoon and in the case of the wife's nonchalant attitude, the readers are deprived of the salient facts.

Yet the havoc Lucy MacWhirr creates in her husband's narration is worse than that wrought by the hurricane, which cuts off the crew's vociferation or coerces them into silence. For she consciously changes the captain's relation, manipulating it to such an extent that it would fit into her own social context.

Outside the draper's Mrs MacWhirr smiled upon a woman in a black mantle of generous proportions [...]. "Thank you very much. He's not coming home yet. Of course it's very sad to have him away, but it's such a comfort to know he keeps so well." Mrs MacWhirr drew breath. "The climate there agrees with him," she added, beamingly, as if poor MacWhirr had been away touring in China for the sake of his health. (T 95)

Thus the content of the letter is reduced to an account of her husband's well-being,³³ while the true content can be gleaned only fragmentarily from hints in the main narration:

It did not occur to her to turn back overleaf to look. She would have found it recorded there that between 4 and 6 A.M. on December 25th, Captain MacWhirr did actually think [...] that he would never see his wife and children again. (T 94)

The gist of the letter (including the details of the crew's struggle with the gale) is partly revealed to the readers through the steward's gossip (he did read the letter carefully). It is he who informs the cook of the desperate state of the ship during that fateful night. Thanks to him the reader gains access to the Captain's innermost emotions of hopelessness and exhaustion, which border on a mental breakdown. Thus this taciturn man, usually discussing only professional matters connected with duties on deck, in a letter to a relative overcomes his emotional inhibitions and articulates his fears and feelings of absolute solitude. It seems that MacWhirr only decides to open up and articulate his emotions and serious reflections under circumstances of grave danger or even imminent death. Regrettably, not much is disclosed to the reader, since the Steward – for fear of being exposed – does not mention many details from that correspondence to the cook.

Solomon Rout's letters constitute another type of correspondence. They are received and read with scrupulous attention and great enjoyment by Mrs Rout. In contrast to the uninterested Lucy MacWhirr, the mechanic's wife always reads them aloud to acquaint her mother-in-law with their content. These letters create a source of pleasure and are the sole attraction for the two lonely women (T 15). By contrast with the captain's letters, Rout's accounts are always full of amusing anecdotes, shrewd observations

³³ I cannot agree with Bonney's evaluation of MacWhirr's correspondence as 'sterile' and his opinion that MacWhirr was not able to develop an intimate relationship with his wife. For one thing, in his last letter we find the Captain's intimate disclosures; it is his wife who is so insensitive and mannered that she does not pay any attention to her husband's confessions. Bonney's suggestion that MacWhirr 'make[s] a thoughtless choice of wife and thereafter sleeps among charts [...] instead of with her' seems to me an act of overinterpretation. (Bonney. "Christmas..." pp. 24–25).

and catchy sayings. They are so captivating – and at the same time perceptive – that Mrs Rout starts to use the phrase “Solomon says” in conversations with other people.³⁴ Not infrequently it leads to humorous misunderstandings, as in the case of the first encounter with the young curate, when Mrs Rout repeats her husband's opinions about sailors, prefacing them with the fixed phrase. The clergyman, however, does not recall the biblical king uttering such words, which makes him feel extremely embarrassed:

“As Solomon says: ‘the engineers that go down to the sea in ships behold the wonders of sailors nature’;” when a change in the visitor's countenance made her stop and stare. “Solomon... Oh!... Mrs. Rout,” stuttered the young man, very red in the face, “I must say... I don't...” “He's my husband,” she announced in a great shout [...]. Perceiving the joke, she laughed immoderately, [...] while he [the curate] sat wearing a forced smile. (T 16)

The allusion to the Old Testament king introduces a new motif – a religious one. The aforementioned *qui pro quo* unequivocally establishes a connection with the biblical sage, who always took the right decision and passed accurate judgements. This association will bear on Rout's last correspondence after the typhoon, which I shall discuss later. As regards the engineer's written record of the storm, again the readers' curiosity is not satiated (and neither is the addressee's inquisitiveness, but this refers to some other subject than the typhoon). One more time we hover around the heart of the matter (which from our perspective is the mariners' fight with the gale), yet we circumvent it exactly in the manner recommended by the book on storms that Captain MacWhirr was reading. The disappointment of the reader and that of the addressee are therefore great, but they ensue for two different reasons. The reader awaits for a second time the story of the destructive fight between Man and the sea, whereas Mr. Rout writes “a word or two of the typhoon” (T 96) – and, to crown it all, we do not gain direct access to the chief engineer's words, but they are mediated by his wife's narration. The addressee's curiosity, however, is focused on something else, namely on something the husband has just touched upon, some clever thing the captain has done. It intrigues her extremely, since she knows her husband's opinion about his captain – “the dullest ass” (T 16) – which is later paraphrased as “a rather simple man” (T 96)³⁵. That is why she flips through the pages excitedly to find out something more about what happened, but she does so in vain:

“H'm. H'm” She turned the page. “How provoking! He doesn't say what it is. Says I couldn't understand how much there was in it. Fancy! What could it be so very clever?” (T 96)

Rout is a perfect raconteur, for he arouses the recipient's curiosity at the very beginning and masterfully builds up the suspense, only to let his readers down at the

³⁴ Conrad might have aimed at a word play between ‘Solomon says’ and the childish game ‘Simon says.’ By means of that association Conrad apart from evoking a comic effect, builds a distance between the reader and the chief's utterances.

³⁵ *Simple* in the sense of foolish, stupid, mentally handicapped (Room. *Cassell's Dictionary*..., p. 567).

end (but this is as it should be, since it is not the end of the story and the readers have more letters to pore over). One can here see a broad similarity between the manner of narration and manuals for seamen, which recommended circumventing and avoiding the eye of the hurricane so as not to sail through its very centre. What is more, they did not provide complete knowledge of where the epicentre was or precise information about its strength. The novella's technique of narration appears to be analogous when the narrator seems to be whispering "I know, but I won't tell you" and whets the reader's appetite for more details about the ship's precarious situation.

Yet from Rout's letter we learn something which is perhaps more important (and apparently not connected with the typhoon) – and, it seems to me, something that is easy to overlook during a first reading of the story – which is most probably motivated by the desire to satisfy one's curiosity about the storm. Namely, we discover an intimate relationship between the spouses – a mutual longing, a yearning to meet and be together. Readers also discern the wife's dependability and her sensitivity towards the senile mother-in-law who is in her care. Additionally, the chief engineer's plans to buy a house and be reunited with his wife are revealed. All this stands in sharp contrast to Mrs MacWhirr, who wishes that her husband would never return home. Rout's correspondence also throws new light on those letters of Captain MacWhirr that we have already discussed. It highlights Lucy's selfishness and interest in material possessions (the expensive house and the luxurious furniture), her unconcerned attitude towards her husband's letters, which reveals itself in her not sharing them with her closest family members. The children therefore remain indifferent toward their father (T 95). Why are the mechanic's ruminations, as I have pointed out, only *apparently* not connected with the typhoon? Because Solomon pens those reflections after the turmoil at sea:

The chief wrote just a word or two of the typhoon; but *something had moved him* to express an increased longing for the companionship of the jolly woman. (T 97; emphasis added)

The key phrase seems to be "something had moved him." The reader can surmise how traumatic the event must have been to make the engineer decide to voice his emotions, delineate his goals and meditate on the sense of living alone at sea. The reader realizes that his experiences must have been similar to those of the Captain, who also doubted whether he would survive and see his family again.

As regards the dominant semantic motif of Rout's correspondence i.e. the biblical connotation, this can also be detected in the second letter, but in an artfully modified configuration. The chief writes about some wise thing done by the captain. Thus, indirectly, Rout admits that his judgement of MacWhirr's mental abilities was incorrect (the readers recall, however, that no misjudgement ever occurred in the case of the biblical Solomon, so the parallel between the sailor and the sage is distorted). This is not a negligible observation, for the essence of the story can be illustrated by the fact that Conrad planned to entitle the novella 'Equitable Division',³⁶ which alludes to the

³⁶ CL, II, p. 169.

king's decision to divide in half a child who was claimed by two women as theirs. Had Conrad chosen this title, it would, somewhat misleadingly, have referred the reader to Solomon Rout, not MacWhirr. Yet this would have been discovered by the reader only at the end of the story. But Conrad decided to play a funnier joke on the reader, which I shall clarify later.

Quite a different type of correspondence is kept up by Mr. Jukes, the first mate, who is young and inexperienced, but very conceited and possessed of a vivid imagination. In his letters to a friend sailing on the Atlantic Ocean, he tries to play up his role on the ship. These are not letters written *to* somebody (with the addressee constantly in mind) but rather paeans to himself or disparaging remarks about the captain:

Sometimes you would think he [MacWhirr] hadn't sense enough to see anything wrong. [...] I believe he hasn't brains enough to enjoy kicking up a row. I don't take advantage of him. I would scorn it. Outside the routine of duty he doesn't seem to understand more than half of what you tell him. We get a laugh out of this at times; but it is dull, too, to be with a man like this – in the long-run. (T 17)

In the mate's letters one can detect traces of an inferiority complex about his older colleague, who is serving on a better liner. It is manifested in his constant enumeration of the benefits of sailing in the Eastern trade:

First of all he [Jukes] would insist on the advantages of the Eastern trade, hinting at its superiority to the Western ocean service. He extolled the sky, the seas, the ships, and the easy life of the Far East. The *Nan-Shan*, he affirmed, was second to none as a sea-boat. (T 16)

From his last letter, which closes the tale, readers acquire some information about events on board the ship during the unfortunate voyage. The main stress, however, is laid on his brave behavior when he subjugated the ferocious Chinamen. The first mate enlarges on his herculean courage in tackling the task assigned to him by the captain (of which the reader is well aware). This causes a double effect of dullness and humour, since Jukes's written account diverges markedly from the facts provided in the main narration. Jukes only makes some laconic remarks about the typhoon: he leaves out his fear and inertia during the gale and ignores his mental breakdown. The young sailor does not acknowledge the support he found in his captain – the strength given to him by MacWhirr's words; words that were fragmented and torn by the wind, but that were sober and moved the officer to act. Those sentences that the younger officer had earlier derided – those simple orders that the allegedly "dense" skipper (T 18) uttered – turned out to be of the greatest importance not only for Jukes, but for the safety of the whole crew and the Chinamen. Hence in Jukes' correspondence there cannot be any account of the typhoon or its strength and path; otherwise he would have to admit that at the time of the ordeal he failed.

He describes the gale as a 'fiendish business *I couldn't give you even an idea of*' (T 99; emphasis added). By saying that he is unable to convey in words what the crew went through, he unwittingly attests to the Captain's opinion that there are things

which are inexpressible in words – experiences which cannot be verbalized. In spite of the breakdown he suffered, Jukes does not change his opinion of the Captain. He is unable to realize how much MacWhirr helped him and continues to call him “such a stupid man” (T 102).³⁷

Again, after this letter the reader is disappointed – this correspondence closes the tale, yet nothing has been revealed about the title event. The main stress in Jukes’s letter falls on that “clever thing” done by the captain, namely on the distribution of money. It is to be the most important (“the funniest”?) (T 97) piece of information. But is it really the most significant fact? The reader still has no idea of what happened on the ship during the final attack of the typhoon. When we finish the novella we do not know much about the crucial event: in the book entitled ‘Typhoon’ there is not a word about the actual moment when the hurricane strikes – there is something about what happens BEFORE and AFTER, but there is nothing ABOUT the hurricane itself.

BOOKS

This procedure of circumvention seems to be intended and is linked to the second major motif of the short story – that of books. The protagonists peruse various volumes: the logbook, the International Signal Code-book and a manual for sailors. Yet MacWhirr distrusts written sources. He believes that there are things one can find nothing about in books:

Here he says that the centre of the things bears eight points off the wind; but we haven’t got any wind [...]. Where’s his centre now? “We will get the wind presently,” mumbled Jukes. “Let it come, then,” said Captain MacWhirr [...]. “It’s only to let you see, Mr. Jukes, that *you don’t find everything in books*” [...]. He had indeed been making his confession of faith, had he only known it. (T 33–34; emphasis added)

This saying recurs in the novella several times in different contexts. The maxim is first voiced by MacWhirr in the presence of the confused Jukes (T 34), then the captain reiterates his credo at the crucial moment for the ship (T 87); later on he puts it down in his letter to Lucy (T 93). Finally, Jukes quotes these words in the letter to his friend, where they acquire a special meaning (which will be explained below) since they close the whole story: “There are things you find nothing about in books” (T 102).

Conrad designed this formula so that it would relate to most written accounts, laying bare their deficiencies in representing reality. For one thing, Salomon Rout does not say a word about the storm in his letter and only speaks of the captain’s idea about settling the conflict on board. Another instance which corroborates the formula is

³⁷ I do not think that Jukes evolves and after the voyage becomes superior to the Captain, which is the conclusion put forward by Paul Bruss. (Bruss. “Typhoon...,” pp. 54–55).

Jukes's correspondence, where he leaves out unpalatable facts and openly admits that he cannot describe the harrowing experience he went through. Each of them, however, has different reasons for deforming the narration of the traumatic events. The chief engineer wants to arouse his wife's curiosity and make her await their meeting with impatience, while the officer probably wishes to conceal his cowardice.

A similar situation occurs in the case of books. The International Signal Code-book does not clarify the misunderstanding between Jukes and MacWhirr. The whole misapprehension is rooted in the incompatibility of the languages which the two men use. Jukes cannot tolerate the change of flag from English to Siamese (which features a white elephant). For the young mate, an elephant is not a symbol that should be placed on a flag.³⁸ Jukes perceives this emblem metaphorically and the same applies to the language he uses, which is full of idioms, figurative expressions and similes. Unlike his subordinate, the captain discerns things as they are and does not ascribe additional meanings to them. He therefore reacts instantaneously and literally to Jukes's remonstrances. He consults the Signal Code-book and carefully studies the section on flags. Having checked the accuracy of the Siamese banner, he is unable to fathom Jukes's irritation and his innuendoes about the absurdity of the flag, since it was exactly the same as the one in the book. The International Signal Code-book does not resolve the fundamental disparity between two different levels of linguistic expression: literal and figurative, limiting itself only to illustrating a national flag without enlarging on its connotations.

The logbook, likewise, misrepresents reality. Both the skipper and the captain write down the circumstances of the voyage. Neither of them, however, is capable of recording their apprehensions of the oncoming danger. Mere geographical dimensions, coordinates and degrees do not convey the true state of affairs:

[...] Jukes went into the chartroom to write up the ship's log. He copied neatly out of the rough-book the number of miles, the course of the ship, and in the column for 'wind' scrawled the word 'calm' from top to bottom of the eight hours since noon. He was exasperated by the continuous, monotonous rolling of the ship. The heavy inkstand would slide away in a manner that suggested perverse intelligence in dodging the pen. Having written in the large space under the head of "Remarks" "Heat very oppressive," he stuck the end of the penholder in his teeth, pipe fashion, and mopped his face carefully. "Ship rolling heavily in a high cross swell," he began again, and commented to himself, "Heavily is no word for it." Then he wrote: "Sunset threatening, with a low bank of clouds to N. and E. Sky clear overhead."

Sprawling over the table with arrested pen, he glanced out of the door, and in that frame of his vision he saw all the stars flying upwards between the teakwood jambs on a black sky. The whole lot took flight together and disappeared [...]. The stars that had flown to the roll came back on the return swing of the ship, rushing downwards in their glittering multitude, not of fiery points, but enlarged to tiny discs brilliant with a clear wet shine. (T 26–27)

³⁸ The metaphoric meaning of the white elephant has been extensively analysed by Kolupke. "Elephants...", p. 71.

This extended quotation effectively demonstrates the hiatus between the officially registered matter-of-fact coverage of the weather and the sea and the ineffable experience of the officer.

Another written source which obfuscates, rather than clarifies reality is the handbook for sailors. The graphs and circles elucidate nothing: they do not provide the elementary answer to the question as to the strength of the typhoon. The book that is supposed to be a practical manual only misleads:

He [MacWhirr] had been reading the chapter on storms. [...] He lost himself amongst advancing semi-circles, left- and right-hand quadrants, the curves of the tracks, the probable bearing of the centre, the shifts of the wind and the readings of barometer. He tried to bring all these things into a definite relation to himself, and ended by becoming contemptuously angry with such a lot of words and with so much advice, all head-work and supposition, *without a glimmer of certitude*. (T 33; emphasis added)

The Captain wants to feel certain, to fathom the true nature of things, so he meticulously pinpoints the faults of the instructions given in the manual: “Here he says that the centre of them things bears eight points off the wind; but we haven’t got any wind [...]. Where’s his centre now? [...] [*Y*]ou don’t find everything in books.” (T 33–34)

MacWhirr’s dictum seems to me to be an echo of the well-known assertion made by Hamlet:³⁹

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy.⁴⁰

The implications of both utterances are similar: daily experience exceeds recorded descriptions. The Captain rejects purely theoretical strategies, obscure designations and complicated graphs; he does not want to rely on the dubious written word. His aim is to recognize the strength of the gale and to withstand it:

“How can you tell what a gale is made of till you get it? [...] But suppose I went swinging off my course and came in two days late, and they asked me: ‘Where have you been all that time, Captain?’ What could I say to that? ‘Went around to dodge the bad weather,’ I would say. ‘It must’ve been dam’ bad,’ they would say. ‘Don’t know,’ I would have to say; ‘I’ve dodged clear of it.’” (T 33–34)

³⁹ Shakespearean allusions in Conrad’s works were traced by Adam Gillon, “Joseph Conrad and Shakespeare”, *Conradiana* 1976: 1, pp. 61–76. “Shakespearean and Polish Tonalities in Conrad’s ‘The Lagoon’”, *Conradiana* 1976: 2, pp. 127–136; “Joseph Conrad and Shakespeare”. *Conradiana* 1976: 3, pp. 263–281. Yet the aforementioned allusion in ‘Typhoon’ was not mentioned by Gillon.

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, I, V. [In:] *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells et al. Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 662. This couplet is frequently interpreted as a hint that Hamlet ‘has a wider range of insight than the other characters’ and does not limit himself only to rational (bookish) sources of knowledge (Cf. *Shakespeare. An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Stanley Wells et al. Oxford: OUP, 2003, p. 368).

In this exceptionally long (for him) exchange with his subordinate, MacWhirr exposes the unreliability of written sources at a time of jeopardy – at a moment when Man struggles with the forces of nature.

Now I shall come back to the special meaning of MacWhirr's words about things that cannot be found in books. Similarly, in Conrad's book entitled 'Typhoon,' one finds scarcely anything about the actual typhoon. And this, in my opinion, is the crux of the sophisticated and carefully structured joke played by Conrad on his readers, who seem to the last page to be waiting for a description of the crew's struggle with the storm, but instead are given a Dickensian story about the foibles of a sea captain. It would therefore seem that Conrad elevates the grotesque captain by corroborating his maxim that there are indeed things that one cannot find in books – including those written by Conrad himself.

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