

## JOSEPH CONRAD KORZENIOWSKI: THE CREATOR AS SEAFARER (EXCERPTS)

Margreta Grigorova

The St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo

**Abstract:** This article consists of excerpts from two chapters of Margreta Grigorova's monograph entitled *Joseph Conrad: the Creator as Seafarer*. The titles of the chapters are: "The Captain and the Sea" and "Locating *Heart of Darkness*. a Journey to the Centre of Africa. The Belgian Congo in Conrad's Works." These chapters focus on the figure of the captain in Conrad's works and on one of its particular manifestations in *Heart of Darkness*. The figure of the captain provides crucial insights into Conrad's work. It shapes his narratives biographically and is at the core of their creative design. Conrad's dream of captainship dominates his real-life and creative quests. It is related both to the romantic heroism of sailing and to the sober responsibility and art of ship navigation. The triumph of this dream represents one of the force lines that draw Conrad's readers to his works. The "heart" of "darkness" represents one of the emblematic topoi in his work. Confronting the empirical manifestations of "darkness" and its metaphysical significance is a salient feature of Conrad's fiction, but it acquires its innermost and universal meaning in the eponymous novella, which demonstrates the culmination of his creative eloquence. It is a work that invites the critical reader to undergo a remarkable hermeneutic journey into a world that is under the gravity force of powerful insights and word gestures.

**Keywords:** Conrad, creator as seafarer, captain, ship navigation, creation, "Heart of Darkness", mutations of words, fetish

### THE CAPTAIN AND THE SEA<sup>1</sup>

The figure of the captain provides crucial insights into Conrad's work. It shapes his narratives biographically and is at the core of their creative design. Conrad's dream of captainship dominates his real-life and creative quests. It is related both to the romantic heroism of sailing and the sober responsibility and art of ship naviga-

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<sup>1</sup> This article consists of excerpts (translated by Petya Tsoneva) from two chapters of Margreta Grigorova's monograph entitled *Joseph Conrad: the Creator as Seafarer*. The titles of the chapters are: "The Captain and the Sea" and "Locating *Heart of Darkness*. a Journey to the Centre of Africa. The Belgian Congo in Conrad's Works." – Григорова, Маргрета. *Джоузеф Конрад Коженьовски. Творецът като мореплавател*. Велико Търново: Унив. Изд. „Св. св. Кирил и Методий,” 2011, pp. 153-7, 168-78, 187-93, 244-50.

tion. [...] The triumph of this dream represents one of the force lines that draw Conrad's readers to his works. As Virginia Woolf remarks, "For it was by virtue of something drastic in him, the qualities of a leader and captain, that Conrad kept his hold over boys and young people."<sup>2</sup> Conrad's fiction attracts young readers not only by the power of adventure and peregrination in his life and writing, but also by the vivid figures of his captains and the audacity of his dream of captainship, all of which brings to mind Jules Verne's proverbial gallery of captains.

In Conrad's thinking, the captain's personality focalizes the diverse composition of the crew that grows into optimal unity. [...] As Ian Watt observes, "the solidarity of seamen, then, is essentially provoked by a common enemy; and the essence of Conrad's literary use of the sea is reverence for the heroism of man's 'continuous defiance of what [the sea] can do'."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Conrad's captain is not merely a sailor, but the leader of an army of sailors on board a ship. The instinct for leadership is deeply embedded in Conrad's personality.

Conrad's captains do more than just navigate their ships. They are equal to the task of ruling over the elements. This is the essence of their uneven struggle and the greatest challenge they face. The elements, after all, epitomize life's contingent forces. The ocean emanates contingency and concentrates unpredictability. It is an abyss and a boundless expanse – an arena of unconscious and arbitrary events that the seafarer has to overcome in order to be able to safely reach his destination.

[...] In its hermeneutic fulfilment, the figure of the captain represents the ultimate emanation of the seafarer's experience, as well as the writer's autocreative transfiguration into the epically enlarged protagonist of his works. The protagonist in question fits into the archetype of heroism that finds creative fulfilment in Conrad's work. Last but not least, captainship can be symbolically linked with the power that the writer holds over his language. For example, Conrad's final remarks on the only occasion when he speaks to the Polish press – during the interview given to Marian Dąbrowski – draw a parallel between the two vocations of his life – captainship and writing:

There are two personal things that fill me with pride: the fact that I – a Pole – am a captain in the British Merchant Marine, and the fact that I'm quite good at writing in English.<sup>4</sup> [Transl. R.E.P.]

[...] In real life, Conrad's captainship spanned his service on board two ships – the *Otago* and the *Roi des Belges* (which he sailed up the River Congo). He later quit sailing after several unsuccessful attempts to get hired as a captain. However, the fictional counterparts to his experience of captainship encompass more diverse forms and reach further shores. [...] It is vital never to let the storm and the wind take you by surprise, Conrad insists in *The Mirror of the Sea* – and, sure enough, *Typhoon*,

<sup>2</sup> V. Woolf. *Joseph Conrad*. [In:] *The Common Reader, First Series* (1925), a Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook \*eBook No.: 0300031h.html. Edition 1: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300031h.html#C19>. Date first posted: January 2003.

<sup>3</sup> I. Watt. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> M. Dąbrowski. *Rozmowa z J. Conradem*. [In:] M. Dąbrowska, *Szkice o Conradzie*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1974, pp. 17-23.

*Youth* and *Lord Jim* make the point that storms and testing moments occur all of a sudden and out of the blue, when they are least expected. There is therefore no better preparation for correct behaviour in emergency situations than sailing. It is dangerous to trust the smooth calmness of the sea and its lulling silence, which the discerning sailor should always perceive for what it is: a mere semblance of tranquillity – a “camouflage technique” used by the treacherous sea, first to lull the seafarer into a false sense of security and then to strike a sudden blow. Every member of the ship’s crew should partake of a collective watchfulness, but it is the captain who is expected to be on the utmost alert. [...]

### THE SEA, THE STORM AND THE SHADOW: THE CAPTAIN’S STRUGGLE

The struggle with the sea is one of the Captain’s main responsibilities. As has already been pointed out, he is not only a navigator, but the leader of the ship’s crew. Conrad questions the effectiveness of bureaucratic procedures for the appointment of sea captains and makes it clear that the seafarer’s true initiation consists in coping with ordeals on the high seas. Earlier, I have suggested that the battles with the sea in Conrad’s works are constructed on multiple levels as topoi that interweave landscape, cosmogonic and battle scenes along with battle techniques. The sea “behaves” like an attacking enemy with its own offensive strategy. The battle tests both sides in order to find the winner. The odds seem uneven – the seafarer and his ship stand against an unlimited expanse. Conrad portrays the gigantic, cosmic dimension of battling with the sea.

The culminating scene of the battle with the sea in *The Shadow Line* illustrates this pattern. The first move of the hostile sea is an act of camouflage. The sea veils itself in darkness, silence and invisibility in order to disguise its attack. In Conrad’s works the ominous inscrutability of the darkness is the first symptom of a battle with the sea. Here we may observe one of the images of the darkness that Conrad confronts in all his works, its “heart” being the focal point of his quests. The captain’s encounter with darkness is the essence of the battle with the sea. In *The Shadow Line*, darkness is portrayed as a hard and impenetrable barrier. Conrad shapes this moment of insight magnificently:

At once an uneasiness possessed me, as if some support had been withdrawn. I moved forward, too, outside the circle of light, into the darkness that stood in front of me like a wall. In one stride I penetrated it. Such must have been the darkness before creation. It had closed behind me. I knew I was invisible to the man at the helm.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Conrad’s protagonist enters the battle with darkness by stepping into it. In some of his works, Conrad confronts a particular kind of darkness that precedes the beginning of the world – and one of the forms that this encounter takes appears to be

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<sup>5</sup> J. Conrad. *The Shadow Line: a Confession*. London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons; Paris: J.M. Dent et Fils, 1917, p. 193.

a storm at sea. As in *The Mirror of the Sea* (“The Character of the Foe”), the protagonist’s meeting with primordial darkness takes place during a storm. The same experience may be observed in *The Shadow Line*, where it is also meaningfully bound up with the title of the novel. Once again, primordial darkness is the setting of the tropical cyclone in *Typhoon*:

The far-off blackness ahead of the ship was like another night seen through the starry night of the earth – the starless night of the immensities beyond the created universe, revealed in its appalling stillness through a low fissure in the glittering sphere of which the earth is the kernel.<sup>6</sup>

Entering pre-Genesis darkness and silence is also a dominant trope in *Heart of Darkness*. The repetitiveness of this experience and its graphical articulation demonstrate its central position in Conrad’s cosmogony and metaphysical reflections. [...]

Coming back to the prelude to the storm in *The Shadow Line*, we observe the protagonist’s metaphysical fear of nothingness. The expectation produces horrible silence. The sea takes aim at the ship, braces itself for a strike and then skulks, holding the sailors in the grip of oppressive pre-storm torpor. Conrad describes this condition as the terrible strain of expecting a blow: “[...] Stiff all over and hardly breathing, I waited with a horribly strained expectation. Nothing happened. It was maddening [...]”<sup>7</sup>

[...] The darkness and the silence end with the onslaught of the storm, which starts with large raindrops followed by a downpour of water from the skies. The pace of the first heavy drops is marked by an incomprehensible ticking, after which the full strength of the torrent of water makes itself felt. Conrad’s description of the downpour suggests that the celestial water is charged with cosmic omnipotence. Unlike storms that break out on land, the sea storm allows an interflow of sea and sky, in which the elemental power of water and its unbounded expanse produce the titanic figure of the “water foe”. In ancient times, the latter was personified by the fierce Poseidon, whose wrath thwarted Odysseus on his journey home. Conrad’s portrayal of the cosmic struggle also evokes the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. Within the inward space of spiritual adventure, which is tightly bound up with the heroic and outward quest for adventure in the novella, the “foe” seems to take the form of the shade of the condemned dead captain, whose enraged soul haunts the sea lanes. Wrestling with it, the young captain manages to steer the ship in the right direction.

## THE CAPTAIN AND THE “PERFECT STORM” IN *TYPHOON*

Captain MacWhirr’s duel with the storm in *Typhoon* is a third fascinating example of the meaning and articulation of captainship in Conrad’s fiction. MacWhirr’s captainship subscribes to a hardcore belief that going straight through the ordeal – facing

<sup>6</sup> J. Conrad. *Typhoon and Other Stories*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> J. Conrad. *The Shadow Line*, ed. cit., p. 194.

the storm rather than circumventing it – is the right way to steer a ship. Conrad deliberately juxtaposes MacWhirr's philosophy and that of Captain Wilson, another character in the novella. According to Wilson's book, which MacWhirr reads on board the ship, storms should and can be circumvented. This strategy is safer, but to Conrad it is not a better one – either thematically or in terms of its message – as it fails to communicate heroism, abstains from active resistance and discards the benefits of well-calculated risk.

In accordance with his conviction that storms cannot be circumvented, Captain MacWhirr steers the ship and his crew right through the typhoon, doing open battle with it instead of attempting to avoid it. This perspective offers insight into another of Conrad's creative ideas, namely that of the captain's personal duel with the sea. The latter takes the form of a physical, titanic antagonism that demonstrates the human struggle with the elements and with fate. At the very beginning of the storm, when the wind forces the door of the control room open, Captain MacWhirr "was dragged out over the doorstep, and at once found himself engaged with the wind in a sort of personal scuffle."<sup>8</sup> As the storm develops, the narrative is once again riddled with images of personal attacks directed at and fended off by MacWhirr: "The hurricane had broken in upon the orderly arrangements of his privacy ..."; "the storm penetrated the defences of the man and unsealed his lips."<sup>10</sup> These are illustrations of the storm's personalized attacks against the defiant Captain MacWhirr – attacks that challenge his seemingly quiet disengagement and result in the following conclusion:

The hurricane, with its power to madden the seas, to sink ships, to uproot trees, to overturn strong walls and to dash the very birds of the air to the ground, had found this taciturn man in its path, and, doing its utmost, had managed to wring out a few words. Before the renewed wrath of winds swooped on his ship, Captain MacWhirr was moved to declare, in a tone of vexation, as it were: 'I wouldn't like to lose her.' He was spared that annoyance.<sup>11</sup>

These words spoken by the unassuming Captain MacWhirr say it all.

[...] The ship reaches the verge of death. There is even a suggestion that it is overwhelmed and submerged by the storm. Yet the vessel survives. Its bedraggled appearance after the ordeal testifies to the liminality it has experienced and suggests that it has journeyed "beyond the limits of the created world": "she had about her the worn, weary air of ships coming from the far ends of the world – and indeed with truth, for in her short passage she had been very far; sighting, verily, even the coast of the Great Beyond, whence no ship ever returns to give up her crew to the dust of the earth. She was incrustated and grey with salt to the trucks of her masts and to the top of her funnel; as though (as some facetious seaman said) "the crowd on board had fished her out somewhere from the bottom of the sea and brought her in here for salvage."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. Conrad. *Typhoon*, ed. cit., p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Captain MacWhirr's daring philosophy inspired Gustaw Herling-Grudziński to write his "Imagined Interview with the Protagonist of *Typhoon*", published in the first volume of his essays entitled *Żywi i umarli* (*The Living and the Dead*). According to Herling-Grudziński:

Conrad [...] never had much time for people who let themselves be taken along by the tide of ordinary events and conventional feelings. Only those caught his eye – be it the eye of the artist or the eye of the mariner – who, by a superhuman effort of the heart and will, tried to rise up above the surface of a peaceful existence which did not tempt the mysteries of fate. Conrad is the poet of those who, given the choice, reach for greatness in critical situations calling for decisions which are unforeseeable – decisions for which there are no precedents whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> [Transl. R.E.P.]

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### **LOCATING *HEART OF DARKNESS*. A JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF AFRICA. THE BELGIAN CONGO IN CONRAD'S WORKS. THE CRITICAL READER'S JOURNEY TO *HEART OF DARKNESS*.**

We shall now direct our attention to one of the most emblematic topoi in Conrad's work – the "heart of darkness" – and find our path to it through various critical interpretations. Confronting the empirical manifestations of "darkness" and its metaphysical significance is a salient feature of Conrad's fiction, but it acquires its universal and innermost meaning in Conrad's most representative work<sup>14</sup> – a work which demonstrates the culmination of his creative eloquence and which invites the critical reader to undergo a remarkable hermeneutic journey into a world that is under the gravity force of powerful insights and word gestures.

An angry critique of the European exploitation of Africa; the account of a journey to the burning "centre" of the world;<sup>15</sup> an adventure story that is way ahead of contemporary fantasy; an existentialist novel and a work that exemplifies New Historicist trends; an account of the mythological descent into Hell;<sup>16</sup> an excursion into the world of archaic thinking; a warning against the "temptation of superhuman power";

<sup>13</sup> G. Herling-Grudziński. *Żywi i umarli*, Lublin: Fis, 1991, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> The generic identifications of *Heart of Darkness* vary between *novella*, *novel*, *short novel* and *short story*. Conrad himself defines his work as belonging to the genre of the *novella*.

<sup>15</sup> In his conversations with Bertrand Russell, Conrad mentioned that *Heart of Darkness* was intended to tell about the journey to the "central fire" of the world (B. Russell. *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays*. London: Georg Allen and Unwin, 1956). Maria Kuncewiczowa's essay entitled *The Discovery of Patusan* also highlights Conrad's remark regarding the theme of his work (M. Kuncewiczowa. *Odkrycie Patusanu*. [In:] *Conrad żywy*. Ed. W. Tarnawski. London: B. Świdorski, 1957, p. 50). Stefan Zabierowski's article *Within Conrad's Circle* follows suit (S. Zabierowski. *W kręgu Conrada*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008, pp. 175-6).

<sup>16</sup> According to Lillian Feder, central to *Heart of Darkness* is "Marlow's descent into hell" (Cf. Virgil's *Aeneid*). See L. Feder. *Marlowa zstąpienie do piekła*. [In:] *Conrad w oczach krytyki światowej*. Warszawa: PIW, pp. 477-95.

the “psychological sources of fascism” and the tragedies that afflicted humanity in the twentieth century<sup>17</sup> – these are some of the proverbial phrases<sup>18</sup> that crop up time and time again in the polydiscursive analysis of *Heart of Darkness*. Frequently ranked as qualifying for a Nobel Prize, it has proved to be one of the most complex and most powerful works in English literature – and, as Frederick Karl observes, is “possibly the greatest short novel in English, one of the greatest in any language, and now a twentieth-century cultural fact.”<sup>19</sup> Its significance is largely due to the fact that it has its origins in colonial and postcolonial discourses and is involved in the processes of transition in English and world literature at the turn of the twentieth century. It also ranks high by virtue of its spectacular and inexhaustible hermeneutic potential, which the present study takes as one of its major inspirations.

A further clue in the attempts of critics to grasp the meaning of the novella is the assumption that it can be read as a journey in quest of self,<sup>20</sup> during which the protagonist experiences revelations and undergoes the ordeals of darkness. Conrad’s text has the capacity to enlighten. It expands the typically Conradian plot of spiritual initiation modelled on the ritual archetypes of initiation. Marlow’s journey in search of Kurtz, his partially revealed secret and the impossible rescue (the story ends in the tonality of a pre-death absolution which respects the privacy of confession) trace the itinerary of a spiritually enlightening initiation under extreme circumstances. As Joseph Campbell observes, the hero gains knowledge and experience when immersed in an extraordinary and abnormal area of human life and then comes back with a message.<sup>21</sup> The hero’s tribulation therefore consists in the search for the nature of evil and its devastating power. The message he receives is equivalent to knowing the “horrible” sources of evil.

Tsvetan Todorov for his part considers the novella to be a story that is first and foremost engaged in a quest for knowledge: “... Journeying to the source of the river epitomizes the quest for truth. Space maps time. To draw nearer to the source is to

<sup>17</sup> Zdzisław Broncel claims that Conrad foresaw the unparalleled brutality of the two world wars that broke out in the twentieth-century. See Z. Broncel. *Pokusa nadczłowieka*. [In:] *Conrad żywy*, ed. cit., pp. 159-68.

<sup>18</sup> One of the latest researchers of Conrad’s work, Mohit Kumar Ray, reviews a selection of the most popular readings of *Heart of Darkness* and lists them as follows: “an angry text that documents absurd and brutal exploitation” (A. Guerard. *Conrad the novelist*. Harvard, 1958); “the annunciation of a Wild God” (C.B. Cox. *Joseph Conrad, the Modern Imagination*. London, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1976); an adventure story in advance of contemporary fantasy, an existentialist novel, an early voice of New Historicism, a novel that revolves around a double paradox (J. Hillis Miller. *Joseph Conrad. Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); a work that addresses simultaneously European exploitation in Africa, primitive human life, the archaic aspects of human thinking and the manifestations of moral meanness (See B. Parry. *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*. London: Macmillan, 1983). Mohit Kumar Ray also cites (with disapproval) Chinua Achebe’s claim that Conrad was a “bloody racist”. – M.K. Ray. *Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’*. *The Atlantic Critical Studies*. Delhi, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> F. Karl. *A Reader’s Guide to Joseph Conrad*. Syracuse University Press, 1997, p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> M. Alvarez. *Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”. A Journey in Quest of Self*. Published on the website of The Joseph Conrad Foundation, at <http://jtknk.tripod.com/alvarez.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> B. Moyers, J. Campbell. *Potęga mitu. Rozmowy Billa Moyersa z Josephem Campbellem*. Kraków: Signum, 1994, p. 196.

reach the beginnings of the world [...] The accounts of action (the “mythological account”) serve only to enable the development of the gnostic itinerary. Physical activity, therefore, is subsumed by the existential quest.”<sup>22</sup>

As Cedric Watts observes, after enjoying a flurry of euphoric critical acclaim, *Heart of Darkness* was widely introduced as a must-read in colleges and universities. Now it has the status of a “canonical text”. Though it has its minor weaknesses, such as the excessive intensity of adjectives (*adjectival insistence*), its power and appeal far outweigh any such drawbacks. The cultural impact of *Heart of Darkness* reaches far and wide. The novella has been invoked as a point of departure for various research ventures and has been treated as an anthology of scenes and passages in which multifarious routes and issues in twentieth-century quests, models of exploitation, corruption and decadence converge.<sup>23</sup> Neither the text’s canonicity nor its critical and demythologizing levels of analysis can detract from its enduring topicality.

*Heart of Darkness* is a work that has been on the lips of critics for over a century. Such extensive exploitation naturally leads to questions (raised during discussions held at the beginning of the twenty-first century) such as: “Are we still expected to read *Heart of Darkness*? Can we read it? Should we read it? [Or should we] take every single copy of it from the library shelves and burn it? By “reading” I do not of course mean the passive perception of words, but the meaningful interaction between the literary work and its readers in which the latter can do justice to the text by elaborating an interpretative language, irrespective of the fact that such a language may also be implicit or may ‘keep silence’.”<sup>24</sup>

The search for a method and a language for reading Conrad is still open. *Heart of Darkness* has been the subject of manifold interpretations which, over the course of time, have given rise to a number of trends and traditions. [...] The novella has been read as a pamphlet for the *mission civilisatrice* and as a fictional document of colonialist crimes in Africa; as the account of a journey to the end of the world and even beyond; as a gnostic and mystical journey; as an existential immersion in the world of non-being and as a modernist scrutiny of the ontology of evil; as a fantastic Gothic encounter with the Serpent, the Evil Spirit of local beliefs and the land of revenge; as a mythological return to primordial darkness and as an entry into Hell via the river of death; as an unexpected version of the tale of the Enchanted Princess; as a reflection on the various missions of language, its uses and misuses; as a discourse of negation and as an anti-utopia. These are some of the prisms through which we shall attempt to examine *Heart of Darkness*. [...]

The novella continues to be one of the most popular anticolonial works in world literature, provoking discussions on issues relating to colonial and postcolonial dis-

<sup>22</sup> Ц. Тодоров. *Поетика на прозата*. София: Лик, 2004, p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> C. Watts. *Heart of Darkness*. [In:] *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. B.J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> J. Hillis Miller. “Should We Read ‘Heart of Darkness’?” [In:] *Conrad in Africa: New Essays on “Heart of Darkness.” Conrad: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, vol. XI, p. 21.

course as well as the culture of imperialism.<sup>25</sup> Such discussions have long been haunted by the twists and turns of perspective in the literature of colonized countries.<sup>26</sup> This extremely complex work is the best illustration of the transition towards the symbolic and metaphysical thinking of Modernism, with its insights into the nature of evil. In his study entitled *Literature, Modernism and Myth. Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century*,<sup>27</sup> Michael Bell argues that Modernism is an optic that gives a clearer view of the mentality of colonial thinking. In *The Modern Temper* (1930), Joseph Krutche for his part suggests that Conrad's work can also serve as a good illustration of the "crisis" of the modern world – a crisis that ensues from a human failure to overcome human nature. In this reading, *Heart of Darkness* is seen first and foremost as an illustration of the crisis in the metaphysical quests of modern European thought.<sup>28</sup>

Of great significance is also a trend that situates *Heart of Darkness* as a prelude to the philosophical insights of existentialism, which continue earlier developments of the "philosophy of life".<sup>29</sup> The emblematic statement, "We live, as we dream – alone"

<sup>25</sup> Some of the early claims that the novella can be read as an attack on colonisation, colonial expansion and even imperialism – as Norman Sherry and Andrea White point out (N. Sherry. *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) – appeared in "The Manchester Guardian", followed by Edward Garnett's opinion — published in "Academy and Literature" in 1902 – which insists that the novella reveals aspects of life on the "black continent" that were unknown to most Europeans (See A. White. *Conrad and Imperialism*. [In:] *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. B.J. Stape, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 179). White highlights the fact that later perspectives on these issues vary greatly, with some critics claiming that Conrad writes in the mould of English imperialism, while others see him as a hero of the anticolonial resistance movement. Chinua Achebe's proverbial statement that Conrad is a "bloody racist" happens to be a frequent point of reference in such discussions. (*Ibid.*)

There has hardly been any research on colonial, postcolonial and imperial literature that has not included Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a source. Among the great number of publications that discuss Conrad, I would like to outline three which are particularly relevant to my observations. In 1969 – when the concept of the "Third" world was being born – Robert Lee published the first monograph that explores how Conrad's work can be read as a colonial discourse (See: R.F. Lee. *Conrad's Colonialism*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1969). Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) likewise represents a crucial stage in the development of this trend – as, among other things, it introduces cornerstone concepts for an anthropological reading of Conrad's work. At the onset of the millenium, Terry Collits's *Postcolonial Conrad* embarks on an examination of Conrad's postcolonial views, which in his opinion are well understood but have yet to be adequately researched (T. Collits. *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>26</sup> In the 1970s, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's accusations concerning Conrad's presumed racism proved to be one of the most polemical issues in the reception of Conrad's work and in the construction of the topos of the Belgian Congo. This will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

<sup>27</sup> See: M. Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth. Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, p. 184. Bell analyses the relationship between modernism, mythopoesis and political discourse.

<sup>28</sup> Daphne Erdinast-Vulcan's book focuses on this type of discourse: D. Erdinast-Vulcan. *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991, pp. 1-2, 91-108.

<sup>29</sup> Reading the existentialist concepts in Conrad's work has been the concern of a number of critical texts, of which the most outstanding is Otto Bohlmann's monograph *Conrad's Existentialism*: O. Bohlmann. *Conrad's Existentialism*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Conrad's existentialism in *Heart of Darkness* has also been explored by Matthew Feldman (M. Feldman. "The Search for

in *Heart of Darkness* is a motto and well-working key to the existentialist messages of the novella. Reading its main symbolic and motif-generating plot on the level of the existentialist ideas of metaphysical solitude is just one of the fascinating analytical perspectives that makes Conrad a forerunner and inspirer of existentialism – someone who is comparable to Camus on account of his writing skills and who is very close in his ideas to other representatives of existentialism and the “philosophy of life”. [...]

### **LANGUAGE, CREATION AND DESTRUCTION. MUTATIONS OF WORDS IN THE NOVELLA. WORDS AS A FETISH. TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD. WORDS AS A SCREAM. WRITING AT THE HEART OF THE JUNGLE.**

One of Kurtz’s missions in *Heart of Darkness* is related to the functions performed by language. Words operate as dubious purveyors of power in Conrad’s work. Claiming to be truthful, they can actually communicate untruths. Their power to save can be turned into a force of destruction. The reason for these transmutations of words can be found in their interaction with power. Both imply the other. The active aspect of language depends on how it is used and how it enacts the rule of its pronouncements. Power can turn a word into a fetish or perform the mission of creation. Words can create or destroy.

Kurtz is one of the primary users of dubious language fetishized by power. The gift of eloquence is a major feature of his identity and is announced as his greatest virtue – he can rule over crowds and make a friend of every fellow human being. He wields the “unbounded power of eloquence”<sup>30</sup> and Marlow is curious to converse with him in order to see this power unleashed: “I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing.”<sup>31</sup>

Before Kurtz makes his physical appearance in the novella, he is invoked on numerous occasions as a verbal presence. The character of Kurtz is constantly shaped by the discourse of the stories told about him, which anticipate and lead to the fulfilment of his being. At first, Kurtz is but a name – “I did not see the man in the name,”<sup>32</sup> Marlow says. Then he grows beyond the confines of his name, which is gradually replaced by silence (“His name, you understand, had not been pronounced once”),<sup>33</sup> becoming taboo-like and more and more anonymous as Marlow’s quest for Kurtz enters another stage – that of uncertainty and doubt. His sharply pronounced character at the beginning of Marlow’s journey finally fades away into the disapproving

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Authenticity: Aspects of Conrad’s Existential Vision”. *Postgraduate English*, No. 6 [September 2002]) and by the Anglo-Indian scholar Mohit Kumar Ray.

<sup>30</sup> J. Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*. [In:] *Youth and Two Other Stories*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Page & Company, 1926, p. 118.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

label of “that man” – an appellation that denotes alienation, rejection or anonymity associated with something unpleasant.

When Marlow finally meets the man, Kurtz’s presence is largely announced as a voice. His weak and suffering body has been supplanted by a deep and vibrant voice. Marlow’s final conversation with Kurtz begins as a pre-death confession, the culminating moment of which is Kurtz’s final spell of eloquence, which Marlow describes as an intense spiritual struggle. It is followed by his death, which is described as the end of his flow of speech: “I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole.”<sup>34</sup>

As one of humanity’s main attributes, language plays a major role in Conrad’s grotesque and farcical portrayal of European civilization. In his critique of the latter he demonstrates how words can generate falsehood. In this sense, preoccupation with language is a major feature of Kurtz’s symbolic personality and an essential part of Marlow’s quest. In the prelude to their meeting, we learn that Kurtz is a brilliant orator: “how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings. He had faith – don’t you see? – he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything – anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party.”<sup>35</sup> It is precisely this omnipresent faith and the capacity for manipulation which it implies – together with Kurtz’s eloquence (a talent that holds the promise of a future career as the leader of an extremist party) – that makes Kurtz’s speech problematic, for these characteristics are part of Conrad’s farcical and skeptical narration. It also becomes clear that “you don’t talk with that man [Kurtz] – you listen to him.” His personal grip on people is amazing. The Russian, who is one of Kurtz’s disciples, admits that “this man has enlarged my mind.”<sup>36</sup> We are also informed that Kurtz needs an audience.

Surprisingly, the eloquence of the ivory trader and the Company’s best agent finds its curious fulfilment in the midst of local native tribes. Instead of being a political leader in Europe, Kurtz becomes a deified tribal chief. Words serve him to establish his authority, “He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings.”<sup>37</sup> His power to exert control over a person’s innermost being by means of verbal gestures grows to such an extent that it becomes vicious arbitrariness and even an instrument of torture and murder. Thus, the power of words easily mutates into dictatorship.

This transformation of the role of language amounts to a fetishization of words. Substituting intangible values for tangible things is one of the novella’s key messages. This substitution takes place as the juxtaposition of disparate entities on one and the same level of significance – ivory, cottons, beads and brass wire are equivalent to ... ways in which language can operate.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

In the end, Kurtz's voice outlives him, which is a tragico-farcical solution to the problem of speech: "A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper."<sup>38</sup> The voice tells about Kurtz's life, retraces the pathways of evil and constitutes one of the most profound themes of reflection in *Heart of Darkness*. The voice and its words cross the narrow but rigid limits of non-being, as do all the other perishable things in Conrad's fiction, turning into emptiness and negations of themselves: "A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices – and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense."<sup>39</sup>

Conrad's African experience enables him to meditate on the primordial nature of language. He examines the role of speech and the dimensions of its manifestations in one particular spot. He also observes that language does not derive its status from European civilization only. It has its origins in the depths of primordial times. In *An Outpost of Progress* this assumption is confirmed by a telling scene in which one of the chieftains who leads a group of local natives comes to the station to see Makola, Kayerts and Carlier and tries to tell them something, speaking vehemently in his own language:

Their leader, a powerful and determined-looking negro with bloodshot eyes, stood in front of the verandah and made a long speech. He gesticulated much, and ceased very suddenly. There was something in his intonation, in the sounds of the long sentences he used, that startled the two whites. It was like a reminiscence of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilized men. It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams.<sup>40</sup>

Conrad's Africa is constructed as a primordial wilderness in which words perform creative, imperative and incantatory functions, the speaker being well aware of the power of their enunciation. This passage subverts the myth of the divine nature of language and its original presence as heavenly inspiration. It also shows Conrad's particular sensitivity to the use of language. [...]

In *Heart of Darkness* the performance of language is related to the categories of truth and falsehood and their interplay demonstrates the full intensity of the dichotomous patterns of the novella. For instance, the truth about Kurtz is abominable. The external signs of his divine status appear to be credible, but in fact are nothing more than a hoax. Similarly, Marlow lies to Kurtz's fiancée in order to meet her expectations. When she asks him about Kurtz's last words, he replies "Your name." Marlow is unwilling to dismantle the figure of the "good" Kurtz and sustains the illusion of his "good" nature by giving an ethically acceptable, albeit false rendering of the man's highly improbable and dehumanized final utterance of the word "horror".

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> J. Conrad. *An Outpost of Progress*. [In:] *Tales of Unrest*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925, p. 97.

The dilemma of truth and falsehood is linked to issues of European morality and the civilizing mission. In this novella set in the Congo, Conrad cruelly parodies the rhetoric of civilization. This imperialist rhetoric is at its most eloquent and compelling in Kurtz's report, about which Marlow is positively ecstatic. This "perfect" report comprises seventeen pages of "an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence."<sup>41</sup> It is, however, a false narrative and its unexpected end reveals the unpalatable, yet stark truth: "Exterminate all the brutes!". This emotional outburst reveals the unfathomable grip of the "spell of revulsion".

The performative capacity of language in *Heart of Darkness* is also bound up with the leader's charisma, which is a major instrument of positive or negative guidance. As Leszek Kołakowski observes: "The authority of the charismatic personality is quasi-sacral and is not entitled to rational powers. [...] The charismatic leader can certainly exert a good or bad influence; s/he can, as fascist leaders do, provoke his/her faithful disciples to unleash the utmost evil in their human nature, such as a readiness for violent self-assertion, futility and arrogance."<sup>42</sup> In the case of Kurtz, the charisma of the ancient incantatory powers of language illustrates the negative effects of his charismatic personality.

The roles of language are also intimately linked with patterns of silence and an unwillingness to speak, which have already been discussed. This relationship is the background against which words undergo a dramatic metamorphosis into another of their extreme forms – that of the shout (or cry) and the shriek. The cries that resound in the jungle are not simply the usual voices of the "savage" tribes, but are vocal outbursts provoked by excessive brutality and the experience of horror. These are pivotal features of Conrad's Congo in both *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness*, where the jungle echoes with the sound of drums and the cries of demented voices. In *An Outpost of Progress* we read that it was "as if the whole land had been one immense drum booming out steadily an appeal to heaven. And through the deep and tremendous noise sudden yells that resembled snatches of songs from a madhouse."<sup>43</sup> In *Heart of Darkness* the same screams are heard again and again. Kurtz's invisible presence itself first materializes as a "scream" that comes out of the heavy silence of the jungle:

Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings – of naked human beings – with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest.<sup>44</sup>

The extreme intensity of the shriek in *Heart of Darkness* is reminiscent of Munk's "Scream" and the agony of Faulkner's emblematic *The Sound and the Fury*. What is

<sup>41</sup> J. Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*, ed. cit., p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> L. Kołakowski. *Czy Pan Bóg jest szczęśliwy i inne pytania*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2009. pp. 182-3.

<sup>43</sup> J. Conrad. *An Outpost of Progress*, ed. cit., p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> J. Conrad. *Heart of Darkness*, ed. cit., p. 133.

so special about that scream? Is this cry the truth disrobed of time's passing moments? Is this "infernal shriek" a disguised call for help? The answers to these questions are to be found in the comments of Marlow the narrator, which counterbalance the creative and destructive power of words: "Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced."<sup>45</sup>

Words make their presence felt in yet another form in the novella: that of the book found in the depths of the jungle. Lying near the door on the littered floor of Kurtz's abandoned cabin, the coverless book, whose pages are grimy from being frequently thumbed, suddenly reawakens the spirit of redemption and hope and the sense of protection by reclaiming an old friendship. The book in question is Towson's *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, which reminds the protagonist of his close ties to the sea and counteracts against his ominous relationship with the river. The book operates as an emissary of life itself, freeing Marlow's current existence of its sense of unreality. It is, moreover, a Book with a capital "B" – a friend and guide, with cipher-like notes in the margins:

The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it – and making notes – in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery.<sup>46</sup>

Wherever Conrad's protagonists journey, they always find themselves in the presence of a book which journeys along with them and leaves its messages. Thus, Conrad's first written book "joins" him in his sea ventures and the reading captain shares his life with a book in *Typhoon*. In *An Outpost of Progress* a whole collection of select books succeeds its dead owner. These are books that restore humanity's broken relationship with life, but also reinvent it, producing a version of life that appears to be more vigorous than life itself:

Then during long days there were interminable and silly discussions about plots and personages. In the centre of Africa they made the acquaintance of Richelieu and of d'Artagnan, of Hawk's Eye and of Father Goriot, and of many other people. All these imaginary personages became subjects for gossip as if they had been living friends.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from books, the library consists of local newspapers that discuss issues related to colonization and the civilizing process in a euphoric and enthusiastic tone. Clichéd phrases such as the "path of enlightenment" are rhetorical devices that are frequently used in this colonial discourse and Kayerts and Carlier dreamingly position themselves in the midst of their great illusion that as "the first civilized men to live in this very spot" they would have their place in the *Book on the History of Civilization in This Spot* and that people would later read about them as being two

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> J. Conrad. *An Outpost of Progress*, ed. cit., p. 94.

*good men*. In their dreams they imagine the development of the spot into a city with “quays, and warehouses, and barracks ... and billiard-rooms.” The formula of “warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms” enters the new chronicles of the spread of civilization in colonial lands. This idyllic book, however, turns out to be a farce. Kayerts and Carlier fail to become heroes, ending up dead before they manage to “civilize” the “savage” world. They kill each other in a quarrel over a lump of sugar, arguing about who will be in command.

Translated by Petya Tsoneva

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