

## Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford: narrative absences, narrative multiplicities

di William Rivière

1. The wrestlings of idealism with despair recounted in overlapping and interlocking structures of authorial narrative and authorial personal narratives were not first developed by Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. Among the progenitors the grandest, and the indisputable masterpiece, is *Wuthering Heights*. Among the inheritors of this bloodline we find *The Great Gatsby* and *Absalom, Absalom!* But when one compares the moral solitudes of Heathcliff, of Kurtz or Jim or Leggatt, of Ashburnham, of Gatsby or of Sutpen, one's curiosity is aroused. And if then one looks at the similar relations which some of these possessed men (they are never women) have with their narrators (in their turns possessed) one can scarcely ignore the ways in which these novels shadow each other. The following pages are the beginning of an attempt to tease out some of these tangled threads.

Clearly the study of isolation and possession, of moral ruin or redemption, may take a myriad other shapes: there is nothing preclusive here: one thinks of *Voss*, of *Under the Volcano*, of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, of *Pincher Martin* and *The Spire*. But my concern here is with a clutch of narrative methods which Conrad did not always use – *Nostramo* and *Victory* triumph in different ways – and did not always use with immaculate success – *Chance* is defective, and I am far indeed from being the sole reader who has remarked that *Under Western Eyes* might have been liberated from its narrator – but which in works such as *The Secret Sharer*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* he deployed

\* Presentato dall'Istituto di Lingue.

with matchless artistry. I shall be concerned also with *The Good Soldier*. Not only did Ford collaborate with Conrad on a couple of indifferent novels, not only did he record some of their discussions of narrative technique, not only are there a few manuscript pages of *Nostromo* in the younger writer's hand. In Dowell he produced the only character / narrator to sustain serious comparison with Conrad's Marlow; and his «saddest story ever told» is, if not as dramatic as Conrad or Faulkner at their most powerful, certainly as skilfully balanced, perhaps the most exquisite indirect narrative in English.

Although in *Lord Jim* and in *Under Western Eyes* Marlow's involvement with Jim and Razumov's with Haldin are elucidated on a far bigger scale, and the moral contaminations or initiations they undergo are explored more deeply, it is in the short story *The Secret Sharer* (first published in *'Twiixt Land and Sea*, 1912) that Conrad achieves the most unnervingly perfect symmetry between his two chief actors. If the formal brilliance of *Heart of Darkness* may be gauged by the decades of voluminous critical dispute as to whether Marlow or Kurtz is the central subject of the exploration, this presumably indicating that the novella's equilibrium is faultless, in *The Secret Sharer* the captain and Leggatt seem to mirror one another so naturally and convincingly that no debate as to where the heart of the story lies has been stimulated at all. They are the heart, together. Captain and escaper, narrator and outcast, their brotherhood is such that critics apply the word «hero» to the narrator, quite tranquilly and quite correctly, in the face of his growing consciousness of the other's only secretly admissible heroism.

The most orderly analysis of the story is by Cedric Watts<sup>1</sup>. It is he who denominates it a two-faced or Janiform work; he who reminds us that its author referred to himself as «homo duplex»; he who points out that the story is not just morally ambiguous but actually, in its combinations of the callous and the sensitive, the detached and the engaged, paradoxical or self-contradictory. I shall have occasion to return to this callousness which is or is not condemned, this apparently immoral (or in Kurtz's case

<sup>1</sup> Cedric Watts, *The Mirror-Tale: An Ethico-Structural Analysis of Conrad's 'The Secret Sharer'*, «Critical Quarterly» 19, 1977.

amoral) ruthlessness in our protagonists which our observing narrators agonize over or gruffly accept, condemn and yet often declare they envy. But in *The Secret Sharer* the tone is unmistakable, the moral focus confounds and dislocates. To Leggatt's confession, «I've killed a man», the narrator confidently, dismissively replies, «Fit of temper». To which Jakob Lothe's response, in this work<sup>2</sup> on Conrad's fiction to which I shall have recourse more than once, that the narrator's awareness of his similarity to, almost his identity with, the escaping murderer blurs the moral issue seems to me the beginning of a comprehension of these tragic commitments and evasions, but far from the end.

That human life is, indeed, cheap, is a recurrent motif in Conradian tragedy. That some of his more liberal or more squeamish critics have gone to wondrous lengths to muffle our awareness of his refusal – an abstention repeated in work after work – to lament the deaths of scoundrels, weaklings and cowards, and his tendency to refrain from orthodox condemnation of their killers, to limit himself to the most ambiguous of strictures, can make for amusing reading. But my interest here is a structural one. It was John Masefield, I believe, who first condemned Conrad for aloofness, detachment, coldness. Certainly it has been a recurrent cry ever since. Reviewing *Heart of Darkness*<sup>3</sup>, Masefield called it «fine writing, good literature, and so forth, but most unconvincing narrative [...] It reminds one rather of a cobweb abounding in gold threads. It gives one a curious impression of remoteness and aloofness from its subject». In the case of *The Secret Sharer*, Watts' methodical analysis goes a long way toward demonstrating how our author achieves what we may dismiss as coldness and immorality or praise as a breaking through to a clarity, a poisoning of ambivalent visions. He schematizes the Janiform into Face 2 Mirroring (this is Leggatt, the escaper) and Face 1 Mirrored (the captain, the narrator). Between them, of course, is the mirror-relationship, which resolves itself into a large number of likenesses, such as their age, build, training, their solitude and alienation; into complementary

<sup>2</sup> Jakob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Review in the *Speaker*, 31 January 1903. In *Conrad, A Casebook*, ed. C.B. Cox, London, Macmillan 1981.

factors, such as the ethics they embody; into contrasts, such as one of them killing a man and the other saving the killer, and the former averting a shipwreck and the latter risking one.

For without doubt Leggatt is one of Conrad's most innocent guilty men – which is why I have considered his relatively clear-cut case before that of Kurtz, for whose diabolical conduct we can offer few apologies, and before that of Jim, who in his fall from grace is unambiguously guilty however much in his atrocious circumstances he has our sympathy, who toward the end in his achievement of redemption regains an unambiguous innocence however much we may sympathise with his lover's refusal to forgive him. But Leggatt saves his ship. He kills one member of the crew, a dangerous weakling; but by this action he saves the others, including the unlucky (and timorous) captain of the *Sephora* who is only doing his duty when he locks him in his cabin until at the end of the voyage he can be consigned to an earthly justice which will be ineluctably compelled – condemned, one might say – to condemn him.

Of Conrad's good sinners, his men fallen from grace with whom we are beguiled or exalted into sympathising, to the detriment of our social morality, Leggatt resembles Jim formidably. He has Jim's youthful idealism. He too could be said to be «one of us», in poor haunted Marlow's recurrent phrase; he too, in another phrase we are shadowed by in that novel, is «under a cloud». Like Jim, he ends in an exile from which there can be no return. He may be imagined to have something resembling Jim's despair, though he too keeps an impeccable manly control on it, and he is not allowed to emerge beyond his despair into Jim's world-losing, soul-regaining, life-spurning victory. Like Jim, after his criminal moment of impulsiveness, he is defiant, he is steady. No – it is our apprehension of him which is crucially different. In other words, it is his relation to his narrator, it is the doppelgänger motif. For in *Lord Jim* Marlow keeps condemning his young friend roundly, even as he tries to cushion him against some of the more vile consequences of his actions, or rather, of his «keen perception of the Intolerable», his «deplorable faculty» – Conrad's irony was never more Delphic than in that first chapter. And certainly the stolid Marlow is not tempted into any action a court of law would condemn – not in the outrageously romantic *Lord Jim*, where the romance is in-

tegral to the risk of moral corruption, not even in the infernal *Heart of Darkness* where his dour refusal to succumb to the malign gives us the measure of Kurtz's Faustian accord with – in the absence of a Mephistophilis – himself. Whereas the narrator of *The Secret Sharer* conceals a murderer in his cabin and in order to allow him his perilous escape risks his ship and his crew – actions which before justice would have lost him his master's certificate, his livelihood and his liberty.

Lothe remarks<sup>4</sup> on «a certain negligence» in the presentation of moral problems in *The Secret Sharer*, on its «relative thematic superficiality»; and indeed one should not expect a short story to perform like a novel, the comparison must be handled lightly. This said, I would prefer to wonder at the intricate ways by which Conrad brings us to the note of triumph on which the story ends. Leggatt does not lose his ship; the ship might be said to lose him. Like Jim, he leaps overboard. But Conrad gives us no sense of the ignominious or the culpable in his desire to avoid the gallows; and his second leap into the sea (the comparison would be with Jim's second leap, his jumping of the stockade, his dash for freedom) comes to us at the climax of the story's suspense as the finest of moments, just as his striking out alone, unarmed, penniless, for the barbarous shores of the Gulf of Siam, for mountains and jungles from which he can never emerge and where he is unlikely to live long, is presented as noble, convinces us as a striking out for a liberty and a recovery of self which we acknowledge as just.

The identification of the captain with the escaper has been close indeed to entice us into acceptance of such a dubious moral victory. One remembers him marvelling at his success in hiding the fugitive – was Leggatt invisible to others, was he dreaming him? One remembers their physical resemblance, and the one wearing the other's clothes till the latter half believed the former was him, and he was saving himself. One remembers the captain “so connected in thoughts and impressions with the secret sharer of my cabin” that he suspects that he might have done as the other did – a moral complicity which Marlow never admits to in Jim's regard, for all the admiration his protégé by

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

degrees wrests from him, though one we will find in *The Good Soldier* where Dowell confesses that if he had been half the man Ashburnham was he would have behaved as badly as he did. Even so, it is an uncanny achievement, comparable in its moral audacity to far longer works. Unrelenting in its seduction of the reader's senses – most conspicuously, of his moral sense – *The Secret Sharer* remains, for all its taut narrative control, one of the most spiritually reckless exploitations of the potentialities of solitude, or adventures in moral solitude, which fiction offers. The hero of *The Shadow-Line*, by comparison, as Lothe<sup>5</sup> among others has pointed out, at the end of this trials and his learning returns to society, to protections and to certainties, to self-possession. While as Michael P. Jones, cited with approval by Lothe, observes<sup>6</sup>, the captain in *The Secret Sharer*, who from the start is removed – one might say, is freed – from social contexts, as the narrative proceeds is driven further into himself. It is in this isolation that he finds his alter-ego. It is in this inner uncertainty that he wonders «how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality that every man sets up for himself secretly». It is among these echoing ambiguities that the reader has to focus on what smoky shape-changers ideal conceptions can prove to be. And the story's movement toward the ideal or the atrocious is astonishingly absolute, uncompromising. In longer works in which the resolution, for all its sorrow, has a ring of victory to it, such as *Lord Jim* and *Victory* itself, there are a valedictory page or two at the very end in which the survivors are allowed at least to feel sad, there is a sketched return to some sort of normalcy. Not in *The Secret Sharer*.

2. It is the eponymous hero of *Lord Jim* who is pitched into despair by his betrayal of his ideal conception of his personality – into that despair which for Christianity is a sin, but which in Conrad can have a glint of grace to it, as if a susceptibility to self-hatred were a profound sensibility few people were capable of, self-pity being the really contemptible sentiment. It is Marlow

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Michael P. Jones, *Conrad's Heroism: A Paradise Lost*, Ann Arbor (Michigan), UMI Research Press 1985.

who, as memorably analysed by Miller<sup>7</sup>, has come to doubt the existence of a «sovereign power enthroned in the fixed standard of conduct». The novel, thus, tells a double story. There is Jim's flight from «the fact», from his fall from grace, from a tainted and intolerable self, and his pursuit of a new opportunity, of reconquered honour, a cleansed new self. There is, interwoven with this strand, that of Marlow's attempt to bolster up his shaken faith in the sovereignty and reliability of a code of conduct embodying a moral code.

As in *The Secret Sharer* and *Heart of Darkness*, the narrative is dominated by two male characters, and in all three cases the psychological structures are variations on a few clear, indeed relentless, themes. Someone has infringed the fixed standard of conduct, broken society's moral code – Leggatt by committing a murder aboard the *Sephora*, Jim by abandoning the *Patna*, Kurtz by his «unsound methods». Someone else involves himself or is drawn into involvement with the errant soul. This someone else, named or unnamed, is a sea captain who hitherto has not been decoyed into questioning the professional and moral principles which have shaped him (although in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is aware of unease with himself and his venture from early on). Our captain also functions, wholly or in part, as a narrator; and the tale he tells is always, among other themes, that of his attempt in some sense to save the transgressor.

The narrative structure of *Lord Jim* is of celebrated complexity, but the author is scrupulous to prepare this readers for what is a harmony (though one not without discords) of speakings and listenings. The epigraph on the title-page is by Novalis. *It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it.* (Conrad used Carlyle's translation.) Jim in the open boat at night will not speak to his tormentors, and in the court-room he knows that the questions being asked will not find the answers he is looking for. But after the Enquiry, in Marlow's hotel room, he begins his long attempt to convince his new acquaintance. «Can't you see it? You must see it. Come. Speak – straight out». And Marlow will talk to his listeners by the hour,

<sup>7</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, Oxford, Blackwell 1982.

try to convince them of what he saw, or intuited, or was haunted by; to one of them, «the privileged man», in the end he will write.

The tripartite shape of the novel's narrative is plain to grasp. Chapters 1-4 are told by an omniscient narrator; chapters 5-35 are told by Marlow; chapters 36-45 are written by him. It is not quite so simple as that – after the fourth chapter the omniscient narrator does not utterly vanish, he is shadowily present in the descriptions of Marlow talking and of «the privileged man» receiving the packet, sitting down to read – but that is the broad outline. More complicated are the novel's patterns of interpretation. The omniscient authorial narrator may englobe the personal narrators; he may despite this be eerily absent, conspicuously scant with definite information and conclusive evaluations – but some interpretation is offered. Then there are the two principal interpreters, Marlow and Jim. There are such brilliantly drawn characters as Stein and the French lieutenant. There are a number of minor characters, like Brierly and Cornelius, like 'Gentleman' Brown, like Jewel, who make their contributions to the elucidation of the central enigma which is Jim.

That *Lord Jim*, like Conrad's other major novels, cannot for easier comprehension be reduced to its essentials, on account of those essentials' multiplicity and ambiguity, is demonstrated by the 'eloquent inadequacy of the summary of the story given by Guerard<sup>8</sup>. That it can defy analysis and yet gain by investigation is shown by the fascination of Sherry's factual researches as to its background<sup>9</sup>. But perhaps there are some resonances in its interlocking subjectivities still to be identified, distances in its overarching scepticism still to be discerned.

Marlow insists again and again on his subjectivity, and equally will not let the reader forget that his central endeavour is interpretation. «All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions». He says this in

<sup>8</sup> Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1966.



Chapter Five, thus right at the opening of his oral narrative, and his anxieties as to the limitations of language ring tellingly in their conspicuous position. As the novel proceeds in its pursuit of the recessive nature of truth, or at any rate of conviction, of the tantalizing ways in which understanding can seem to recede from one (from Marlow, from the reader) in proportion to one's accumulation of apparent facts, this unease as to language as the very medium of knowledge, as our only hope, sounds ever more disquietingly. And already toward the close of Chapter Five we begin to discern how doubt will be, with masterly Conradian paradox, vitally important and the heart of the tragedy. I have already referred to this moment, and shall now cite it at greater length.

Why I longed to go grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which, after all, concerned me no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct, I can't explain. You may call it an unhealthy curiosity if you like; but I have a distinct notion I wished to find something. Perhaps, unconsciously, I hoped I would find that something, some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse. I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible – for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death – the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct. It is the hardest thing to stumble against; it is the thing that breeds yelling panics and good little quiet villainies; it's the true shadow of calamity.

In *Heart of Darkness*, which had been serialised in Blackwood's Magazine in three issues in the spring of the year, 1899, of which in the September its author began to write *Lord Jim*, it is Kurtz, that incarnate opacity, whom Marlow finds rising like a vapour in his path; he is the ghoul tormented by doubt who stands before him «misty and silent» in the night jungle. But if the novella's horrors are more dramatically concentrated, the vaster structures of the novel give it a terrible air of the ineluctable, of mirror after mirror, recession beyond recession. Here a «distinct notion» resolves itself into a haunting series of 'some-things', and never can the seemingly innocuous word 'some',

tolled like a bell, have been revealed to be so ominous, so charged with depression. What is so confounding is the perspective in which we have to confront the search for «some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation». That this is a post-Christian endeavour is clear from the aching tone of the voice which speaks of redemption and mercy. That our pursuit of «some shadow of an excuse» brings us face to face with «the true shadow of calamity»; that what we hope for is 'impossible'; that the ghost of doubt which we have created is one which we cannot lay; that the 'fixed' is not reliable, nor the 'standard', and there is perhaps no 'sovereign power' – these perceptions resound so desolately, seem integral to such an omniscient scepticism, because in their world, in *Lord Jim*, there is no 'sovereign power'. As I have already suggested in this discussion, the authorial narrator, that invisible Olympian mind which gave reassuring solidity to so many great novels by Conrad's predecessors, in this book is notable for his ghostliness, for his inability or reluctance to be generous with facts or judgments.

The oddly consistent masculinity of these Conradian idealistic transgressors and their narrators, of the idealists and transgressors and narrators we also find in *The Good Soldier* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Great Gatsby*, for that matter the consistent masculinity of these authors, may be a coincidence and certainly is not a phenomenon I can explain. But in the moral and psychological perspective sketched above it is not hard to sense why these studies of what at the outset I called the wrestlings of idealism with despair are situated in texts bereft of 'sovereign power', structures which for all the brilliance of the dramatic closure achieved in their final chapters remain hauntingly open-ended. Marlow's puzzlings over the delusory nature of the knowledge offered to him are, I submit, to be read in this light.

I don't pretend I understood him. The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog – bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country. They fed one's curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation. Upon the whole he was misleading.

Of course, no novel is without authorial narrative – in the banal sense that it is all authorial. But Conrad developed all manner of stratagems for making the authorial appear to disappear, as in *Heart of Darkness* where on the first and last pages Marlow's narrative is framed by that of another narrator in his turn to be distinguished from the author himself; and perhaps more fiendishly still in *Lord Jim* where the omnipresent is just present enough to unnerve by its absence, the all-encompassing refuses to unify and to delimit, the omniscient refuses to know. We perceive Jim through rents in a fog (and fog, and misty apprehensions, are crucial in the Congo story too). We hear Marlow lament that sometimes he has doubted Jim's very existence, and yet assert that his is an «imperishable reality». We even read that Jim was «overwhelmed by the inexplicable; he was overwhelmed by his own personality». We are assured that it is impossible to know how much Brown lied to Jim or, later, to Marlow, and that doubtless in his vanity he lied to himself – because «the truth of every passion wants some pretense to make it live», which if we accept must lead us to doubt the complete reliability of any testimony. But among these clouds some lineaments emerge. The subject is the interpretation of the glorious and the atrocious and the delusory, and these are tentative understandings and illuminating ignorances which will not be arrived at, in this post-Christian writer's philosophy, by one voice preaching a sermon, there being no One, but by the play of many voices, by infinite variety. In a world of illimitable subjectivities, of myriad changes of consciousness, artistic detachment is the essence: so we see Conrad deploying narrative within narrative, and gaining distance with each deployment, gaining the possibilities of new perspectives and new ironies – and we hear him being blamed for aloofness.

These are all stories of loyalty (Conrad's, Ford's, Fitzgerald's); they are tales of friendship defying great odds, tales of moral isolation shadowily shared, tales of hauntings. And although *Lord Jim* is one of the extremely rare novels which one can describe as a tragedy in the Shakespearean sense, it is also Shakespearean in that it is one of the most passionate affirmations of the splendour of the human spirit ever written. Into the mouth of steady, rather wordy Marlow – as into the humble mouths of Nellie Dean in *Wuthering Heights* and nice Nick Car-

raway in *The Great Gatsby* – are put wild, defiant thoughts. When the longing for a sovereign power is undertaken, as Conrad makes one undertake it, in the spectral presence of its absence, we are in fit condition to approach the apprehension of the atrocious (in *Nostromo*, *Heart of Darkness*), and *Lord Jim* never shirks its brushes with malignity. We have the explanation of Brown's massacre of Jim's men, which was «a demonstration of some obscure and awful attribute of our nature which, I am afraid, is not so very far under the surface as we like to think». But it is worth remembering that though the sceptical and idealistic Conrad has his self-defeated sceptics, like Decoud in *Nostromo*, he is also abundant in self-destructively triumphant outcasts, like Lena in *Victory* – and like Jim. Critics have shied away from the ineluctable despair of the novel, but also from its glorying in its defiances. After all, Marlow and Stein do give Jim the opportunity of redemption he craves, and he does grab it most spendidly with both hands. And Marlow is not defeated by his loyalty to, and his haunting by, that «disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of this earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades». Jim may be, according to the «fixed standard», as the loathsomely corrupt Chester pronounces, «no good». Certainly he will never be able to return to face his father (that inadequate shade of a sovereign power, a One) who had been so pleased with «his sailor son». All his family back in England will ever know was that he disgraced himself and disappeared. But Marlow on the last page seems strangely positive. «For it may well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side... He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied – quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us – and have I not stood up once, like an evoked ghost, to answer for his eternal constancy?»

Eloquent enough, that use of the present tense.

3. As in *Wuthering Heights*, as in *The Great Gatsby*, in *Heart of Darkness* an account of scarcely credible wild passions is anchored in what we may believe, in what we may disquiet ourselves by accepting, by being related to us in tones of unexcep-

tionable sanity. A respectable narrator, a narrator endowed even with a faint, blessed touch of dullness, lends an invaluable ordinariness – though this is not without its perils. For if the irreproachable, sociable group of friends on the Thames give solidity and structure to the vaporous horrors enacted and perceived on the Congo, if the outer story prevents the inner from bursting the bounds of all comprehensibility, equally the question of complicity is posed. This suspicion of course falls chiefly on Marlow, the principal narrator; on that survivor of loyalties and revelations, that witness of unverifiable veracity and possible contamination. But it is intrinsic to the structure of Conrad's moral intention in this parable that the suspicion of complicity fall also, however tangentially, upon the personal frame narrator, and thus, faintly but logically, on the reader too, on everyone.

Marlow who relates one of his «inconclusive experiences», the frame narrator who recounts his telling of that story, the author who in turn writes that story – to narrate a pursuit of recessive truths, of arrival at emptinesses, Conrad sets up a structure of multiple detachments. Nor is the absence of authorial narrative, that once-sovereign power here reduced to the invisible, without moral resonance. The fiction of «inconclusive experiences», which Ian Watt<sup>10</sup> writing of *Heart of Darkness* called «subjective moral impressionism», is in this exemplary case a fiction which takes the form of a re-living and a re-ordering, is an attempt to interpret and to expiate. The sovereign power, if there is one, will not provide the conclusive. If it exists, it is not to be imagined outside the narrative but inside; not encompassing the whole with its total comprehension, not imbueing every thread of the texture with order and with meaning, but at the dark heart of the Dark Continent, at the Inner Station, waiting.

When Lothe writes of «the relative naivety and limited insight of the frame narrator» he misses the point<sup>11</sup>. The novella's levels of interpretation, relative to one another, are the steps of the

<sup>10</sup> Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Chatto and Windus 1980.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

reader's apprehension, and to arrive at Kurtz's self-knowledge (if what is what it is: Trilling was unsure<sup>12</sup>: but of this, more later) we advance through the frame narrator's understanding of Marlow, through other men's understanding of Kurtz, through Marlow's understandings of himself and of him. The gradations are nicely judged. And on the very first page it is clear that the frame narrator – who can have no forboding of the initiations he will be subjected to before the turn of the tide – has his sensitivity. The foreshadowing begins with his vision of «a mournful gloom, brooding» over London, with the Accountant «toying architecturally with the bones», (they are dominoes), with Marlow «an idol». To him is entrusted the initial sun which sets «stricken to death by that gloom brooding over a crowd of men», and also the opening discussion of empire. His are the «monstrous town» and «brooding gloom» which immediately precede Marlow's famous first line, which would certainly be incomprehensible without them. «'And this also', said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of dark places of the earth'».

In the sense in which *Lord Jim* may be said to be *about* interpretation, *Heart of Darkness* is *about* Marlow as a narrator of a spatial journey and as an interpreter of a psychological and moral one. Kurtz stands at the heart of the story; but Marlow bulks more formidably in the reader's gaze, and Kurtz only exists in his words. For the haunted would-be rescuer the Inner Station «was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience». *Heart of Darkness* has been lucky in some of its critics, and I have no wish to replicate the work of Guerard or of Guetti<sup>13</sup>; but the dream-like quality of Marlow's voyage, the air of unreality which its realities have, are germane to my theme. «It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt...» Marlow's possible unreliability as a narrator, the yawning here too of the

<sup>12</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture*, quoted in *Conrad, A Casebook*, ed. C.B. Cox, London, Macmillan 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1958, already cited in this essay; James Guetti, *The Limits of Metaphor*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press 1967.

absence of a 'fixed standard', is founded on his own forced awareness that what had been imagined to be reality is but a dream-sensation, and no relation of what we live will be other than that vain, as delusory as the experience itself. Approaching the Inner Station, the introspective voyager and his vessel proceed through a silence that «seemed unnatural, like a state of trance», and from their advance into what cannot be heard they enter a fog where nothing can be seen. Then, «The approach to this Kurtz grubbing for ivory in the wretched bush was beset by as many dangers as though he had been an enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle». And at the end, crucially, Marlow's tenebrous pilgrimage toward this Other or his Jungian shadow, his adventure in self-knowledge, resolves itself into the perception that our most profound experience is not only vaporous, it is not our own, and here we meet our most perilous alienation. «And it is not my own extremity I remember best – a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things – even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity I seem to have lived through».

The political reverberations of these extremities have had their elucidations<sup>14</sup> and do not concern me here so much as the problematic relations which Conrad reveals between language and silence, language and power, language and truth. It is the frame narrator who tells us, «I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night air of the river». A word, a clue, a revelation... A waiting for a sign... The story of Kurtz, that man of enlightenment, that all-European purveyor of civilization to barbarians, that artist and political orator and writer, that enchanter famous for his eloquence so few of whose utterances we are permitted to hear, brings us to the nexus truth-/treachery, to revelations the final ambiguity of which is that they may defeat the mind either by being intolerable or by being

<sup>14</sup> Eg. R. Oliva e A. Portelli, *Conrad: l'imperialismo imperfetto*, Torino, Einaudi 1973; also K.K. Ruthven, *The Savage God*, in *Conrad, A Casebook*, ed. C.B. Cox, London, Macmillan 1981.

delusory and one has, at this cognitive level, little way of discerning which adumbration is more or less spectral.

It was Trilling, in *Beyond Culture*, who remarked that he did not know whether the author of *Heart of Darkness* was a reader of Blake or of Nietzsche but he wrote as if he were, his story «follows in their line»; and he went on to denominate Kurtz «a hero of the spirit... the artist, the man who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring the reality of this hell to the bland lies of the civilization that has overlaid it...». I would add that what is infernal in the world of texts such as *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, a world of narratives at once multiple and fallible and all we have, was aptly phrased by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*: «Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error». That on the murky stuff of our existence or non-existence no logical structure can be raised, that falsity may be in-built, is the doubt which mirrors Marlow's burgeoning apprehension that you could say much the same of language, and it is among these infinite reflections and recessions, in what T.S. Eliot in *Gerontion* called «a wilderness of mirrors», that our struggle to make sense is conducted. That language is not only a terrible power but is also terrible in its limitations, that Kurtz's 'unspeakable rites' are indeed unspeakable, that the African wilderness lies beyond our words – this has been most justly phrased by Giuseppe Sertoli<sup>15</sup> citing Hamlet's last line: «The rest is silence».

If as Sertoli points out language is the luminous surface of our civilization, and beneath it abide the abominations which that same civilization produces, Kurtz is the man of that heart of darkness because in his emptiness echo whispers not commonly heard, in his hollowness the silence is imperfect. In the absence of the sovereign power of a moral order and where the glittering order of language begins to betray its inarticulacy with certain realities, its imprecision with certain dreams, stands Kurtz in

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Cuore di tenebra*, Nota introduttiva di Giuseppe Sertoli, Traduzione di Alberto Rossi, Torino, Einaudi 1989.



«his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces». He has not saved his moral sanity with hard work, as Marlow does; nor will he, as Marlow does, return to civilization and seal his rehabilitation with a lie. He who could say anything, who could convince anyone of anything, who could «get himself to believe anything», is not even a transgressor in the fairly straightforward manner of Leggatt or Jim – and beyond doubt he lacks their fetching dash of the romantic. As Guetti has argued<sup>16</sup>, his faith was in himself, not as a moral being but as a being who could use or discard morality.

Conrad harks back repeatedly to the lack of external restraints in the wilderness, to the corresponding need for internal restraints, in other words the need either for a saving stupidity or for iron self-discipline and indefatigable belief. His response to his first sight of the heads on Kurtz's stockade is this:

They only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.

Here the 'sovereign' which was first in doubt, then absent, has been reduced to a 'something wanting', to a 'small matter'; and he who has comprehended so devastatingly the disparity between moral fictions and an amoral reality reminds one of Dr Faustus with his inability to save himself with structures which he has annihilated, to him are no longer available. It is perhaps in this light that Kurtz's last words are to be read. Following Trilling, we can appreciate Conrad's ironical determination to leave it possible to understand them as simply expressive of the man's horror at his rapidly approaching extinction. This will not alarm us, who have lived from the start with the manifold resonances and silences of this novella's title. But we can also puzzle over Marlow's determination to remember those words as a

<sup>16</sup> James Guetti, *Heart of Darkness and the Failure of the Imagination*, in *Conrad, A Casebook*, ed. C.B. Cox, London, Macmillan 1981.

breakthrough: «This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it».

This story does not close with the defiant grasping of almost angelic triumph in the midst of terrestrial ruin which other Conrad stories do (both Lena and Jim are endowed with flickers of seraphic imagery). The only comparable text I can think of is W.B. Yeats's poem *Meru*, with its recognition that civilization is made of 'manifold illusions', but that «man's life is truth», and that is why the thinker is eternally «ravening, raging and uprooting / Into the desolation of reality».

4. It is difficult to imagine a novel which might rival Ford's *The Good Soldier* for its absences of all possible centres of knowledge or order, for the playful yet remorseless multiplicity of its meanings and meaninglessnesses. As in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, story-telling and interpretation, the possibility or impossibility of discerning light or establishing signifi-*ance*, are the subject, are as near to a conception of an encompassing whole as we come. As so often in Conrad, too, the psychological mainspring is loyalty; there is the wish to stand up for a dead friend, to set the record straight, to render homage. In Dowell's, the narrator's, words, «it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads». And indeed Ford is concerned, (as he was in *Parade's End*), with the falling to pieces of that English society which did not survive its only apparent victory in 1914-18. He leaves a record – perhaps not a record which 'heirs' or 'generations infinitely remote' will be much edified by, but a scrupulous portrayal of ignorance, selfishness, bigotry, treachery, callousness; of a society with its normal and successful souls corrupt and cold, its finest spirits annihilated, a world without pity or redemption. His narrator's gruff wish to get the sight out of his head serves merely to remind the reader who has read the novel before that this is something he is unable to do. And no setting of a record straight was ever more crooked, more wayward, more labyrinthine.

For interpretative coherence it is possible to reduce the novel to some order – to order it possesses but will scarcely admit to.

For example V. Fortunati<sup>17</sup>, while never forgetting that such schematizations leave out much of richness, identifies four principal scenes: the first meeting between the Dowells and the Ashburnhams in the hotel dining-room at Nauheim; the excursion to the castle at M. and subsequent death of Maisie Moidan; Nancy's and Edward's stroll and Florence's consequent suicide; Dowell's sojourn at Branshaw Teleragh – this last episode being divided into three main moments, Nancy's offering of herself to Edward, her being accompanied to the station by Edward and the narrator, and Edward's suicide. The same critic makes an equally useful set of distinctions between the novel's negative imagery (such as the death of a mouse from cancer, the prison full of screaming hysterics, the goodly apple rotten at the core) and its positive imagery (such as the extraordinarily safe castle, the minuet, the tall ship with white sails on a blue sea), and relates these illuminatingly to the story's formidable array of binary structures – appearance / reality, security / insecurity, health / sickness, and so on. For *The Good Soldier* which is, like *Heart of Darkness*, a study of the rottenness of a civilization, a study of seemingly ineluctable degenerations, has its inescapable structures. My point is that it also possesses other elements which are, given its sombre material, entirely appropriate. A symbolic structure, after all, one can focus on, and find coherent (just as one of the merits of a sovereign moral code is that at least one knows when it is transgressed, a law makes comprehensible both the lawful and the lawless indifferently). But what are the structures of caprice and of fallibility, for instance, and what moral purpose, if any, can one discern in their deployment in this text?

That Dowell is the most apparently maddening narrator in fiction, that his mind is a maze of misapprehensions but also of clairvoyances and that they are famously difficult to distinguish, has been authoritatively discussed by Fortunati and by others. For Ohmann<sup>18</sup>, Dowell «free-associates. His subject of the moment reminds him of other events, so that he moves freely within his

<sup>17</sup> V. Fortunati, *Ford Madox Ford: Teoria e tecnica narrativa*, Bologna, Patron 1975.

<sup>18</sup> C. Ohmann, *Ford Madox Ford: From Apprentice to Craftsmanship*, New York, Wesleyan University Press 1964.

whole chronological range». Such is the logical end of Dowell's avowed uncertainty as to «how it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story; or whether to tell it from this distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself. So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. And I shall go on talking, in a low voice...» As Ohmann says, «It's the story of Dowell telling his story». And as Stang<sup>19</sup> has phrased it, «There are overstatements, understatements, denials, lies, contradictions... logical fallacies, omitted links... Dowell is a faux-naif of the most artful kind, a pretender to innocence, a master of obfuscation...» «As if it were a story...» As if it had at least the sovereign order of time – but this is a story of consciousness where time does not plod from one o'clock to two o'clock at a steady pace, and Ford's novel, like Proust's, has the twin tissues of voluntary and involuntary memory intertwined, it has that dizzying freedom. As Ford remarked (in *Thus To Revisit*, 1921), «life is really a matter of minute hourly embarrassment; of sympathetic or unsympathetic personal contacts; of little-marked successes and failures, of queer jealousies and muted terminations – a tenuous, fluttering and engrossing fabric. And intangible!» Hence the vital importance, in writing, of truth to the cadence of the author's (or narrator's) mind; hence what M. Allot recorded as «life by values transcending life by clock»<sup>20</sup>. This tenuous, fluttering, and engrossing life is mirrored in a style of which the same may be said – and one of the consequences of this liberty with time-shifts and strange juxtapositions is moral, for Ford can keep aloof from common judgments as coldly as Conrad, like him can enforce reapparaisals. He can be off-hand about a death (Florence's leaves one untouched, she snaps like a brittle stick and that is that), and yet describe the conversation between Edward and his mother just before the former's engagement as «a crimi-

<sup>19</sup> S.J. Stang, *Ford Madox Ford*, New York, F. Ungar Publishing Co. 1977.

<sup>20</sup> M. Allot, *Novelists on the Novel*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1959.

nal sort of proceeding». He is unsparing not only of those he despises (Bayham the 'rabbit') but also of his heroes: the adored Edward and Nancy have, respectively, their stupidity and their cruelty.

It is pertinent not only that, as Novalis phrased it and Conrad echoed him, our conviction gains as soon as another soul will believe in it. But when one has read Marlow's confessions of his bafflement when attempting to plumb Jim and Kurtz one can hardly fail to acknowledge that not only our convictions hinge perilously on others' wisdom or gullibility: our doubts are equally contingent, just as lacking in autonomy and dignity. And with Dowell the case is more acute still.

I don't know; I don't know; was that last remark of hers the remark of a harlot, or is it what every decent woman... thinks at the bottom of her heart?... Yet, if one doesn't know that at this hour and day, at this pitch of civilization... If one doesn't know as much as that about the first thing in the world, what does one know and why is one here?

The 'silent listener' is as integral to Ford's design of his shifting truths and values, and as vital to Dowell's attempt to make sense of this tiredness and sadness and solitude, as are Conrad's verandahs and decks of listeners to Marlow's theatricality, his need to mirror Jim's and Kurtz's needs to communicate, be understood, wring some assent from an oblivious emptiness. To pursue this argument farther would be to embark on an analysis of Samuel Beckett's novels and plays, which is outside my modest scope here. But the tone of longing – of romantic, wild desperation – which unmanly, rich, confused Dowell comes out with on occasion gives one the measure of his loss of faith, of his despairing comprehension that only belief in sovereign good, in rather, in durable values might have ransomed his pinchbeck world and him.

You may shut up the music-book, close the harpsichord; in the cupboard and presses the rats may destroy the white satin favours. The mob may sack Versailles; the Trianon may fall, but surely the minuet – the minuet itself is dancing itself away into the furthest stars, even as our minuet of the Hessian bathing places must be stepping itself still. Isn't there any heaven where old beautiful dances, old beautiful intimacies prolong themselves?

Dowell's defiance, his standing by the soul of the man who was his wife's lover and who caused her death, who furthermore caused young Maisie Moidan to die not in her husband's arms but alone, deceived, heart-broken, gains its awful resonance from the moral void in which it is vainly and doggedly and cack-handedly launched. The silent listener is isolatingly silent – does not even make a dumb gesture off, possibly, compassion, like the silent listener in *Not I*. For, to elaborate Nietzsche after Novalis, if «Life is no argument», that means our consciousness is nothing to found reasonings on, Ford's «tenuous, fluttering and engrossing fabric» of thought and feeling and words can only flutter.