

SEARCHING THE DARKEST CORNERS : ASPECTS OF THE GROTESQUE IN SELECTED WORKS OF CONRAD

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It has often been said of Conrad's works that they are marked by the 'doctrine of extremity' especially when it concerns the treatment of diabolism. Works like *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Agent* and *Victory* abound in instances, characters, symbols and images which create this sinister atmosphere. The creation of this atmosphere is not only a matter of craft and technique in the art of novel writing, it may also be seen as the product of an instinctive sensibility for reading character. One may therefore say that characters like Kurtz, Schomberg, Verloc and James Wait are not only agents of destruction, they also have a strong association with the kind of environment which produces them.

Conrad's deep insight into character is combined with his narrative technique which Ford Maddox Ford has explained in *A Personal Remembrance*, as being basically one of intensity :

... 'every' word set on paper—must carry the story forward...  
the story must be carried forward faster and faster and with  
more and more intensity. That is called 'progression d'effect',...

This produces grotesque effects at times.

In applying the word 'grotesque' to the artistic meaning which Conrad achieves in his characters and situations one need not adhere to any set meaning of the word as it is rather difficult to apply a formula to Conrad's creative powers. Moreover, Conrad himself has used the word 'grotesque' with a different meaning every time he has used it. In *Heart of Darkness* he uses it for Kurtz's rather perverted temperament

which becomes grossly inhuman while he is among the African natives. In *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, the tone is rather ironic with metaphors and thematic structure focussed around the character of James Wait, an obnoxious figure. James Wait's obnoxiousness in relation to the humanity and patience of the crew of the 'Narcissus' may be equated with the grotesque effect of the nigger's personality. In *The Secret Agent*, the word has a paradoxical implication. Characters like Verloc, Vladimir and the anarchists are caricatures, laughable for their ludicrousness and pretentiousness in Dickensian terms.

On the other hand, the grotesque in *The Secret Agent* is so very true that it is painful. It creates a nauseating feeling on the physical level by the startling presentation of truth. It creates the effect through a dehumanizing metaphor as in some novels of Kafka. The feeling produced is not only one of cruelty but leaves one disturbed, thinking about the void of a moral wasteland.

In *Victory*, the grotesque is linked with the malicious drives in some people, which makes them detestable. Such people are recreated in characters like Schomberg, Jones and Ricardo. The diabolic streak in them is inevitably linked with a certain amount of stupidity and denseness what in other words may be called stubbornness. This single-minded stubbornness is expressed through Schomberg and Jones's obsessions.

In the works of Joseph Conrad the grotesque also runs in close proximity to the device of creating metaphors, symbols and dramatic effects. The total effect of which is the creation of a macabre and sinister atmosphere as in some of Poe's stories. However, unlike Poe, Conrad never brings in the Gothic element or supernatural decor to produce this effect. He does it in an ironic manner. Never admitting to believing in it but making his characters believe and practise occult rites. The grotesque atmosphere of 'romanticized primitivism' becomes a myth or a technique for probing and questioning a variety of meanings. These may include individual sparks of character and also an ironic treatment of political

anarchy and the justification for colonialism. Understones of these are to be found in *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Agent*, *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *Victory*. The collective effect of these works operates on more than an intellectual plane. It strikes strongly on the sensory and emotive plane as Conrad said, "I am complex because my thought is multiple."

Conrad characterizes his artistic approach by saying:

"I am but a novelist, I must speak in images." In one of his letters, he says about his fiction:

You must cultivate your poetic faculty . . . you must search the darkest corners of your heart . . . for the image.

The image in Conrad's works is extremely important from the point of view of producing the grotesque effect.

An image, technically speaking, does not only consist of visual effects. It may appeal to any of the senses. "It may be visual, may be auditory or may be wholly psychological." According to Conrad himself it is "the outward sign of inward feeling." The image therefore is "that which represents an intellectual and emotional complex," "the image seems an appropriate epitome of the whole." Very often in a work of literature, the image identifies with the symbol, in that the symbols are recognized through specific images. Those images, in the context of the story, give it dimension and make the work what it is. "All symbols, in fact, are apprehended through specific images." For instance, the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick*, is a "vague, nameless horror" on the one hand, and on the other hand, it symbolizes "whatever grand, or, gracious" things there are. In *Heart of Darkness* the images of blackness recurring continuously in the context of the story build the symbol of the 'impenetrable mystery' of the heart of darkness. In a wider context, the image of blackness is a probing deep, deep down into the recesses of the human psyche. This would include the psyche of the Russian, in *The Secret Agent*, the psyche of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and the psyche of civilized Europe, which seems almost an obsession in Conrad's works. Quoted

below are instances where Conrad has used the image of 'blackness' to emphasize "the improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering" existence, in the stifled atmosphere of the heart of darkness :

Black men advanced in a file toiling up the path . . . black rags were wound round their loins and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.<sup>4</sup>

All these images create the symbol of deepest, darkest Africa which is the abode of barbarity and corruption. Another parallel image is Marlowe's impression of the river Congo slithering through the forest :

But there was in it one river, especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving a far over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as looked at the map of it in a shop window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird.<sup>5</sup>

Through the image of the long river compared to a snake, Marlowe symbolizes not only the cognitive journey through the real Congo, it is the symbolic journey of experience especially the encounter with the forces of evil. It is the mythic journey like Huckleberry Finn's journey down the Mississippi River. But whereas Huckleberry Finn's journey makes him accept the hard facts of existence, Marlowe's journey to the Congo makes him all the more aware of the "black and incomprehensible frenzy" of madmen like Kurtz and the manager of the station. Compared to the deep and complicated intentions of the Europeans in the heart of darkness, Marlowe is "a silly little bird." The image as such in Conrad's works, like in the *Heart of Darkness*, equates with the symbol. They both work in close proximity. They not only create the atmospheric effect, but also fulfil the purpose of being an "outward device for presenting an inward state."

T.S. Eliot's statement about the use of 'objective correlative' may be said to identify with the image and the symbol in that it is :

The only way of expressing emotion in art... in other words, a set of objects; a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular*; such that when the general facts which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

An example of such a 'particular' may be cited from *The Secret Agent*. By various suggestions, Conrad implies that the anarchists are the most insincere group of people. They are disorganized and everything they do is chaotic, their personalities are swamped and they are stifled. Nothing in them is genuine. Their confusion is directly intuited by Stevie. In Eliot's sense of the definition, Stevie creates through his innocence, juxtaposed to the hypocrisy of the anarchists, the sensory experience. This sensory experience not only arouses the reader's sympathy for Stevie, it also objectifies the general chaos among the anarchists.

Mr. Verloc, getting off the sofa with ponderous reluctance, opened the door leading into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles, innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric. A convocating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. (Italics mine).

Through the images in Stevie's mind, the author has been able to include not only Stevie's personal failings, but also a wider area of connotation. Through Stevie's chaotic mind a reference is made to the cosmic chaos, ironically pointing towards the anarchists. The image in this respect helps to concentrate and make more compact the author's

general area of reference. The image or the symbol helps in a condensation of meaning, of unexpressed reference.

Conrad's works abound in images and symbols which are concentrated, and whose aim is through the 'power of the written word' to create a total effect:

My task which I am trying to achieve is to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see.<sup>9</sup>

The image of Pedro in *Victory*, according to this statement, is not only to fulfil the immediate purpose of making him a grotesque personality, physically nauseating; it is also a reference to a wider subject which Conrad is concerned with. It is to indicate the existence of grotesque characters like Schomberg, Jones, Ricardo and Pedro.

Pedro the third individual—a nondescript, hairy creature—had modestly made his way forward and had perched himself on the luggage: by his narrow and low forehead, unintelligently furrowed by horizontal wrinkles, surmounted wildly by his protruding cheeks and a flat nose with wide, baboon-like nostrils.<sup>10</sup>

This is one instance of how in an isolated image, Conrad can produce a startling effect.

On the subject of evoking an image, one can apply Conrad's statement, in the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. That is to say that Conrad draws from sources and many arts to create an image which fulfils his artistic intention. His image sometimes aspires:

Strenuously . . . to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be

brought to play for an evanescent, instant over the common-place surface of words.<sup>11</sup>

For example, in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad borrows from sculpture to make an image which would express effectively the god-like authority which James Wait exercised over the crew of the 'Narcissus'. The image is most appropriate in that it contains a reflection of James Wait's malingerings and obnoxiousness which ironically gets so much consideration for him from the crew of the 'Narcissus'. The same image also contains the feeling of the crew for whom James Wait was a test of their endurance. He was a carbuncle in their soul. He stood out in their imagination as a hostile god who must be propitiated. While Wait is lying sick in his bed, one of the crew looks at the aspect and comments on the visual aspects :

The little place, repainted white, had in the night the brilliance of a silver shrine where a black idol, reclining stiffly under a blanket, blinked its weary eyes and received our homage.<sup>12</sup>

Through the visual impact, produced by the sculptured image, Conrad has been able to create sensory perceptions on many levels. The image in such an instance creates its own vortex which is a verbal embodiment of thought and feeling.

However, sometimes the images in Conrad's books are suggestive on a different plane. They are not easy to explain, except when they are carefully noticed. The reader, on a second reading sometimes finds that the images relevant to setting the tone of the novel, are carefully scattered in the book. An illustration is the *image* and not the symbol of ivory in *Heart of Darkness*. The image gradually works up to a symbol. By symbol is meant here a predominating pattern or motif holding up the structure of the story. Kurtz's head, says Marlowe :

Was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball.<sup>13</sup>

Kurtz's main topic of conversation was: "My ivory, my intended, my ivory, my station my, river, my . . . everything."<sup>14</sup> About Kurtz's face when he was dying Marlowe says: "I saw on the ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror."<sup>15</sup> In another instance Marlowe describes Kurtz's appearance when he was ill but had crawled to participate in the pagan rites. Kurtz looked:

As though an animated image of death carved but of old ivory and he had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze.<sup>16</sup>

These individual images of ivory contribute towards the symbol of the ivory as a predominant force in *Heart of Darkness* till the word 'ivory' itself becomes a fetish. "You would think they were praying to it. The ivory then symbolically becomes as important a motif in the book, as the coiling river or the black natives all of which set the smothered atmosphere of *Heart of Darkness*.

The image works in close association with the symbol in the works of Conrad to produce the grotesque effect. From a single incident the image works towards a larger and wider base. What an American student of Donne, James C. Cline, has said of Donne's imagery, is relevant to Conrad's symbolism too:

There is no advance in thought, only a refinement of it, a deepening and gathering intensity of realization until finally the great period crashes to a close, still reiterating, still sustaining, an incremental movement of passion and of mind.<sup>17</sup>

It may be said of Conrad's technique of creating the grotesque effect that, there is hardly any rapid development in the story. The story moves slow and is at times almost static but the images grow in space through the symbols. Bereft of the symbols the character would lose much of its stature. From "visual scene upon visual scene charged with emotive impact" Marlowe creates the grotesque personality of Kurtz. But the final role of Kurtz's corruption is revealed in taking the story on an



altogether different plane. The image of Kurtz grows wider and his corruption becomes more obvious juxtaposed to the innocence of his 'intended' and the admirable opinion she has of him. In a letter to William Blackwood, Conrad sums up his technique of creating effects in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad writes:

For the writing is as good as I can make it (first duty) and in the light of the final incident, the whole story in all its (detail) descriptive detail shall fall into its place—acquire its value and significance . . . The last pages of *Heart of Darkness* where the interview of the man and the girl looks in—as it were—the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the centre of Africa.

There is yet another method which Conrad uses to create an atmosphere of the grotesque. Transferring our attention to *The Secret Agent*, we notice that the symbolism, which is the basis of the grotesque effect of the book, relies a good deal on the texture of the similes and metaphors. This does not however suggest that there are no similes and metaphors in *Heart of Darkness* which we have discussed earlier. The difference is one of emphasis. Whereas the metaphors of *Heart of Darkness* are derived from anthropology and primitive ritual, in forming the core symbol of the ivory, the metaphors of *The Secret Agent* are acquired from the animal world. By metaphor I mean here:

a figure of speech in which two unlike objects are compared by identification or by the substitution of one for the other.

The metaphor being an extension of the simile which is usually defined as a 'stated comparison'. The metaphors of *The Secret Agent* are largely those of flesh and animals. These 'zoological metaphors', as such metaphors may be called, are not only 'damaging, but damning'. Verloc is therefore abused by Vladimir for his fatness: "you are too fat

for that," "he's fat—the animal." Verloc on account of being fat was too lazy—"He breakfasted in bed and remained wallowing there with an air of quiet enjoyment, until noon every day."<sup>20</sup> Vladimir is a 'dog fish.' Karl Yundt, the terrorist appears, "His little, bald, head quivered, imparting a comical vibration to the wisp of white goatee."<sup>21</sup> Of Comrade Ossipon, Conrad writes, "Comrade Ossipon's thick lips accentuated the negro type of his face."<sup>21</sup>

The Professor looked ridiculous. The roundness of the heavy rimmed spectacles imparted an owlish character to his moody, imperturbed face.<sup>22</sup>

Baron Stoth-Wärtenheim, "enjoyed a fame for an owlish pessimistic gullibility."<sup>23</sup> Nichols was speaking in an even voice, a voice that whoozed as if deadened and opposed by the layer of fat on his chest.<sup>24</sup>

Verloc extended as much recognition to Stevie, as a man not particularly fond of animals, may give to his wife's beloved cat.<sup>25</sup>

And last but not the least the metaphor of the people: They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on, blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps.<sup>26</sup>

These are indeed examples of some of the metaphors drawn from the animal world which one can say "determine the theme and even the structure of a novel", like *The Secret Agent*. These metaphors express Conrad's contempt for the anarchists and the hypocrisy of their entire organization. The contempt stands out all the more, from the disparity between what Conrad considered were Winnie Verloc's honest intentions and the untruthfulness of the anarchists.

To sum up, we may say that Conrad creates in his style, layer after layer of images, all tightly packed and inseparable and the overall effect of

such images is to make the characters appear grotesque—truthful, yet larger than life. This fits in well with the technique both he and Ford Maddox Ford set forth :

The architectonics of the novel over the way a story should be built up so that the story progresses and grows up to the last word.<sup>27</sup>

- 4. Ibid., p. 12.
- 5. Ibid., p. 13.
- 6. Ibid., p. 14.
- 7. T. B. Macaulay, "The History of England," p. 15.
- 8. The Secret Agent, p. 16.
- 9. The Secret Agent, p. 17.
- 10. The Secret Agent, p. 18.
- 11. The Secret Agent, p. 19.
- 12. Ibid., p. 20.
- 13. Ibid., p. 21.
- 14. Ibid., p. 22.
- 15. Ibid., p. 23.
- 16. Ibid., p. 24.
- 17. Ibid., p. 25.
- 18. Joseph Conrad, "The Secret Agent," p. 26.
- 19. W. B. Yeats, "The Secret Agent," p. 27.
- 20. Beson and Clark, "The Secret Agent," p. 28.
- 21. Ibid., p. 29.
- 22. Ibid., p. 30.
- 23. Ibid., p. 31.
- 24. Ibid., p. 32.
- 25. Ibid., p. 33.
- 26. Ibid., p. 34.
- 27. Ford Maddox Ford, "The Secret Agent," p. 35.

## REFERENCES

1. William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol*, (Indian University Press, 1965), p. 9.
2. Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, (London 1966), p. 93.
3. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid*, p. 18.
5. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 7.
6. Tindall, *The Literary Symbol*, p. 8.
7. T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet", *Selected Essays*, (Faber, London 1963), p. 145.
8. *The Secret Agent*, p. 46.
9. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, p. 13.
10. The third individual in the trio of grotesque characters in *Victory*. The other two are Jones and Ricardo.
11. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, p. 12.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
13. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 57.
14. *Ibid*, p. 58.
15. *Ibid*, p. 84.
16. *Ibid*, p. 72.
17. Zabel, *Craft and Character*, p. 219.
18. Joseph Conrad, *Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum*, (ed.), W. Blackburn, (Durham, N. Carolina, 1958), p. 154.
19. Beckson and Ganz, *Literary Terms*, p. 127.
20. *The Secret Agent*, p. 41.
21. *Ibid*, p. 74.
22. *Ibid*, p. 75.
23. *Ibid*, p. 32.
24. *Ibid*, p. 42.
25. *Ibid*, p. 41.
26. *Ibid*, p. 74.
27. Ford Maddox Ford, *Joseph Conrad : A Personal Remembrance*, (Little Brown & Co., Boston 1924), p. 185.