HOW TO LIVE: THE PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The essence of Conrad's work is about struggle in life, and his characters are constantly "in the process of becoming". Although these Conradian figures hold an optimistic view of themselves, they are indeed flawed. In their tendency to dream the impossible dreams, to reach the unreachable heights, they are often taken for a rough ride by destiny. For the numerous wandering figures depicted in Conrad's novels, their nomadic/displaced existence was the result of crime committed, law broken, trust abused, or confidence breached. Whilst their shame and guilt condemn them to the outcast status, their self-imposed exile often amounts to an endless pursuit that typically leads to nowhere and ends only in self-destruction. In the face of the resultant self-destruction, how do these fallen heroes react? This paper thus seeks to examine the precarious existence of Conrad's fallen heroes.

Keywords: Self-destruction, Existence, Humanity.

INTRODUCTION

The essence of Conrad's work is about struggle in life, and his characters are constantly "in the process of becoming". Although these Conradian figures hold an optimistic view of themselves, they are indeed flawed. In their tendency to dream the impossible dreams, to reach the unreachable heights, they are often taken for a rough ride by destiny. For the numerous wandering figures depicted in Conrad's novels, their nomadic/displaced existence was the result of crime committed, law broken, trust abused, or confidence breached. Whilst their shame and guilt condemn them to the outcast status, their self-imposed exile often amounts to an endless pursuit that typically leads to nowhere and ends only in self-destruction.

Protagonists in Conrad's novels are indeed taken for a rough ride by destiny. As the drama unfolds, they come to realise that it is a journey of no return. Any illusion of a God-given script to navigate through the tricky waters soon evaporates, as Almayer's prolonged expectations, Jim's mission to fulfil his heroic idealism, Kurtz's apparent devotion to the cause of progress and civilisation, and Razumov's vain wish to submerge himself into a state of collective inertia all attest. Despite their endless endeavour to find a foothold in society and define their existence, once they have fallen, these characters descend into situations where external, social inhibitions loosen their grip or cease to operate altogether – there may be no law, no police and no dread of outside opinion to restrain them – and then they tend to succumb to their entrenched patterns of action, losing their grasp on the moral ideas upon which the human community is founded. They travel beyond the last fragile bastions of collective morality to discover, with horror and fascination, the true colour of their personalities. They become their own judges, their own accused and in the case of Almayer,

his own acquitter. When all that solid melts into air, the outer world of human associations becomes a turbulent, uncontrollable force that drives them into isolation and despair. On the surface, they seem to be relieved from the straightjacket of communal duties and obligations, but what do Conrad's characters make of this new founded freedom? In this sense, Conrad's concerns are very much those of all major literature: What is humanity? How do humans make moral judgments? What is the foundation for moral judgments? In the face of profound socio-political upheavals and the resultant destruction of values, how do individuals react? The answer to the question of "how to live" perhaps could best be found in Stein's conversation with Marlow in *Lord Jim*.

DISCUSSION

Beginning his life in "sacrifice, in enthusiasm for generous ideas", the ex-revolutionary Stein had "travelled very far, on various ways, and strange paths, and whatever he followed it had been without faltering, and therefore without shame and without regret. In so far he was right" (Conrad, 131). Surely, Stein had in fact lived life the way the other Conradian heroes dreamed of, acquiring fame and fortune. Sophisticated and successful, Stein is in every respect diametrically opposite to Jim's naivete and inexperience, but to Marlow's mind, "no one could be more romantic than him". Marlow's dialogue with Stein in *Lord Jim* thus deserve our attention, for it is in their illuminating conversation that the key concepts defining the Conradian heroes' paradoxical existence emerge.

Stein is renowned for his study of Entomology: "His collection of '*Buprestidae* and *Longicorns* – beetles all – horrible miniature monsters, looking malevolent in death and immobility, and his cabinet of butterflies, beautiful and hovering under the glass of cases on lifeless wings, had spread his fame far over the earth" (Conrad, 123). Stein's understanding in human nature can be translated into the two species he collects: "with its wings which can carry it above the mere dead level of an earth which beetles crudely hug", the beautiful creature of butterfly embodies idealism which man forever pursues, while beetle, an "ugly earth-bound creatures, devoid of dignity and aspiration, intent merely on self-preservation at all costs", symbolises man's aptness for survival" (Tanner, 448). Observing the spectacle of life from his study where "the might of nature and the seductive corruption of men" cannot obtrude, Stein, oracle-like, articulates his world-view through his famed collection of butterflies and beetle" (Conrad, 127). Unlike the flawless creature of the butterfly, man, though he may be "amazing", is not "a masterpiece". Whilst in Stein's opinion that "a man that is born falls into a dream like a man falls into the sea", he nevertheless is convinced that romantic dreams is a sustaining power in life. The role Stein plays is therefore not only to indicate the dimension of the destructive element, but to a certain extent, by offering a way-out to Jim's predicament in *Lord Jim*, to inspire the question of "how to live".

For Stein, to find a solution to Jim's predicament is, metaphysically speaking, like preserving a rare species of butterfly.

> "We want in so many different ways to be", [Stein] began again. "This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it; but man will never on his heap of mud keep still. He wants to be so, and again he wants to be so … He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be … in a dream…"
> "And because you not always can keep your eyes shut there comes the real trouble – the heart pain – the world pain. I tell you, my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not

> clever enough. Ja! … And all the time you are such a fine fellow, too! Wie? Was? Gott im Himmel! How can that be?"
> "Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns – nicht wahr? … No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up\. So if you ask me – how to be?" (Conrad, 129-130)

In *Lord Jim*, Stein "diagnoses" Jim's predicament for Marlow – "He is romantic" and 'That is very bad". And because Jim has already decided to dedicate his life entirely to the course of romantic heroism, the practical answer to his dilemma is therefore not "how to get cured" from this decision but, as Stein puts it, "how to live" accordingly. No matter where his romantic yet impractical dream of heroism: "The way is to the destructive element submit yourself", said Stein, and "To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream – and so – usque ad finem" (Conrad, 131). Whilst regarding the romantic dreams to be a sustaining power in life, Stein, at the same time, also characterises them to be the very element of destruction. Jim's pursuit of the impossible dream is, as Stein suggests, ultimately calamitous, for the discrepancy between the ideal and the real will not remain forever unresolved.

Stein believes that both the quest for the ideal and the complacent acceptance of the real are potentially destructive, but that one must immerse oneself in the destructive element if one is truly to live. Whatever the result of a dream may bring, it invariably reveals the fundamental discrepancy between illusion and reality. A veteran dreamer such as Stein, he recognises the appalling incongruity of life – that man's dreams may not be attained, and yet he must forever dream. Such a tension is certainly not helped by the flawed nature of mankind. The way we typically live, as Marlow describes it:

> It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with formant thoughts. Perhaps it's just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome (Conrad, 87).

Regarding the question of "how to live", obviously, Jim has pledged his allegiance to romantic heroism, and as an admirer, Stein offers Jim exactly that – the chance to recapture his dream of heroism, to redeem himself, both as an individual and as a member of the community (Panagopoulos, 58). Apparently, Stein's answer for the question of "how to live" is not to get cured, but "to the destructive element submit yourself", and "to follow the dream, and again, to follow the dream".

Stein's suggestion is well received by various Conradian heroes who, after the fall, decides to follow the dream no matter where the dream may take them. However, man is flawed. Granted, the expeditions Conrad arranges for his heroes often seem tortuous, full of quandaries and all ending in cul-de-sac. Yet Almayer, the gifted dreamer, Razumov, the ambitious student, Jim, the adventurous marine officer and Kurtz, the idealistic colonist, all embody, even in their degeneracy, a principle of moral agency; what is often ignored is the courage with which they wrestle with fate and their own cowardice. During the process of struggle, the extreme fragility of their personal integrity is laid bare. In striving to reach the other shore, they are constantly beset by unanswerable dilemmas. And indeed, the decision to "take the plunge" never resolves these excruciating difficulties once and for all. Taking Jim in *Lord Jim* as an example, Jim's situation is paradigmatic. He has to live in perpetuity with

the aftermath of his deviation from duty: "There was no going back. It was as if I had jump into a well – into an everlasting deep hole". Unlike *Alice in Wonderland*, this is no child's play: consequences of his Fall are to dog Jim through his life. Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* captures the implications best when he says:

> Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping (Nietzsche, 14)
> what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and *going under* (Nietzsche, 15).

So, what becomes of the ill-fated Conradian heroes? Do they no longer worry about falling into an abyss? Or do they develop an attitude that accepts the eyes of the other, with resignation? As MacIntyre puts it:

> I am forever I have been at any time for others – no matter how changed I may beknow. There is no way of *founding* my identity – or lack of it – on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self. The self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of a character (MacIntyre, 217).

The trouble with Conrad's protagonists is that they cannot let go of their pasts and start afresh. "The trauma" is never consigned to history and laid to rest. It remains a towering part of the guilty self, which constantly overshadows and defines the present. They may have been catapulted to new places with fresh hopes and new opportunities. Yet as they hold on to the old compass without mediating on the initial journey, as they try to silently shoulder it all, there is no one to consult and query. All alone by themselves, they are bound to wander aimlessly. The passage to destruction is thus predestined. How to live after the fall? Stein suggests Conradian heroes to follow the dream. Although the passage to destruction is predestined for most of Conradian heroes, yet man is born alone, and destined to fight for one's own battle. Throughout Conrad's works, the message remains consistent. It is the determined battling spirit shown in the face of man-made adversities that Conrad hails as worthy of redemption.

CONCLUSION

Conrad's fictional world is often a chaotic one in which the individual's capacity to dream only leads to unfulfilled promises and tragic self-destruction. In this cruel world the romantics invariably face the harshest tests and the catastrophic failures propel the protagonists to become self-imposed exiles who then embark on their odyssey. Humanity's struggle to know itself remains a difficult journey, despite the ever-specialising division of knowledge that characterises our contemporary existence.

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