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The motif of the water journey as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry in selected novels of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad

Rossouw, Leon Armand

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Chapter 4 – Conclusion

As literary artists, Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad are similar in a number of respects. Not only do many of their novels have maritime settings, but the fictional worlds which the two authors create are often oceanlike (irrespective of their actual physical background): vast in imaginative extent, ever-changing to the reader's perception, and possessed of unknown depths. Not content to sail complacently in the shallows of life, Melville and Conrad probe everyday phenomena in a bid to uncover underlying layers of philosophical meaning. In this research report, I have argued that a favourite strategy of theirs is to set the leading characters in their novels on physical journeys which frequently function as analogues of the same characters' experiential journeys. Readers of each novel accompany the narrator(s) on yet another journey: one which is dictated by the organisation of the plot. The reader's task is to examine the above-mentioned journeys and the ways in which they are interrelated, and then to bring his own interpretative approach to bear on his findings in order to construct a hermeneutic journey that is uniquely his own.

In Moby-Dick, Melville depicts Ishmael and Ahab as embarking on a whaling voyage during the course of which they are respectively fascinated and frustrated by the pervasive unintelligibility of a universe that, more often than not, is a source of woe to human beings. Whereas Ahab defiantly takes up arms against the complexity of the cosmos and ignores the differential nature of language (which precludes the possibility of final interpretations), Ishmael willingly accommodates his thinking to the exigencies of the physical world. Adopting an approach of pragmatic expediency, he relishes formulating a host of interpretations in an exuberant spirit of gamesomeness. In Billy Budd, Sailor, the eponymous protagonist engages in a foredoomed attempt to live in a self-enclosed world of innocence from which all evil has been excluded. Predictably, his wilful ignorance contributes in large measure to his own demise. Billy's antagonist, Claggart, projects his private, motiveless malice onto the world, and proceeds to undermine goodness wherever it might exist. But he is undone by the unexpected boomerang effect of his own plotting. The bookish Vere, on the other hand, tries to cope with a moral dilemma by acting on the mistaken assumption that human laws and the prevailing socio-historical context are almost infallible guides to human conduct, and that, somehow, they make final interpretations possible.

Because ebullient cheerfulness of the Ishmaelian kind is generally denied a secure foothold in Conrad's novels, I would argue that his outlook is, for the most part, more pessimistic than Melville's. Marlow, the narrator of Heart of Darkness is haunted by the thought that we might live in a universe that is devoid of meaning. On the evidence of his cry, "The horror! The

horror!",[1] it would seem that Kurtz is even more convinced than Marlow that we are surrounded by an impenetrable and all-consuming metaphysical darkness. As a means of fending off the darkness, Marlow puts his trust in, and attaches a high moral value to, a few fundamental ideas which (he believes) should inform our conduct: human solidarity, fidelity to the task at hand, restraint, idealism and imaginative understanding. Lord Jim's Marlow attempts to arrive at a univocal interpretation of the eponymous hero's character and actions, but comes to realise that an incontestable final reading is unobtainable; instead, a plurality of almost equally compelling – but often mutually incompatible – interpretations suggest themselves to him (or are advanced by other characters in the novel), causing him to distrust his formerly-held convictions. It becomes obvious that there is no "sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct"[2]: morality is based on interpretation, and both these notions are inevitably deficient, since they are human constructs which cannot be securely grounded (except by the self-deluded) in metaphysics, owing to the absence of a transcendental signified.

The narrative strategies which Melville and Conrad employ are carefully calculated to reflect the complexity of the universe and its resistance to – and fascination for – human understanding. As a bricolage of different genres, styles and narrative voices, Moby-Dick implies that readers need to make use of an array of interpretative approaches if they hope adequately to grasp the significance of much that happens in life. The narrator of Billy Budd, Sailor gives the impression of assembling as much information as possible in order to achieve the "correct" reading of what takes place on the *Bellipotent*, but his apparent diligence promotes ambiguity rather than certainty. And, in Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim, Conrad utilises first-person narrative, frame narrators, delayed decoding, suggestion rather than explicit statement, and symbolic deciphering to emphasise the epistemological difficulties which problematise notions of reliable interpretation.

Although interpretation can never be made absolute (because of our incapacity as human beings to locate an unassailable and immutable truth), we are naturally curious about the universe, and, in our day-to-day lives, we constantly need to make decisions that are based on satisfactory readings of events, circumstances, creatures and inanimate objects. This being the case, Melville and Conrad are interested in highlighting (in the four texts under consideration here) the merits and demerits of various approaches to hermeneutic enquiry. These two writers are no doubt exceptional in the persistence and depth of their thought-diving, but what emerges (by implication) from their explorations is that an arrogant inflexibility in matters of interpretation is self-deceiving and dangerous, whereas a willingness to regard truth as dynamic, provisional and ever-changing is not only eminently sensible, but also life-enriching.

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[1] Heart of Darkness, p. 68.
[2] Lord Jim, p. 35.

If it is acknowledged that both Melville and Conrad are keenly aware of the widespread indeterminacies which characterise our existence, in what ways do their world-views differ? From my analysis of Moby-Dick and Billy Budd, Sailor, it seems to me that, in common with Shakespeare, Melville possessed to a large degree a characteristic which John Keats called "[*n*]*egative* [*c*]*apability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, [m]ysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."[3] Ishmael and Ahab may be convinced that there is a greater amount of woe than joy in the world,[4] but that does not appear to dampen Melville's consuming interest in a universe of kaleidoscopic variety. Just as Ishmael miraculously survives the sinking of the *Pequod*, so Melville's buoyant enthusiasm reveals itself in a narrative from which the underlying note of optimism cannot be expunged. The execution of Billy Budd may be unjust, but Melville compensates for that by allowing the foretopman's spirit to speak to us from beyond the grave. In his poetic and appreciative evocation of Melville's genius, Albert Camus observes that the author of Moby-Dick and Billy Budd, Sailor

> mingles the Bible with the sea, the music of the waves with that of the spheres, the poetry of the days with the grandeur of the Atlantic. He is inexhaustible, like the winds which blow for thousands of miles across empty oceans... He rages, like Lear's madness, over the wild seas where Moby Dick and the spirit of evil crouch among the waves. When the storm and total destruction have passed, a strange calm rises from the primitive waters, the silent pity which transfigures tragedies. Above the speechless crew, the perfect body of Billy Budd turns gently at the end of its rope in the pink and grey light of the approaching day.[5]

This passage could be construed as counting Melville as an existentialist, who is keenly aware of the engagement between human freedom and the universe, as well as the call to endurance and self-realisation against all odds.

Perhaps because he is more dispirited than Melville by the metaphysical organisation of – or, in his view, the *lack* of such organisation in – the universe, Conrad finds it harder to accept the

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[3] Letter from John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817, in Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (London, Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 43.

[4] Keats, too, had a vivid sense of suffering; in a letter, dated 3 May 1818, to J.H. Reynolds, he compared "human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments". According to him, we move from the "infant or thoughtless chamber" to the "Chamber of Maiden Thought", where, at first, we "see nothing but pleasant wonders". But, as our vision sharpens, "[t]his Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open – but all dark – all leading to dark passages... We feel the 'burden of the mystery'". (Letters of John Keats, p. 95.)

shortcomings of our human condition. I would suggest that a symptom of his frustration is his tendency to create fictional characters who appear to be self-absorbed and lonely even when they are surrounded by other characters. (Marlow's comment, "We live as we dream – alone",[6] exemplifies this type of orientation.) The spectre of meaninglessness haunts Conrad's imagination and, in an effort to escape from the horrors of despair, he casts around for a workable ethical system in which he can put the remnants of his faith. This accounts for Marlow's perception that human identity is reliant on inter-subjectivity ("[w]e exist only in so far as we hang together"[7]). Perhaps it also explains Conrad's pre-occupation with questions of morality; his desire, in the earlier work, to escape into Patusanian worlds of wishful thinking[8]; and his insistence that the literary artist can provide valuable insights into – and make some sort of order out of – the world in which we live. It is quite remarkable how Conrad is able to stare into the abyss, and yet retain his equanimity by hanging on to an idealism which may be no more than a positive illusion. Indeed, Conrad does not dispute the constructedness of our illusions; he is honest enough to realise that if we accord them a transcendental status, we are merely cheating ourselves.

Whereas William Wordsworth was able to lighten, or even efface, (at least to his own satisfaction) the "burthen of the mystery, || ... the heavy and the weary weight || Of all this unintelligible world",[9] by placing his faith in Nature, Conrad rescues himself from possible dejection by subscribing (however tentatively) to ideas whose value Wordsworth had confidently proclaimed. In the poem printed below, the final one in "The River Duddon" series of sonnets, the poet of the Lake District realises that the river Duddon will abide forever, and hopes that "something from our hands" might do likewise. I would argue that Conrad tries to believe in an enduring, though illusory and man-made, transcendent authority, and that he would also like his art to have lasting value. But I am of the opinion that what is even more important to him is that human beings should feel convinced of their own worth, despite their living in a universe which continually casts doubt in their minds because of its apparent anarchy and meaninglessness.

AFTER-THOUGHT

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[5] Albert Camus, "Herman Melville", in Twentieth Century Interpretations of *Billy Budd*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Englewood Cliffs : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 91-92.

[6] Heart of Darkness, p. 30.

[7] Lord Jim, p. 135.

[8] Arguably, this tendency diminishes in Conrad's later fiction (Nostromo, The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes). Since I also acknowledge the heterogeneity of Melville's literary output, I take this opportunity to insert the caveat that my critical comments on Conrad and Melville are based on the *four texts which are the subject of my study*.

[9] William Wordsworth, "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798", in Wordsworth : Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (rpt. London, Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 164.

I thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
As being past away. – Vain sympathies!
For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide;
Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
The Form remains, the Function never dies;
While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
The elements, must vanish; – be it so!
Enough, if something from our hands have power
To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,
We feel that we are greater than we know.[10]

[10] William Wordsworth, Sonnet XXXIV of "The River Duddon" series of sonnets, in Wordsworth : Poetical Works, p. 303.