

https://dspace.org/

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

Rossouw, Leon Armand

2007-03-01T11:27:38Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2174

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Chapter One – Introduction

Theoretical background

In "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", the introductory chapter to a collection of critical essays entitled The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature, M.H. Abrams aptly characterises the motif of the journey as "one of the enduring master tropes by which the postclassical West has endowed the course of human life with structure, purpose, meaning, and values."[1] Abrams proceeds to trace the history of the motif and to identify the types of journeys that are most commonly encountered in literature.[2] Since his survey provides a theoretical and critical point of departure for my own analysis of the motif of the journey as a vehicle for metaphysical, epistemological and ethical enquiry in selected novels and novellas[3] of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, I shall begin this research report with a brief summary of those parts of his discussion that are relevant to my own research.

Abrams notes that the narratives of physical journeys (such as the accounts of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden and the exodus of the Hebrews "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"[4] towards the Promised Land) in the early books of the Old Testament are the major source for the notion of life as a figurative journey. I shall refer to these journeys – and others of a similar nature – as linear (despite the fact that there may be a number of detours along the way), since they describe movement from a particular place to a destination somewhere else. Such a journey may end favourably for the traveller(s) if (as in the case of the exodus of the Hebrews) the place of arrival is preferable to the starting-point. Conversely, it may lead (as in the case of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden) to a final destination that compares unfavourably with the point of departure. A variation of the journey that ends well occurs in the standard form of the medieval chivalric romance, which typically describes the many perilous trials a knight-errant has to endure before he is able to prove by his heroism that he is worthy of his lady love.

According to Abrams, the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 : 11-32 "figured the spiritual history of humanity as, specifically, a circular journey that ends at the point of departure."[5] Similarly, the pagan philosopher, Plotinus, interpreted Odysseus's voyage from Ithaca to Troy and back home "as an allegory for each person's internal journey in quest of the spiritual home

---

[1] M.H. Abrams, "Spiritual Travelers in Western Literature", in The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth-Century Italian Literature, ed. Bruno Magliocchetti and Anthony Verna (Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 1.
[2] Abrams, pp. 1-20.
[3] The novels and novellas which I have chosen for study are Moby-Dick; or, The Whale, Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*), Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim : A Tale.
[4] Exodus 20 : 2.

and father that were earlier abandoned."[6] But it was Saint Augustine who "established the full and enduring Christian topos of the *peregrinatio vitae* [life's journeying] – the figure of fallen man, generic and individual, who wanders as an exile in an alien land, on a toilsome journey in quest of a city [i.e. the Heavenly City] in another country that, when reached, turns out to be the home and father [i.e. God] he left behind..."[7] The Christian version of the *peregrinatio vitae* is not, in itself, of great relevance to this research report, since the fiction of Melville and Conrad is not amenable to orthodox Christian interpretation. However, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many authors of the Romantic Period appropriated the topos, only to modify it and to find new uses for it. It is in this transformed state that it features prominently, also, in the novels of Melville and Conrad.

The Romantic version of the *peregrinatio vitae* tranfers the goal of the journey from heaven to earth; moreover, the journey becomes internalised and secularised. "That is, the journey of life, which had hitherto been a sustained trial for admission to an otherworldly city, is now conceived as a process of self-education, self-discovery, and self-fulfilment in this world."[8] Abrams notes that Johann Gottlieb Fichte gave us an example of such a journey when he

> described *Wissenschaft* (science of knowledge) as beginning with the unity of the absolute ego, which posits the non-ego in itself and so inaugurates a sustained tension, which drives a process that concludes only when it reaches the point at which it "closes with its first principle, returns into itself, and accordingly becomes, by its own agency, completely closed."[9]

It becomes clear that we should imagine both the Christian and the Romantic versions of the *peregrinatio vitae* to be spiral (rather than circular) in form, since "the educational process is conceived as moving from an initial unity through multiple divisions back to a complex integrity which replicates the simple unity of the origin but on a higher level."[10]

In his survey, Abrams also discusses an interesting variant of the circular journey. This is Schiller's concept of a metaphysical journey in which "'the ideal [or goal] is an infinite which...[human beings, owing to their inherent limitations,] can never reach,' but only approximate."[11] The goal of such a journey is the journey itself, and "the measure of dignity and greatness consists, not in absolute achievement, but in maintaining the discrepancy between

---

[5] Abrams, p. 2.
[6] Abrams, p. 6.
[7] Abrams, p. 7.
[8] Abrams, p. 9.
[9] Abrams, p. 12.
[10] Abrams, p. 10.

infinite reach and finite grasp."[12] I intend to show that this version of the journey is common in both Melville and Conrad.

Another mental journey to which Abrams alludes very briefly is the linear one backwards into memory that is undertaken by every narrator when he[13] recalls the events which constitute his narrative. The narrator usually attempts, by a process of selection, to confer meaning and order on what might appear to be meaningless and disorderly. In so doing, he creates a narrative that constitutes yet another journey: a pre-determined one for the reader (or listener). Whilst this narrative journey always takes the reader (or listener) forwards from the commencement of the narrative to its end, it also takes him backwards to events that are imagined to have taken place in the past. The journey which he takes through these fictive events is not necessarily a simple one forwards, but may involve many twists and turns, since the narrator is not obliged to keep the events of his story in strict chronological order when he tells his tale. This can be understood more easily in terms of the distinction which Boris Tomashevsky draws between "plot" and "story": "Both include the same events, but in the plot the events *are arranged* and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they are presented in the work... In brief, the story is 'the action itself,' the plot, 'how the reader learns of the action.'"[14]

Finally, Abrams observes that the uncertainty which has attended the breakdown of established systems of belief in the modern world gives rise to the sentiment that there is no longer "an original place of security and community"[15] which may serve as a starting-point for the spiritual traveller. By the same token, there is also not a safe haven in prospect at the end of his journey. As a result,

> the *peregrinatio vitae*, in the lack of an origin as well as of an end, ... no longer ... [fulfils] its age-old function of endowing human life with structure, meaning and value. For such a view, ... the most authentic image for life is not a journey, but ... *Vagabondaggio* – a random wandering without direction and destination.[16]

Although I appreciate the value of Abrams's perceptive classification of literary journeys in terms of their direction and shape, I am of the opinion that it is possible to enlarge upon his

---

[11] Abrams, p. 14.
[12] Abrams, p. 14.
[13] Throughout this research report, I shall employ masculine pronouns and adjectives to refer to a hypothetical person of either sex. This should not be construed as male chauvinism on my part, but merely as a desire to avoid the clumsiness inherent in the repeated use of alternatives, such as "he/she", "him/her", "his/her" et cetera.
[14] Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics", in Literary Theory : An Anthology, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, Massachusetts and London : Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), pp. 24 and 27.
[15] Abrams, p. 19.

typology by taking into account who the traveller(s) is/are in each instance. Accordingly, I have decided to make my own classification of some of the journeys that occur in the fiction of Melville and Conrad. The nomenclature which I propose to use is as follows:

1. **The physical journey.** This denotes a literal journey undertaken by any of the characters or narrators in a fictional text.
2. **The experiential journey.** This refers both to what a character or a narrator (in his capacity as a character) experiences during the course of a novel or novella, and also to the theories which he advances about the world as a result of his experiences.
3. **The narrative journey.** This designates the journey on which each narrator (in telling his story) takes the reader. It includes what the narrator learns or discovers in the process of his narration.
4. **The hermeneutic journey.** This refers to the intellectual journey which the reader undertakes in order to arrive at his own interpretation of a fictional work. This interpretation is based on all the deductions that he has made about the physical, the experiential and the narrative journeys mentioned above, and on the possible interrelationships between these journeys.

Although, in theory, the experiential, the narrative and the hermeneutic journeys are separate, in practice, they overlap to some extent. It is often not possible, for instance, to make an absolute distinction between a narrator's experiential and narrative journeys. Similarly, it is inevitable that the hermeneutic journey of each individual reader will permeate the various experiential and narrative journeys, since each reader will interpret these last-mentioned journeys in his own unique way.

It will become evident during the course of this study that most of the journeys mentioned thus far may be found in the following novels and novellas: Moby-Dick; or, The Whale and Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*) by Herman Melville; and Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim : A Tale[17] by Joseph Conrad. As I have indicated before, my principal aim in this research report is to investigate how Melville and Conrad employ the motif of the journey on water as a metaphor for philosophical enquiry. I feel that a comparative study of these two authors is justified because each based much of his fiction on his experiences as a sailor. Furthermore, the water journeys on which the protagonists (and often, also, the narrators) of the above-mentioned novels set out remove them from the conventions and restraints of civilized society and force them to engage with the unknown (not only the relatively unexplored regions of the physical world – such as the sea and remote rivers and jungles – but also a range of

[16] Abrams, p. 19.
[17] Henceforth, I shall use the abbreviated forms, Moby-Dick, Billy Budd, Sailor and Lord Jim.

metaphysical problems). I believe that by setting up a series of dialogues between these texts of Melville and Conrad, the possible similarities in their authors' philosophical outlook will be clarified, while the differences will be thrown into relief.

In my analysis of the four novels and novellas mentioned above, I will show that physical journeys are constantly aligned to processes of textual interpretation, since elements of the journey may be treated as texts that need to be interpreted. For instance, a living creature or an inanimate object, as well as anything that happens during the course of a journey, may function as an individual sign or as one of an inter-related sequence of signs to which readers, narrators and characters attach meaning. However, none of the meanings bestowed in this way can be regarded as definitive, since we are all implicated in a web of language, in which there are no positive terms, but only relational ones.[18] It follows, therefore (as Jacques Derrida has shown[19]) that signification is a play of differences, and that meaning can never be fixed, but is constantly deferred and multiplied. This deferral and multiplication of meaning occurs as a result of the operation of *différance* within texts.

I will also demonstrate that stable meaning is undermined by the tendency of characters and narrators to employ what Roland Barthes has identified as the language of myth[20] in communicating to others their own particular interpretations of things. They do so by taking a sign (composed of a signifier and a signified) in a first-order language and using it as the signifier of a new sign in a second-order (or meta-) language. Such signification figures as a process of displacement, and has the effect of supplementing and/or radically altering initial interpretations of the original first-order sign. An example of this occurs in Moby-Dick when Ahab exhorts the crew members of the *Pequod* to become his allies in hunting down the eponymous sperm whale: the first-order sign (the white whale named Moby Dick) becomes the signifier of a new sign that Ahab creates in order to validate and naturalise his own particular interpretation of the whale:

> "To me the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be

---

[18] The relational nature of language is expounded by Ferdinand de Saussure in Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehage, tr. Wade Baskin (New York : Philosophical Library, 1959).

[19] Jacques Derrida, "Differance", in "Speech and Phenomena" and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, tr. D.B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-160, and
Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology : Interview with Julia Kristeva", in Positions, tr. Alan Bass (London : The Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 15-36.

[20] Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in Mythologies, sel. & tr. Annette Lavers (rpt. London : Vintage, 1993), pp. 109-159.

the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him."[21]

Indeed, it may be stated with some confidence that characters and narrators in – and even readers of – the fiction of Melville and Conrad are often engaged in a difficult attempt to find an appropriate signified for a particular signifier.

Although my interpretations of Melville and Conrad rely to a large extent on a broadly-based semiotics, my interest is in the motif of the journey, rather than in a particular theory, or theories, of literature. As a consequence, I intend utilising whatever theoretical approaches seem likely to yield insightful readings of the novels/novellas under consideration here. However, these theoretical perspectives will be self-consistent and consistent with one another. I also wish to point out that, while my chief concern will be with the philosophical questions which Melville and Conrad explore in the context of a number of journeys on water, I do not reject criticism which is more historically-orientated than mine – the kind of criticism which would situate these literary texts firmly within their various social, cultural and political milieux.

Alternative ways of reading these texts

I am aware, for instance, that, when Melville was writing Moby-Dick in 1850 and 1851, the United States of America was in the process of becoming one of the world's major industrial powers, and was also rapidly expanding its territories to the west and the south. The annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 had provoked the Mexicans to war, a war which "was immensely popular [amongst Americans:]... in New York, ... Melville [himself] reported that 'people ... are all in a state of delirium.'"[22] In composing a novel about whaling, therefore, Melville chose a capitalist enterprise with which he was very familiar,[23] and which embodied in modified form the exploration of untamed "territory" (the oceans of the world), and the attempted conquest of a formidable foe (the whale).

---

[21] Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd ed. (New York : W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2002), p. 140. All quotations from Moby-Dick in my research report are from this edition.

[22] George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, America : A Narrative History, Brief Fifth Edition (New York and London : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2000), p. 457.

[23] Not only had he been a crew member of the whaler *Acushnet* in the years 1841-1842, but he had also read extensively about whales and whaling in, for example J.N. Reynolds' "Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific: A Leaf from a Manuscript Journal"; Owen Chase's Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whaleship *Essex*, of Nantucket; Which Was Attacked and Finally Destroyed by a Large Spermaceti-Whale in the Pacific Ocean; with an Account of the Unparalleled Sufferings of the Captain and Crew; Frederick Debell Bennett's Whaling Voyage round the Globe, from the Year 1833 to 1836. Comprisiong Sketches of Polynesia, California, the Indian Archipelago, etc., with an Account of Southern Whales, the Sperm Whale Fishery, and the Natural History of the Climates Visited; and William Scoresby Jr.'s Journal of aVoyage to the Northern Whale Fishery; Including Researches and Discoveries on the Eastern Coast of West Greenland ... in ... 1822. For the information on Melville's reading, I am indebted to Hershel Parker, "Melville's Reading and *Moby-Dick*: An Overview and a Bibliography", in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, pp. 431-437.

The understandable pride of Americans in their achievements as a nation is also reflected in Melville's desire to emulate or surpass the greatest English writers of imaginative literature. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses", he had boldly stated:

> This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been equalled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born. For it will never do for us who in most other things out-do as well as out-brag the world, it will not do for us to fold our hands and say, In the highest department advance there is none.[24]

Thus there can be little doubt that one of Melville's aims in writing Moby-Dick was to present the Great American Novel to the reading public. Armed with his considerable knowledge of whaling, and drawing on the classics of world literature (especially Shakespeare), he seems to have been confident that it was within his power to compose a modern-day prose epic which could be spoken of in the same breath as The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Aeneid, The Divine Comedy or Paradise Lost. It is not surprising, therefore, that Moby-Dick incorporates the sort of subject matter and many of the conventions which characterise epic poetry. These include: a dangerous journey (often by sea); armed conflict on a grand scale; the presence of supernatural beings (or forces); the manufacture of a weapon (or weapons) for the protagonist; action scenes which involve racing and pursuit; a character who tells a story (or stories) to other characters appearing in the text; and a sprawling narrative (often containing incidents which have little bearing on the main story).

Melville's novel may also be read "as part of his lifelong meditation on America."[25] Some critics, for instance, have interpreted the contrast between "authoritarian" Ahab and "democratic" Ishmael as a literary analogue of the tensions that existed (and which were only partially and temporarily eased by the Compromise of 1850) between slave-owning southerners and anti-slavery northerners. Moby Dick itself has even been interpreted "as the principle of whiteness in whose very pursuit the nation insured its doom."[26] If the disastrous hunt for the white whale is taken as evidence of Melville's stand against racism, the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg, and the co-operative efforts of the multiracial crew of the *Pequod* make the same point more obviously and with even greater force. Andrew Delbanco suggests that Moby-Dick

---

[24] Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", an essay which is reprinted in its entirety in the 2nd Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, p. 525.

[25] Andrew Delbanco, "Introduction" to Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, or, The Whale, introd. Andrew Delbanco, with notes and explanatory commentary by Tom Quirk (rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin Classics, 2003), p. xiii.

[26] Delbanco, p. xxi.

> is a disorderly elegy to democracy, which Melville saw as threatened on many sides: by the spirit of utilitarianism (represented comically by Bildad and Peleg), by the accelerating pace of expansionism (the *Pequod* is named after an Indian tribe obliterated in a seventeenth-century war with the Puritans), and by the drive toward industrial power (in the great "Try-Works" chapter the ship becomes a floating factory), which degrades men into mere instruments of a technological process.[27]

One could continue speculating almost indefinitely in like fashion about the possible socio-political resonances within the novel. However, my purpose in this section of the Introduction is merely to identify a few of the many interpretative paths which I shall largely avoid, but which other readers may profitably choose to take.

In the case of Billy Budd, Sailor, the action takes place against the backdrop of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, and in the immediate aftermath of the mutinies in the British fleet at Spithead and the Nore in the early months of 1797. Some twenty years before Melville began work on his novella, the American Civil War had ended. It is arguable that the common thread running through these historical events is the conflict between "rebellious ... idealism and repressive worldly authority",[28] and that a variation of this clash played itself out, also, within Melville's own psyche. For

> the moral dilemma central to *Billy Budd* – the dilemma of the Sermon on the Mount versus the Articles of War, justice versus expediency, freedom and human dignity versus authority, rebellion versus conformity, social ferment versus despotism, son versus father, Jobian or Promethean man versus God – is none other than the conflict Melville had struggled unsuccessfully to resolve throughout his life. [Indeed, much of Melville's writing is informed by his experiences] not just [as] a son thwarted in his efforts to fulfill his ideals, but [also as] a father whose harshness and insensitivity to his children's needs may have driven one son to suicide and the other to a series of flights from home, and from one job to another (uncannily reenacting Melville's own youthful wanderings) that culminated in a lonely death in San Francisco at age thirty-five.[29]

---

[27] Delbanco, p. xxi.

[28] Carolyn L. Karcher, ["Melville and Revolution"], an extract from Karcher's Shadow over the Promised Land : Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville's America (Baton Rouge, LA : Louisiana State University Press, 1980), which is reprinted in Herman Melville, Melville's Short Novels, ed. Dan McCall (New York and London : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 2002), p. 347.

Taking a slightly different direction, one critic has suggested (again, quite plausibly) that Vere's entrapment in a "horrible conflict between duty and conscience" is mirrored in the dilemma which Melville's father-in-law, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, repeatedly faced:

> [Shaw] was a noted, strong opponent to slavery and expressed his opposition privately, in print, and in appropriate judicial opinions. Yet, in the great causes célèbres involving fugitive slaves, [he] came down hard for an unflinching application of the harsh and summary law. The effort cost Shaw untold personal agony [and] he was [vilified] by abolitionists.[30]

Melville's allusion in Billy Budd, Sailor to the execution of three sailors who were accused of plotting a mutiny on the U.S. brig-of-war *Somers* in 1842 has prompted some critics to read the novella as an oblique commentary on the *Somers* affair. Melville's interest stemmed from the involvement of his cousin Guert Gansevoort, who had been the first lieutenant on the brig, and who had headed a council of officers which had "questioned various men and [informed the commander, Alexander Mackenzie,] that the safety of the ship required that the [accused] prisoners be put to death."[31] However, from their examination of Melville's manuscript, Hayford and Sealts conclude that the *Somers* case "was not the primary and motivating source of *Billy Budd* but in the story's last phase was certainly a cogent analogue".[32] They also put forward a number of literary parallels to Melville's story, and discuss incidents from American naval history which Melville may have worked into his tale.

Perhaps to an even greater degree than Billy Budd, Sailor, Heart of Darkness is based on events in its author's life (Conrad's trip to the Congo in 1890), and on the dominant ideology of the day. As a sailor on English merchant ships from 1878 to 1894, Conrad was effectively an employee of British imperialism, and so, when he went to the Congo in 1890 ("under contract to the 'Société Belge pour le Commerce du Haut Congo' to be master of one of its river steamers"[33]), he was well qualified to compare Belgian imperialism there with its British counterpart in various other parts of the globe. He was appalled by what he saw in the Congo, and called it "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience

---

[29] Karcher, pp. 347 and 345.

[30] Robert M. Cover, ["*From* Justice Accused"], in the Norton Critical Edition of Melville's Short Novels, p. 234.

[31] Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, "Editors' Introduction" in Herman Melville, Billy Budd, Sailor (*An Inside Narrative*) (Rpt. Chicago and London : Chicago University Press, 1970), p. 29.

[32] Hayford and Sealts, p. 30.

[33] Joseph Conrad, Extract from a letter, dated 16 January 1890, to his uncle, and reprinted in Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York and London : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1988), p. 149.

and geographical exploration."[34] By contrast, the references to British imperialism in his fiction are generally complimentary, even if they are not spoken by Conrad himself, but by characters of whom he seems to approve. In Heart of Darkness, for instance, the frame narrator extols British seafarers as "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire",[35] and Marlow asserts that "[w]hat saves us [i.e. British imperialists] is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency."[36]

I concur with Edward Said in his assessment of Conrad's ambivalent attitude towards imperialism:

> Conrad could probably never have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available for either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-European at the time. Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West. True, Conrad scrupulously recorded the differences between the disgraces of Belgian and British colonial attitudes, but he could only imagine the world carved up into one or another Western sphere of dominion. But because Conrad also had an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality [as an expatriate Pole], he quite carefully (some would say maddeningly) qualified Marlow's narrative with the provisionality that came from standing at the very juncture of this world with another, unspecified but different.[37]

The peripheral and/or subordinate role of women in Heart of Darkness provides the material for another socially-based reading of the novella – the feminist approach. Marlow expresses amazement, for example, (after a comment of his aunt's) at "how out of touch with truth women are"[38]; Kurtz's Intended is portrayed as enclosed within a world of beautiful illusions; the two women at the Company's offices in Brussels appear ominously threatening; and the proud African woman on the banks of the Congo River is something of a *femme fatale*.

Lord Jim is similar to Heart of Darkness in that its historical setting is the heyday of European imperialism. Critics might be tempted, therefore, to put forward the view that Jim's organisation of Patusanian life is a small-scale colonialist enterprise. However, this is open to dispute, since Jim seems to gain very little financially from his stay in Patusan; instead, his

---

[34] Joseph Conrad, "Geography and Some Explorers", in Last Essays, ed. Richard Curle (London : J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1926), p. 17.
[35] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd ed. (New York and London : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1988), p. 8. All quotations from Heart of Darkness in my research report are from this edition.
[36] Heart of Darkness, p. 10.
[37] Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (rpt. London : Vintage, 1994), pp. 26-27.
[38] Heart of Darkness, p. 16.

exploits are aimed at restoring his honour and self-respect, while at the same time serving others.

In the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel, Jacques Berthoud argues convincingly that Jim is the archetypical "chivalrous gentleman", a figure which was fashioned (as a modern version of the chivalrous knight of Arthurian legend) in Victorian England "by the rise of domestic values, by the proliferation of books and pictures glamorizing self-sacrifice and heroism, and by the establishment of public schools designed to instil ideals of duty and manliness ..."[39] Because Jim is a "new" gentleman "[l]acking on the one hand the solidity of inherited rank, and on the othe hand the solidarity of egalitarian work," he "tend[s] to nourish inner life at the expense of external fact,"[40] a circumstance which leads to his jump from the *Patna* and the shame which that entails.

For the crucial *Patna* episode, Conrad drew on his knowledge of the abandonment of the S.S. *Jeddah* (which was carrying 953 Muslim pilgrims) by its officers near Cape Guardafui in 1880. At the official inquiry, the first mate of the *Jeddah*, Augustine Podmore Williams, was censured for his conduct, but, like Jim, he faced down his disgrace. (Two other men who contributed substantially to the creation of Jim in Conrad's imagination were Sir James Brooke – who became famous as the Rajah of Sarawak – and James Lingard.) Later, Conrad himself participated in a not dissimilar naval disaster. In March 1883, he was one of the officers on board the *Palestine* when a fire broke out in her hold; the ship was abandoned and subsequently sank. Though the official inquiry attached no blame to the crew, the episode must have been in Conrad's thoughts when he came to write Lord Jim.[41]

Indeed, the notion of betrayal had yet another personal meaning for Conrad. A few months after the novel's publication, he

> respond[ed as follows] to a letter from a Polish historian accusing him of abandoning his people in their hour of need ...: "It does not seem to me that I have been unfaithful to my country by having proved to the English that a gentleman from the Ukraine can be as good a sailor as they, and has

[39] Jacques Berthoud, "Introduction" to Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, ed. Jacques Berthoud (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002), p. xvi.
[40] Berthoud, "Introduction" to Lord Jim, pp. xxi-xxii.
[41] For the information in this paragraph, I am indebted to: Norman Sherry, "The Pilgrim-Ship Episode" and "The Bornean River and Its People", in Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim, ed. Thomas C. Moser, 2nd ed. (New York and London : W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1996), pp. 319-373; and Pierre Lefranc, "Conradian Backgrounds and Contexts for *Lord Jim*", in the same edition, pp. 386-390. All quotations from the novel in my research report are from this edition.

something to tell them in their own language."[42]

In the light of this defensive reaction from Conrad, it is not hard to see why he chose to write Lord Jim – a tale in which the protagonist desperately tries to restore his lost honour after having forsaken those who depended on him for their safety.

Although I do not advocate, or intend to demonstrate, a crass indifference to the social and historical forces which influence literary production, my aim in this research report is to use the motif of the journey as a hermeneutic tool to facilitate readings of Melville and Conrad that emphasise conceptual, philosophical and linguistic considerations. I would not wish to claim that my approach (or any other approach) to interpretation is comprehensive, or that it cannot be supplemented by other approaches which could illuminate a particular literary text in different ways.

The course which I shall be charting

I proceed, therefore, to giving a brief indication of the topics which I intend to discuss in the major chapters of this research report. In Chapter Two, I will draw comparisons, as well as examine the differences, between Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness. These novels are similar in that their protagonists embark on journeys with a clear goal in mind: Ahab single-mindedly sets out to kill the white whale, Moby Dick, while Marlow is eager to meet the remarkable Mr Kurtz (although that was not his original reason for going to the Congo). Ahab may be compared, also, to Kurtz in that they are both charismatic figures who attempt to impose their interpretations of the world upon others. It is clear, too, that Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness interrogate similar epistemological and metaphysical concerns. The narrators, Ishmael and Marlow, continually search for a deeper metaphysical meaning behind the surface appearance of things, but they are, at best, only partially successful in their efforts. However, they react very differently to the apparent impenetrability of the universe – an impenetrability that raises doubts about the quantity and the type of knowledge that human beings can realistically hope to acquire about the cosmos. It should be evident that the gap which exists, in Moby-Dick and Heart of Darkness, between epistemological desire (the desire of narrators and characters for enlightenment about the nature of the universe) and metaphysical denial (the resistance of the universe to human understanding) has the potential to undermine the grounds on which ethical action might be founded (namely, a belief in some higher power in a realm beyond the purely physical). Melville and Conrad respond in very different ways to this gap: whereas the latter

[42] Berthoud, "Introduction" to Lord Jim, p. xvii. Conrad's words are quoted from The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, ii, 1898-1902, ed. Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 323.

appears to seek a pragmatically workable ethical system in Heart of Darkness, the former refrains from doing so in Moby-Dick.

Another issue which I will address in Chapter Two is the tendency of Melville and Conrad to create characters (such as Marlow and Ahab) whose identities are – or become – fragmented. I will also draw the reader's attention to, and comment on the significance of, the various narrative techniques and styles that Melville and Conrad employ in the two works of fiction under discussion. And, since I am convinced that a considered interpretation of the ending of each of these two novels is crucial to an overall understanding of them, I will attempt to offer such an interpretation.

Billy Budd, Sailor and Lord Jim will be the focus of my attention in Chapter Three. Both novels raise questions about the choices that people make, the actions which they perform (whether as a result of their choices or in tension with their choices) and the judgements that are passed on those actions. A parallel may be drawn, for instance, between the impetuous blow which Billy Budd aims at the master-at-arms of the *Bellipotent*, John Claggart, and Jim's seemingly impulsive leap from the *Patna*. These actions come under official scrutiny in a drumhead court and at an official inquiry respectively. But since all acts of judgement are dependent on a particular interpretation of events and, possibly, on the assignment of particular motives to the accused, any sentence handed down in a court of law is likely to be criticised by those who interpret the same events rather differently and/or assign different motives to the accused. Indeed, many, if not most, readers of Billy Budd, Sailor and Lord Jim feel that the proceedings at the trials of Billy and Jim do not adequately address all the issues that should be taken into account for a fair judgement and an appropriate sentence to be passed. In the latter novel, Marlow (the narrator) shares the misgivings of readers, and he makes every effort to uncover "the fundamental why", and not "the superficial how",[43] of Jim's desertion of the *Patna*.

The mythic qualities in Lord Jim have received much attention from Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan,[44] and I intend responding to her views about what they tell us about Conrad's *Weltanschauung*. I will also review the narrative techniques which are employed in Billy Budd, Sailor and Lord Jim, and remark upon their relevance to philosophical issues. Finally, since I agree with Jacques Berthoud[45] that the conflict between idealism and materialism[46] is an important theme

---

[43] Lord Jim, p. 38.

[44] in Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, Joseph Conrad and The Modern Temper (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 34-47.

[45] Berthoud's earlier interpretation of Lord Jim is to be found in Jacques Berthoud, Conrad : The Major Phase (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 64-93.

in Lord Jim, I will analyse the way in which the theme relates to Jim himself, and I will discuss what bearing this theme has on Conrad's outlook on the world.

In the concluding chapter of this research report, I will attempt to crystallize all that has gone before into a clear picture of the various ways in which Melville and Conrad exploit the motif of the water journey to articulate their (often unresolved) philosophical concerns. I will underline the similarities and the differences in the narrative strategies of each author, and I will conclude the report by comparing Melville's response to the universe with Conrad's. I do so with the expectation that such a comparative approach will give the reader greater insight into the unique fictional world of each author, since each author will serve as a foil for the other. However, I must emphasise that I am not aiming at dogmatic categorisations, since I believe that such an approach would be reductive and, ultimately, misleading.

[46] I define "idealism" as "the practice of forming and/or pursuing ideals which have spiritual value" and "materialism" as "a tendency to prefer material possessions and physical comfort to spiritual values" or "a way of life based on material interests".