

SILENCE OF THE OTHER IN MODERN BRITISH FICTION

UDC 821.111.09

Marija Knežević, Milena Mrdak

Faculty of Philosophy, Niksic, Montenegro
E-mail: marijak@t-com.me

Abstract. *This paper assumes that fictional treatment of the Other in modern British literature mirrors the particular moment of British social and political history when the decline of its colonial powers relativized its imperialistic values. Facing specific realities of the foreign places, the great British travellers and writers under consideration, Joseph Conrad, Edward Morgan Forster, and David Herbert Lawrence, explicitly questioned the paternalistic discourse of their compatriots. Besides, their works share an acute modernist awareness of the precarious nature of interpretation. To trace their hermeneutic hesitations, we will focus on depiction of geographical as amoral phenomena. In all the three cases descriptions are obscure, characterised by semantic and aesthetic underdevelopment, i.e. with the repetition of instances where the choice of modifiers needs subsume negation. However, if these narratives are obscure, considering that the most frequent modifiers they use, and/or are powerless to avoid, belong to the semantic scope of "unknown," "dark," "formless" or "empty," it is not to deny meaning to the entity observed but to denounce the inherited means of expression.*

Key Words: *Imperialism, others, epistemological dilemma, hermeneutic hesitation, geographical space.*

Fictional treatment of the Other in modern British literature clearly mirrors the particular moment of British social and political history when the decline of its colonial powers resulted with relativization of its imperialistic values. Facing specific realities of the foreign places, the great British travellers and writers under consideration in this essay, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970), and David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930), explicitly questioned the paternalistic discourse of their compatriots.

Although authored by different literary sensibilities their works share an acute modernist awareness of the precarious nature of interpretation, the power of texts to "create not only knowledge but also the very reality [it appears] to describe" (Said 2000: 877).

To trace their hermeneutic hesitations, we will focus on depiction of geographical as amoral phenomena. In all the three cases descriptions are obscure, characterised by semantic and aesthetic underdevelopment, i.e. with the repetition of instances where the choice of modifiers needs subsume negation. However, if these narratives are obscure, considering that the most frequent modifiers they use, and/or are powerless to avoid, belong to the semantic scope of "unknown," "dark," "formless" or "empty," it is not to deny meaning to the entity observed but to denounce the inherited means of expression.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1889) the central Africa wears an aspect of a vacuum. It is perceived as "an unknown planet," (Conrad 1999: 63) it "seemed unearthly," (65) its vegetation "was like a rioting invasion of soundless life," (57) while "[a]n empty scene, a great silence, an impenetrable forest," (61) sent no comprehensible sign to the perceiver, who felt "how confoundedly big, was that *thing* that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well" (54). Ian Watt defines Conrad's attempt to demonstrate the gap between seeing and understanding as "delayed decoding" (Tredell 1998: 94). Peter Brooks argues that it resulted in an "unreadable report," (120) J. Hillis Miller shows Conrad tormented "by a sense of guilt for the mendacity of language," (54) while Valentine Cunningham discusses the work's "self-reflective textual self-doubting" (152). Finally, Con Coroneos reads its geographical elusiveness under the light of Conrad's understanding of the twentieth-century triumphant geography as, paradoxically, the very discovery of the vanishing point of exploration (Coroneos 2002: 25). Drawing on the aforementioned, our reading highlights the author's deliberate identification of the narrative with imperialist discourse, i.e. his fear that a description of the other assumes appropriation of the other.

Already the organic form of the central story of *Heart of Darkness* introduces a problematic epistemological scheme being a derangement of several retrospective layers repeatedly redefining the present importance, decentering its subject, and adding to the inconclusiveness of the text. The frame story is given within the quotation marks that comprise several citations from the original and remove the tellers/auditors from the intended signified, while deliberately mocking their only *raison de être*.

Seeing Africa to death,¹ Marlow, as an ancient mariner, begins his obsessed speech in a moment of arrest, when "[t]he *Nellie* [...] swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails," (Conrad 1999: 32) while evocation of the curse of the Jew surpasses Christian context and obtains universal connotation. As the text deepens the action becomes constantly impeded, as in a dream, and the insistence on words is pronounced. Having uttered his first words in the present perfect, pointing that the Thames, "the seed of commonwealths [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth," (33) Marlow is implying that the truth may not be found within the cracked shell of the British fin-de-siècle cultural ambience. While obviously relativizing the idea of progress, he introduces a metonymical narrative manoeuvre to point to what has stayed without as unnameable. For Marlow,

the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

¹ Cf. Peter Preston, "Seeing Florence to Death: D. H. Lawrence and the Lily Town," a paper delivered at *D. H. Lawrence and the Poetics of Movement*, Nanterre University, Paris, March 2006.

He entails that the story is the haze of a particular milieu, including limited perception due to the surrounding darkness and additionally allowing this distrust of sight to be followed by distrust of names embodied in ironical allusion to the Victorian "passions for maps" (35), i.e. the Cartesian necessity to know and order. When it comes to the great African river, which was "the biggest, the most blank," Marlow also adds: "so to speak," (35) because by the time Conrad visited Congo "[i]t had got filled [...] with rivers and lakes and names," (35) while already Kurtz "had *discovered* lots of villages, a lake too" (84). Now, visual presentation of the Kongo takes the form of a "snake uncoiled" which fascinates Marlow "as snake would a bird – a silly little bird," (36) as though knowledge of it presupposes denial of the self.

Marlow is hesitant and his speech is elusive primarily because he feels it resembles the endeavour of that ship of war he saw "firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns [...] a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – *and nothing happened* [!]" (41) In his account of the civilizing efforts in Africa the modifier Marlow uses to describe the method by which Europeans built a railway firing into a cliff, which, he deems, was not in the way of anything, vividly depicts his feelings about language as an "objectless blasting" (43). Therefore, it is the perception, and consequent narration, not only the particular physical progression up the river, which develops "like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints of nightmares" (42). Marlow is now forced to abandon mimesis and he cries out the greatest paradox of humanity: "I've never seen anything so unreal in my life" (51). Faced with the trap of language he cannot avoid, he unwillingly confesses: "I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie" (54). Lie, which for Marlow has "a taint of death, a flavour of mortality," goes thus as deep as the very heart of darkness, "the original Kurtz," (77) who, as half of Europe contributed in the making of him, inevitably "presented himself as a voice." All the time Marlow wrestles with impressions and oscillates between hallucination of this vacuity embodied in Kurtz's mouth that voraciously opens wide to gulp the surrounding, on the one, and the suspense that wilderness will "burst into a prodigious peal of laughter" to "shake the fixed stars in their places," (75) i.e. in transcendental mind, on the other side. Assuming a lie, he cannot do better but identify with Kurtz and meet the cost of "profound anguish" (63) at which this "accursed inheritance," (77) his language, is to be subdued. This profound anguish of being inarticulate is finally gesticulated at by the Conradian polyglot play of eternal exile, especially when acquired by a native and uttered "in a tone of scathing contempt – 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead.'" (98)

"Geography interests me," says Forster. "I like to see the face of the world and to think about it" (Shaheen 2004: 87). However, once beyond the human norm of the Mediterranean, (Forster 2000: 278) venturing to tunnel a passage to India as "a little bridge of sympathy between East and West," Forster had to abandon this conception and confess that his "sense of truth forbids anything so comfortable" (Childs 2002: 22). He came to an unidentified landscape such that "[r]eaders looking for *The Passage to India* will be frustrated at the narrative form of equivocality and non-involvement" (100). Although Forster's geography is often accused of being metaphoric, presenting the Other as a dark hole, a cave here, an empty space, uninhabited by Western morality, we are of the opinion that Forster's text, enveloping around a confusing entity and playing with the 'muddle,' exactly resists "the desire to contain the intangibilities of the East within the western lucidity" (Suleri 1990: 245). When he wrote: "I tried to show that India was an inexplicable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle – Miss Quested's experience

in the cave. When asked what happened there, *I don't know*," (Childs 2002: 22) it was exactly to denounce the prevailing romantic tendency to diffuse India into emptiness and formlessness. Therefore, Forster's text expresses no fear of India's "fictionality" or its seductiveness, but an obsession that the narrative cannot avoid "empt[ing] the area out of history and [...] represent[ing] India as an amorphous state of mind" (Suleri 1990: 245) Although Suleri rightly observes that "the narrator is [...] the only locus of rationality in an area of engulfing unreliability," this unreliability does not relate to India alone but to understanding in general. Besides, the narrative does not "internalize the symbolic landscape of India in order to make it human." The very images of the geographical place, functioning exactly as decolonising agents "of its vagrant subjects," exclude every familiarity.

The allegations against Forster find good grounds in the opening of the novel where Forster builds the description of Chandrapore on the absence of a recognisable form. When the city is presented as an indistinguishable mass, trailing along the river "scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely," (Forster 2000: 31) where even the inhabitants seemed "of mud moving [...] so abased, so monotonous" that they are degraded to "excrescence" and expected to wash "back into the soil," it is to establish resistance of the other central to the novel. When in the chapter "Caves" the plot culminates and Forster tries to approach India using geographical facts, he cannot but vacillate again to the mystery of the old soil and its mythic representations of the holy places of Hindustan. Conjuring up the time immemorial when "[t]he mountains rose" (138) and "the gods took their seat on them," he concludes that India stays beyond the understanding of the white. "[T]he India we call immemorial," he says, "is really far older."

Already in the following paragraph, Forster prepares the reader for the enigma of the Marabar Hills acknowledging "something *unspeakable*" in them that resist comparison: "[t]hey rise abruptly, insanely, without the proportion that is kept by the wildest hills elsewhere, they bear no relation to anything dreamt or seen." Having just proposed their existence independent of humanity, Forster must again reduce the caves to facts: "The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter." However, the general denial is insistent, because "[h]aving seen one such cave, having seen two, having seen three [...] the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all." Despite the narrator's pains to unearth a word from the rich soil of his cultural heritage, "[n]othing, nothing" he can name "attaches to them," as their, what he paradoxically calls, reputation, "does not depend upon human speech."

Powerless to articulate the mystery, the narrator is brought to an *impasse*, as well as an ironical suggestion, that the cave is probably "like all the caves [...] mirror[ing] its own darkness in every direction infinitely" (139)/ The climax of this notion is responded by a disturbing echo which incomprehensibly "ou-boums" to whatever sound humanity is capable of producing. For an honestly attending visitor, the oppressive indifference of the soil generates "a spiritual muddledom [...] for which no high-sounding words can be found." Thinking of what had spoken to her in the cave, Mrs Moore imagines "something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity – the undying worm itself." The reptile image from Conrad's text recurs here, as will show dominant in D. H. Lawrence's work, not only to suggest that the Christian meaning is incompatible to an amoral universe, but also to accentuate the burden with which that meaning, limited as it is on particular phenomena, presses upon

the perception of the travellers. Because "[t]he abyss may also be petty," invites Mrs. Moore here, "the serpent of eternity" may as well be "made of maggots." As the meanings collapse so does the narration. The narrator can no longer be a reliable one, nor does he want to. Therefore he unexpectedly addresses the reader seemingly in the Victorian self-confident way, yet obviously at bitter odds with the words: "Visions are supposed to entail profundity, but – wait till you get one, dear reader!" (213)

D. H. Lawrence's approach to the other adds another bitter instance to the above developed understanding. When after World War I he left (what at that point in history he felt to be) the corrupted culture of Europe for the wild American Southwest, it was for "something savage and unbreakable in the spirit of place [...] that really is America. But not the America of the whites." (Roberts 2004: 9) Announcing his decolonizing politics,² Lawrence argues that "[e]very continent has its own great spirit of place" (Lawrence 1977: 12) which determines its specific culture and clearly disparages the "white monkey" tricks of the Anglo community and its "saviour's will to set the claws of his own white egoistic benevolent volition into [the natives]" (Roberts 2004: 81). It is not the "mutilated intelligences" (Lawrence 1961: 242) we should hope for, but divination of the deep metaphysical rootedness, or *thereness*, of the place, which needs remain outside what Said calls "the accepted grid for filtering" and Lawrence calls "our Pale-face and Hebraic monotheistic insistence" (Buskley 1996: 35). Moving his attention from the perceived to the perceiver, Lawrence is prophetic of the post-colonial criticism which was to occur half a century later:

One says Mexico: one means, after all, one little town away South in the Republic: and in this little town, one rather crumbly adobe house built round two sides of a garden *patio*: and of this house, one spot on the deep shady veranda facing inwards to the trees, where there are an onyx table and three rocking-chairs [...] and a person with a pen. We talk so grandly [...] about Mornings in Mexico. All it amounts to is one little individual looking at a bit of sky and trees, then looking down at the page of his exercise book. (Lawrence 1974: 9)

Abandoning his "room with a view," Lawrence climbs down the "ragged semi-squalor of a half-tropical lane" (14), to perceive himself the only stranger in the place, a trespasser, so much that for a large part he imagined himself to be an object for the other, fearing indeed that the natives were secretly laughing at him. Insecure about his understanding, he relies on his instinct of an artist and in his *furor scribendi* subverts "traditional rhetorical function of description" (Norris 1985: 310). The spirit of place, the latent holiness of the soil his imagination tries to divine, laid in the west coast of Mexico that stretched into the fierce Rockies, the grey-blue sage-bush highlands of the Taos Indians, "the high plateau of death," (Lawrence 1996: 44) the "grey country of snakes and eagles," (Lawrence 1974: 62) parched "between the volcanic violence under the earth, and the electric violence of the air above" (Lawrence 1996: 283).

The inevitable fantastic dimension of landscape, mythical, "unsullied and unconcerned," (Lawrence 1988: 137) was, to Lawrence, menacing and reassuring at the same time. The suspense of a "strange invisible influence coming out of the livid rock fastness in the bowels of those uncreated Rocky Mountains," (133) dismays the perceiver

² Cf. Mark Kinkead-Weekes, "Decolonising Imagination: Lawrence in the 20s," in *The Cambridge Companion to D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Anne Fernihough (Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

who needs to express it as "an underlying ugliness, a sort of squalid evil," (Lawrence 1996:14) and present in bestial images, as "monsters watching gigantically and terribly over their lofty, bloody cradle of men" (40). Alien, belonging to the great dragons of the Aztecs and the Toltecs, their pressing weight denied that "soaring or uplift or exaltation, as there is in the snowy mountains of Europe." At this point, the fatality of the place predictably becomes the inconceivable "silence [...] of vacuity, arrest, and cruelty: the uncanny empty unbearableness of many Mexican mornings" (83). As the resistance of the landscape persists the author must insist on modality: "Perhaps something came out of the earth [...] some effluence [...] Perhaps it came from the volcanoes. Or perhaps even from the silent, serpent-like dark resistance of [...] natives," (45) repeating the vision of the dethroned angel of the cosmic might and splendour.

Summing up, Lawrence believes that "undeniable new gods share their life with us when we cease to see" (Lawrence 1964: 662). Being deeply religious he hopes for a mystical connection with the place and dives into the chimerical constitution and "confusion of contradictory gleams of meaning" of the Aztec's god Quetzacoatl, the Plumed Serpent. Divining its constituting dragon that resides in "the earth's dark centre," where he "holds his dark sun [...] round which our earth coils its folds like a great snake" (Lawrence 1974: 68), and eagle that "brings down the life of the sun," (Lawrence 1996: 67) the observer achieves "wonder and mystery, almost like hope," (53) because "Gods should be iridescent, like the rainbow in the storm" (48) and never determined.

When humanism was understood as ultimately groundless (Bell 1999: 13), being, as France Fenon argues, inseparable from imperialism, as will to see sameness is a desire to make sameness (Shaheen 2004: 75), the traditional visual metaphor, that what we see is what there really is, which dominated the nineteenth-century novel, was inevitably confronted by deliberate blankness of sight and, sometimes, even aimlessness of speech. Historically avant-garde modernist texts, resentfully conscious that words often cannot avoid fabrications, insisted on the ontological foundation of art, which is always in transcending particular contexts, and helped create foundation for another cultural discourse, namely that of the recognition of differences and their co-existence.

REFERENCES

1. Bell, M., (1999), "The Metaphysics of Modernism", in Michael L. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge: CUP.
2. Buskley, W. K., (1996), "D. H. Lawrence's *Gaze at the Wild West*", *D. H. Lawrence Review*, Austin: The University of Texas.
3. Childs, P., (2002), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India: A Sourcebook*, London – New York: Routledge, 2002.
4. Conrad, J., (1999), *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Gene M. Moore, Ware: Wordsworth.
5. Coroneos, C., (2002), *Space, Conrad, and Modernity*, Oxford: OUP.
6. Forster, E. M., (2000), *A Passage to India*, ed. O. Stallybrass, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
7. Lawrence, D. H., (1974), *Mornings in Mexico*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
8. Lawrence, D. H., (1961), *Phoenix II*, eds. Warren Roberts, Harry T. Moore, London: Heinemann.
9. Lawrence, D. H., (1988), *St. Mawr*, Harmondsworth: Penguin–Heinemann.
10. Lawrence, D. H., (1977), *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Harmondsworth: Penguin–Heinemann.
11. Lawrence, D. H., (1964), *The Complete Poems*, eds. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts. New York: Viking.
12. Lawrence, D. H., (1996), *The Plumed Serpent*, Ware: Wordsworth.
13. Norris, M., (1985), "St. Mawr," in Bloom H. (ed.) *Modern Critical Reviews*. Chelsea: New York.

14. Preston, P., (2006), "Seeing Florence to Death: D. H. Lawrence and the Lily Town," *D. H. Lawrence and the Poetics of Movement*. Paris, Nanterre, March 2006.
15. Roberts, N., (2004), *D. H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference*, New York: Macmillan.
16. Said, E. (2000), "Orientalism", Rivkin J and M. Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell.
17. Shaheen, M., (2004), *E. M. Forster and the Politics of Imperialism*. Macmillan: New York.
18. Suleri, S., (1990), "The Geography of *A Passage to India*," in Walder D. (ed.) *Literature in the Modern World*. Oxford: OUP.
19. Tredell, N., (1998), *Joseph Conrad: Heart of Darkness*. Palgrave: Macmillan.

ĆUTANJE DRUGOG U SAVREMENOJ BRITANSKOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Marija Knežević, Milena Mrdak

Analizirajući semantički i naratološki sadržaj pojedinih tekstova moderne engleske proze, dolazimo do zaključka da se u slučajevima naglašenog tretmana drugog jasno ogleda onaj društveni i istorijski trenutak u kome se relativizacija britanskih vrijednosti realizuje paraleleno sa slabljenjem imperijalističke moći. Susret sa stranim mjestom i svjesnost specifičnosti njegovih realija, velike engleske putnike i pisce, poput Džozefa Konrada, Edvarda Morgana Forstera i Dejvida Herberta Lorensa, tjera na promišljanje diskursa svojih zemljaka kao paternalističkog i imperijalističkog, te na razvoj epistemološke dileme tipične za engleski modernizam.

Iako iznikla iz pera različitog senzibiliteta, djela koja su predmet analize ovog rada dijele akutnu modernističku svjesnost varljive prirode interpretacije, moći teksta da ustanovi, kako je govorio Edvard Said, ne samo vokabular na osnovama kojeg će se razviti znanje o predmetu kojim se tekst bavi već i da kreira samu pojavnost koju nastoji da opiše. Krećući se tragovima hermeneutičkog oklijevanja tekstova navedenih engleskih modernista, ovaj rad se fokusira na prikaz geografskog kao amoralnog i ideološki neutralnog fenomena. Ipak, u sva tri slučaja, opise karakteriše semantička i estetska nerazvijenost, kao i insistiranje na neophodnosti odabira modifikatora koji pretpostavlja negaciju. Međutim, njihova eliptičnost, koja proizilazi iz frekventnosti atributa koji se kreću u semantičkom domenu "nepoznatog", "mračnog", "bezobličnog" ili "praznog", nema za cilj odricanje značenja entitetu koji razmatraju, već upravo naglašava neprikladnost naslijeđenog sredstva izraza koji ne uspijevaju izbjeći.

Relativizacija jezika i značenja vodi tekstualnom promišljanju sopstva putnika, posmatrača i pripovjedača.

Ključne reči: imperijalizam, drugi, epistemološka dilema, hermeneutičko oklijevanje, geografski prostor