An interview with Professor Robert Hampson, 09/12/2020

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Teacher: Ms Belinda Giannessi

1) Professor Hampson, do you see yourself in the figure of Conrad?

First, to take the question literally, my sister was surprised by a photograph of Conrad in his 20s, which she thought looked like me in my 20s. Less literally, there are many obvious differences (I am not a Polish aristocrat - and I have no experience of the sea), but there is something very congenial to me in his cast of mind: particularly, the scepticism, the openness to other cultures, the cosmopolitanism.

2) How would you describe Conrad in 3 words?

I would describe Conrad's works as rich, complex and intelligent.

I have offered a three-word description of Conrad's mind as evidenced in his fiction at the end of question 1. A three-word description of the man would be: complex, intelligent, careworn.

3) Why did you decide to dedicate your studies to Conrad?

I was attracted by Conrad's work as an undergraduate: the power and subtlety of the writing (where every word counts), the experiments with the form of the novel, the thematic engagement with colonialism in Heart of Darkness, with globalisation and neo-imperialism in Nostromo, with isolation and learning to 'trust in life' in Victory. When I was doing my MA in Toronto, I became interested in what it meant for Conrad to live outside of Poland, to be aware of the suffering of Poland, and to feel guilty about not taking on the political burden of trying to liberate his country. My PhD and my first book explored that sense of guilt and betrayal.

Since then, it is more that Conrad hasn't left me. The work is so rich, and it opens out onto so many other things: the colonisation of Africa; the Dutch colonisation of Malaysia; anarchists in London; the politics of South America; the unification of Italy. Conrad was very widely read; he had a great interest in history and politics; and his engagement with what interests him (in his fiction) is so subtle and profound. My second book explored his Malay fiction and the history of Malaysia.

It has also been important that there is a very supportive, world-wide community of Conrad scholars. I am also pleased that Conrad's transnationalism has given me many opportunities to travel: to Poland (for obvious reasons); to various parts of France (where he also spent time); to Malaya and Singapore (for research); to Italy .... His story 'Il Conde' is set in Naples; Garibaldi is an important figure in *Nostromo*.

I have also worked on other authors as part of this research project: on Conrad's friend Ford Madox Ford; on Kipling and Rider Haggard - to explore the colonial novel; on James Joyce and Virginia Woolf - to explore the modernist novel; Flaubert and Maupassant - as authors whose work he knew by heart.

4) What's your favourite aspect of Heart of Darkness and why?

When I first read it, I was very impressed by the brooding atmosphere of the novel, the sense of psychological exploration and questioning, the expose of colonial practices in Africa.

I then became very interested in the narrative method.

However, in the end, it is the quality of the writing that keeps bringing me back: Conrad's attention to the rhythm of the sentence, the choice of *le mot juste* (Flaubert's concern that Conrad took from him). There is a pleasure in these aspects of the work that never fails.

5) What do you think about people changing after being in Congo?

It is interesting to think about who changes and who does not change. Has the accountant changed? Perhaps everyone changes? Or perhaps the greed and self-concern of the 'pilgrims' only stands more clearly revealed by the conditions of Africa - and by 'conditions' I mean, the position of power that the European occupies through his possession of superior weaponry.

The most dramatic changes are in Kurtz, Marlow and Conrad. Kurtz has surrendered to the temptation that his position of power has given him - and I think here of other colonialists who engage in torture, slaughter, massacre. Marlow undergoes an existential crisis - he is traumatised by the experience; his eyes are opened to the realities of colonisation in Africa; he returns (like Swift's Gulliver in Gulliver's Travels) with a misanthropic view of his fellow-europeans. Conrad described the experience as a political awakening - but it also left him with various medical problems for the rest of his life.

6) Why do you think Conrad developed such a passion for the sea?

He had read a lot about travel and exploration as a boy. He had also read novels about the sea - like those of Captain Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper. This might also have

offered an escape from the terrible conditions of his childhood - in a Russian penal settlement for political prisoners.

7) Are there any negative aspects in Marlow's figure?

Marlow is an English gentleman: he is also intelligent, reflective and questioning. However, like most other English gentleman of his time, he has a rather limited view of women and their role. He is troubled by the suffering of the Africans that he sees around him, but he is also limited in his understanding and perception of them. He speaks English and French, but he doesn't speak any African language - and this limits both his interaction with the Africans and his ability to represent them. (The Russian, by comparison, speaks an African language and has an argument with Kurtz's African lover - Marlow is restricted to presenting her as a visual image. Conrad's Congo Diary shows his attempt to learn something of the local African language.)

8) Do you think that Kurtz, as representative of western society, is still current nowadays?

From one perspective, Kurtz is very much a man of his time - a part of the late-Victorian 'exploration' of Africa: he looks back to Henry Morton Stanley and his 'exploration by warfare'; he resembles a French 'explorer' of Niger, who was engaged in mass-slaughter at the time when *Heart of Darkness* was being published in *Blackwood's*. From another perspective, he looks back to earlier explorers and colonisers: the Conquistadores in South America (who are recalled at the start of *Nostromo*) or the later genocidal take-over of North America from Naive Americans.

I think it would be interesting to think of who the modern equivalents of Kurtz might be. Would it be some of the Australian, British and American soldiers in Afghanistan? Would it be the Trumps and the Bolsaneros with their devastation of the environment? Would it be Musk with his ambitions for space exploration?

9) Do you think that the image of Africa Conrad portrays is a stereotyped or unique in its kind?

The picture of colonisation in Africa that Conrad presents was a revelation at the time. he shows the reality behind the rhetoric of 'the civilising mission'. He shows what is happening in the Congo two years before the campaigning group, the Congo Reform Assocation, comes into being.

As Marlow observes, Marlow has the problem that he is trying to describe his African experience to people who have not been to Africa. This is comparable to the problem that the anthropologist faces when he/she tries to explain one culture in the language and concepts of another culture. Conrad faces a similar problem. Some aspects of this presentation (the drums, for example) might seem to us a stereotype of Africa - though

talking drums and ritual uses of drumming were features of the cultures of the Congo - and we find similar things in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in his picturing of Africa.

Racial stereotyping is another issue. Marlow's presentation of his African helmsman (as 'an improved specimen') no doubt reflects the kind of language and thinking of an Englishman of the time - but is offensive for 21st-century readers. There is also a problem about the way in which Kurtz's transformation is Africanized: it plays into ideas of degeneration / reversion at the same time as it is clear that Kurtz's madness is entirely a product of western technology (his guns) and his colonising mindset.

10) Why does Kurt's last sentence "the horror, the horror" have such an important role in the novel?

It is interesting that we think of this phrase as Kurtz's last words - look at the text to see when he speaks this, and what else he says subsequently. It is presented by Marlow as Kurtz's 'last words' in the sense that it articulates Kurtz's summation of his experience. It stays with us, I think, because of its ambiguity. What is 'the horror' for Kurtz? Is he passing judgement on what he has done - has he finally understood the terrible nature of the things he has done? Or is he thinking of something else? It is important because (whatever he means by it) it is clearly a judgement of some kind. It is the message he brings back from his experiences and offers to us - and, unlike 'unsound method of trade', it is a moral judgement.