STRAIGHT AND CROOKED SYMBOLISM: SOME REFLECTIONS ON CONRAD AND MELVILLE

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In embarking on this exploration of symbolism and on two writers whose names are commonly associated with it, I may as well begin by mentioning the replies given to someone who, at a seminar on Conrad, remarked rather plaintively, 'But why should I care about what happened to all these ships? I'm not especially interested in sailors.' The replies were, firstly, that the ships and the sailors on them were symbolic of much wider issues, secondly that those sailors underwent experiences that were of relevance to all men. Now the principal tenet of this paper is that these answers do not say quite the same thing. For instance, whether one thinks of them as very important or not, there can be little hesitation about accepting that Jim's moments of choice are, at any rate meant, to be, of relevance to 'us' too; but only if we accept that that necessarily implies symbolism can we grant without question that those moments, and Jim's story itself, are symbolic of wider issues. Of course it could be claimed that everyone who has a difficult choice is very like everyone else who has a difficult choice, and therefore that the term symbolism is appropriate in such a context. I suppose one cannot really object very vociferously to those critics who have used the term to describe what I would rather characterize simply as generally relevant experiences. What is unfortunate, however, is when the issues get confused, and the qualitative gap between this milk-and-water variety and genuine symbolism goes unobserved.

The case of Jim is fairly straightforward. *Heart of Darkness* is more complicated. Is it basically an account of Marlow's impressions in seeking Kurtz and of Kurtz' experiences amongst the natives, which separately and altogether shed a general light on the colonial experience; or is it also a symbolic study of the inner reaches of a man's soul, the discovery of what lies at his heart? This is not the place to go into that question; I would merely suggest here that it would make discussion of the work clearer if those who referred to it as a symbolic one were quite clear, in conception and in expression, about what they themselves meant.

The gap, as I have called it, becomes apparent when we consider the differences between *Lord Jim* and *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, which latter I would consider a symbolic work in the profound sense, the only sense in which I would like the term used. The present paper is not a work of exposition, something that would in any case be

superfluous where *The Nigger* is concerned[1]; but it would perhaps be worth recalling the way in which the work functions at three levels. Firstly, there is the basic story of the ship and the trials and tribulations, from nature and from men, that it faces on its voyage; secondly, there is the impression of the body politic for which the ship stands, so that its problems seem not quite similar to but indicative of the problems a social community has to face; finally, there is the concept of the individual whose inner guidance of himself is also shadowed forth by the account of the progress of the ship. At all three levels the story is followed through quite consistently. It is not simply a matter of the relations of the sailors to each other occasionally recalling the relations of members of any cohesive group; it is not simply a matter of the manner in which an individual might set about his ends and not suffer deflection; throughout the narrative Conrad keeps us closely aware of the three separate functions of the ship. That, it seems to me, is what makes it a true symbol, something the whole presentation of which is bound up with the further concepts that it embodies.

But this alone would not have been enough. For a symbol to be effective it is not enough simply that it should have been intended as a symbol. In the first place, it should function satisfactorily in its basic role: that is, what it does or what happens to it should be both convincing and interesting. Now it seems to me quite clear that the ship and its crew in *The Nigger* fulfil this condition admirably. The characterization of the sailors, from the officers down to the forces of disquiet, Donkin and Wait, leaves nothing to be desired, so that the reader does not have any hesitation in accepting them as actual beings; furthermore, by an exciting and skilfully discriminating narrative, Conrad keeps his readers constantly concerned with the fortunes of the ship. That it should survive both its external buffeting and its internal dissensions is a matter of overriding interest to us. And not only that: the particular instruments of its salvation, the detached captain, the devoted Singleton, even the conscientious Podmore, are presented distinctively enough for us to be interested in them not only as individuals but it what they have to contribute to the life and management of the vessel. In short - except for those who are determined to evince no interest whatsoever in ships and sailors - what might be called the basic story of *The Nigger* is an interesting and instructive one, and I would suggest succeeds in widening our sympathies effectively.

This, however, though it makes for a good story, does not alone make a good symbolic work of art. For that, the further reaches the basic images are meant to open up should be satisfactorily treated too. To begin with, they should be plausible by which I mean not only that what is symbolized should be clear but also that recognition of it should not be forced. To show that this is the case here I can do no better than quote

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[1] See, for instance, Albert J.Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge Mass & London, 1958.

some of the prominent places at which Conrad establishes the breadth of his subject -

> The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet...She had her own future; she was alive with the lives of those beings who trod her decks;like that earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes.(Ch. 2)

with later on -

> On men reprieved by its disdainful mercy, the immortal sea confers in its justice the full privilege of desired unrest... They must without pause justify their life to the eternal pity that commands toil to be hard and unceasing, from sunrise to sunset, from sunset to sunrise; till the weary succession of nights and days tainted by the obstinate clamour of sages, demanding bliss and an empty heaven, is redeemed at last by the vast silence of pain and labour, but the dumb fear and the dumb courage of men obscure, forgetful, and enduring. (Ch. 4)

and again -

> And in the confused current of impotent thoughts that set unceasingly this way and that through bodies of men, Jimmy bobbed up upon the surface, compelling attention, like a black buoy chained to the bottom of a muddy stream. Falsehood triumphed. It triumphed through doubt, through stupidity, through pity, through sentimentalism. We set ourselves to bolster it up, from compassion, from recklessness, from a sense of fun. Jimmy's steadfastness to his untruthful attitude in the face of the inevitable truth had the proportions of a colossal enigma of a manifestation grand and incomprehensible that at times inspired wondering awe; and there was also, to many, something exquisitely droll in fooling him thus to the top of his bent. The latent egoism of tenderness to suffering appeared in the developing anxiety not to see him die. (Ch. 5)

I trust that these passages have intimated the skill with which Conrad brings out the wider implications of his subject. Particular quotation cannot do more. It is necessary to read such passages in context, preferably in the context of the whole book, to realise how effectively Conrad introduces them, how the narrative before and after allows for, indeed demands, such instances of far-reaching comment, and how the analogies that are brought to mind are sustained throughout. It could of course of argued that such passages are unnecessary, that the further reaches should have been left to the reader to discover; but, though one might have thought that the implications were unmistakable, there have been those who have failed to notice them and simply thought of the book as a simple sea-tale, and therefore I don't think Conrad can at all be blamed for these occasional hints about his larger purpose. At the same time, and I think more importantly in terms of resolving the more common difficulties that arise from an undisciplined use of

symbolism, the larger purpose is not used as an excuse for deficiencies in the basic sea-tale. The analogies are very carefully and firmly placed within a realistic and fascinating context.

Yet even this, I would claim, would not by itself have been enough. The subjects of the book may embody various other subjects, but if this is done simply for the sake of it being done, the end product would not seem to me a particularly admirable one. Such a meretricious achievement is not, however, all there is to remark in *The Nigger.* The quotations above suggest in fact the measure of Conrad's achievement in the book: he is actually engaging in a profound and subtle study of the conditions of human existence, both at the level of the individual and at larger levels; and it would seem to me that he succeeds not only in illuminating various conditions but also in instructing us about them. We are not simply introduced to certain values which Conrad thinks essential for the business of living, he also shows certain situations which demand such values if they are to be coped with satisfactorily. Accordingly, our appreciation of such values, both in their private as well as in their public manifestations, is considerably enhanced. At the same time, though this didactic aspect of the work has got to be stressed. Conrad cannot be accused of preaching. One can hardly speak of a lesson, because the points Conrad adumbrates are general enough to preclude partaking of such a character; but, even if this were not the case, instead of being drilled into us they arise so naturally from the basic story that their expression does not provoke irritation. In short, the subtlety of the concepts with which Conrad deals is matched by the subtlety of his treatment. We finish our reading of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* knowing a lot more than we did before about the nature of life at sea, both at the particular period of the tale and in general; appreciating better the internal relations within social groups, and better aware of the skills necessary for the control of such groups so that they can face both external and internal disruptions; and having been made more acutely conscious of the deeper reaches of our own personalities, the weaknesses that can be mistaken for strengths, the strengths that have to be invoked if we are to navigate successfully our voyage through life; and we derive all this while feeling predominantly that we have been entertained.

I have detailed these often dissected if still praiseworthy qualities of *The Nigger* because I wish to put forward expressly the standards by which I intend to judge *Moby Dick*, another work that is frequently advanced as a triumph for symbolism. Here too I have no intention of expounding, as that has been done often enough before; if any statements I make are unclear, I advise reference to Ronald Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* (London, 1951) which puts succinctly and clearly the case for the exalted opinion of the book. I intend to quote at length from this study myself: later works have not, I think, added much to the basic account Mason gives. It is that basic account itself of *Moby Dick's* qualities and value that I wish to put in question.

To begin with fundamentals, *Moby Dick* is I would insist a remarkably tedious novel. Such a judgement might seem a subjective one, so let me expand upon it. It must be granted, even by those who believe that the actual story the book tells is an interesting one, that there are passages that appear simply to be masses of uninteresting technical detail. Mason must be commended by his valiant efforts to justify these agglomerations; but even he has to argue only with reference to the symbolic intention -

> And in all effective symbolic art - in Kafka's intricate law-processes as in Dostoevsky's elaborately-fashioned police investigations - communication of the ultimate imaginative vision is achieved in proportion to the degree of familiarity and palpability which the central symbol has been able to achieve. (p. 125)

That is, Mason seems to grant that in itself Melville's protracted verbosity, concerning 'Cetology' or 'Whales' Heads' or whatever, has little interest. In contrast, of course, what strikes the reader is that the processes in Kafka and Dostoevsky are fascinating in themselves; the efficacy of the symbolism arises from this basic fact, a fact of which Mason suggests Melville had no appreciation whatsoever.

But it is not only these passages of bewildering boredom that vitiate the story as a story. It is in addition a highly disorganized work, with strands that lead nowhere, characters that barely exist, and a structure that is woefully unbalanced. I should perhaps qualify this. There are certainly some virtues: the characterization of Ishmael and Ahab is forceful, some of the more human adventures of the 'Pequod', the meetings with other ships for instance, are interesting, the sermon on Jonah could be thought to have a central significance. But these seem to me unbalanced by the unsatisfactory elements. I think one is entitled to have expected an account of life on the ship that went beyond either tedious technicalities or lopsided personalities; I am sure I am not the only reader - indeed, Mason's account confirms this view - who anticipated that more would be made of the mates and the harpooners who are so elaborately introduced.

Mason indeed advances a reason for the inadequacies when he considers the strange fact that the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, made much of early on, is almost lost sight of in the main body of the book -

> No deep significance need be read into this, not the only loose end in a book which by its very compendiousness could hardly hope to avoid them. The reason lies no further off than the unusual compulsiveness of the main theme, which allowed little room for subsidiary developments once its obsession had gripped the author as the obsession with the white whale gripped Ahab. (p. 115)

That is, the 'compendiousness' of the book was really a misjudgment on Melville's part, given that he was to decide that only one, albeit vital, theme was to be

developed. In that case it seems to me that the 'compendiousness' could well have been done away with: even if it is claimed that it was necessary to set the stage, the narrative should have been better organized so as not to leave the reader feeling that he has been cheated of a satisfactory resolution of some of the issues raised.

What in fact we come back to all the time is the contention that the failures in the basic story are justified by the symbolism; so let us now subject that aspect of the book to a critical examination. I said above that in a symbolic work not only ought what is symbolized to be clear but also recognition of it should not be forced. It seems to me that Melville succeeds, astonishingly, in failing in both these respects at once. With regard to the latter, it is almost a matter of drilling into the reader what the symbolic functions of Ahab and Moby Dick and Ishmael are: just in case all the references to fire and burning himself up hadn't made the point as far as Ahab was concerned, we are given the preposterous fire-worshipping Parsee Fedallah to underline that Ahab represents some sort of overweening fiery energy; in addition to the images of destruction that we are given, by other ships and by those on the 'Pequod', there is also the highly wrought chapter on the 'Whiteness of the Whale' to emphasize the concept of deathliness that is associated with Moby Dick; and though the 'loneliness of Ishmael is secondary, as Mason expounds, to the more active principles illustrated by the main protagonists, it is nevertheless forcefully expressed to the reader both at the beginning and again at the end of the book. There is also the little negro Pip to add to the impression of lunacy brought on by Ahab's obsession; while, to emphasize the fatalistic nature of the ship's voyage, we have had the vague shadows that flocked around it before its departure, as well as the warnings of the crazy Elijah. Indeed, probably so that the, at least in intention, profound connotations of the situation should not be in any doubt at all, everything to do with the 'Pequod' appears to function at a highly exalted pitch of intensity.

But the question remains, what actually is the whole business all about? for the trouble is that it is not quite clear what all these extreme elemental forces are meant to indicate to us. Are they intended to show us various types of emotion? are we being made aware of the consequences of conflict between them? is the essential destructiveness of all such absolutes being revealed to us? Mason makes a distinction that seems essential if we are to make coherent sense of the whole business, between what is represented by Moby Dick on the one hand and on the other what Ahab and Ishmael represent: he claims for the latter two some sort of human element:

> The crude statement of the problem 'Melville against the Evil spirit of the Universe' was given a more complex and more effective form; Moby Dick as the adversary was confronted by the passive, receptive Melville in the guise of Ishmael, and by the proud, inexorable, authoritative Melville (who had Puritan ancestors) in the guise of the great and crazy Ahab. By projecting, say, his own loneliness into Ishmael and his own obsessed bitterness into Ahab, Melville gave his drama a double authenticity of experience as well as a high dramatic quality

> quite beyond the powers of his previous works. Against the ferocious malignity of the whale he opposed both the good-humour and essential innocence of Ishmael and the implacable hatred of Ahab. (p. 134)

Now all this may be fascinating for those who are concerned with Melville's psychology, but it does not really contribute anything to our understanding of the particular states of mind under consideration: they are simply asserted to us, not explored with any penetration. We have no idea whether or to what extent we are meant to find any of this admirable; nor, indeed, is there any indication how we are to cope with such elements in our own lives.

The above statement may suggest that I have a didactic approach to my subject - if, that is, that had not been already apparent from the questions I ask above or indeed from my discussion of *The Nigger*. But I would argue that this is so only in the sense that I think that the novel must tell us something, and this is so loose a claim that I feel the word didactic is misleading here. Certainly I believe that my demand is one that is generally shared; and that Mason shares it seems to me clear from his apology for the essential obscurity of the book:

> Melville wrote it out of an inner vision which corresponds to no man's theory but Melville's, and no other man can interpret that vision as exactly as he has, in concrete symbol, expressed it himself...It seems presumptuous to rationalise too closely upon the compulsive expression of the emotional imagination. All that is admissible is to analyze, select, appreciate, reset in what seems the most significant order as the salient characteristics of this masterpiece of literature; and to extract from that difficult exercise the essential elements which appear to have made it such an organic, such a significant work of genius. From this there emerges unobscured the bitterness of the lesson that Blake had seen so clearly; that uninformed by humility, by passiveness, and by love, the will kills. 'Evil is the Active springing from energy.' All the glory and the ingenuity of man are vitiated by the injudicious will; it is a commonplace of history. And the will, by violating man's constructive instincts, arouses those which are more destructive and more dangerous; which like Moby Dick fascinate and challenge and destroy him. (pp. 156 - 7)

Now in the first place it does not seem to me that we need to have been subjected to an encyclopedic tome to be told this. But I think I would go further. The characterization Melville has employed is so extreme that I don't believe it capable of conveying any universal truth to the reader. For symbolism to be effective one must believe in the general applicability of the symbol, and this I think is quite impossible with what Melville has presented. Finally, I would also insist that, perhaps because of this

very failure of concrete characterization, there is some confusion about the message of the book, whether or not it is what Mason claims above. Indeed, he himself ends his discussion of the work by stating that 'The deepest tragedy of Ahab is not his own violent destruction; but the survival and the loneliness of Ishmael.' (p. 157), which I think points up a fundamental ambiguity about the message. In the work as a whole, as we have noted, Ishmael sinks to a cipher; which is why the suggestion in the above paragraph that Mason makes, that he should have been capable of being providing some sort of balance to Ahab's ferocious energy, is so absurd. At the same time, it is difficult to see him, as Mason's remark noted in this paragraph suggests we should, as a victim of the great struggle which has been inflicted upon us: as the detailed account of him at the beginning of *Moby Dick* makes clear, what we have in him is, to quote Mason once more, 'the hypnotised progress of the naked soul from the soured loneliness of misanthropy to the sacred loneliness of death.' (p. 112) The more human veritable victims of Ahab's absurdities do not really come alive sufficiently for the widely destructive nature of energy such as his to be apparent; and where the triangular relations of Ahab, Moby dick and Ishmael) are concerned, they are all such extravagantly hopeless cases anyway that trying to derive any generally valid concepts concerning the interaction of associable bizarre forces - if such can indeed be posited - would be a futile task. In short, except for the vague impression that excess can be destructive, there is nothing interesting to be derived from *Moby Dick* either about the individual or about humanity at large. It is, I would argue, and in particular when compared with *The Nigger of The 'Narcissus'*, a tedious, oppressive and - except possibly as regards the whaling business - uninstructive work; in fact, a monumentally useless one.

In the remainder of this paper I wish to consider briefly two other works that bear, if obliquely, upon this question of symbolism; or, rather, to be less exacting upon the question of the wider connotations that can be placed about basic subject matter. I should add that my approach here will be necessarily a cursory rather than a cohesive one, designed merely to suggest lines of thought that I shall not be exploring in any very thorough detail myself.

Billy Budd is not, in my view, a hopeless case as *Moby Dick*; is but the reason for this is not the one Mason again advances, that it is a great symbolic work. Its association between, on the one hand, Captain Vere and Billy and, on the other, God the Father and God the Son may be an interesting one, but it is not the most important aspect of the tale; rather, the events themselves take a marked precedence, and in that context the psychological presentation of the characters. In this respect indeed Mason's account is deficient in as much as, though he stresses the spiritual agonizing characters go through, in stressing the religious overtones of the work he omits the sexual ones. I believe that Melville's carefully worded account of Claggart's physical awareness of Billy - and, to a lesser extent, Captain Vere's as well - indicates unmistakably the latent homosexuality that provokes the tragedy; and it is one of the impressive ironies of the book that in two different ways this quality leads

to Billy' destruction. I refer to the fact that envious malignity has to be brought to fruition by Vere's determination not to indulge his 'warm heart'.

I am aware that one ought not to make too much of this point. But it seems to me that to ignore it completely, as Mason does, is seriously to depreciate the value of the book. It is such myopia that leads, for instance, to the assertion that the story is about the fulfilment of duty regardless of circumstances. Such a view disregards completely Melville's suggestion that the condemnation of Billy is very much due to circumstances. Vere does not actually state that Billy could be convicted and the penalty thereupon mitigated; but, in putting forward this possibility in the speech about 'the consequence of such clemency' (Sec. 22), he intimates that the final argument for executing Billy is not one of strict regulation but of the practicalities of the situation. It is to Melville's credit that, in detailing Vere's deep psychological need to advance every justification possible for his decision, he develops the idea of the depth of feeling that the mention of 'heart' in Vere's case contrasted with 'conscience in that of his fellow-officers at the court-martial had first set concisely before us.

Homosexuality is also an element, minor but significant, in the Conrad novel I wish to consider: I refer to *Victory*, and the treatment therein of the trio of Jones. Ricardo and Pedro, who bring destruction to the hitherto idyllic island retreat of Heyst and Lena. It seems to me unquestionable (See Frederick R.Karl, *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad,* London, 1960 for a resume of the evidence) that, as with Claggart, one of Mr. Jones' fundamental motivations is his homosexuality. Its contribution to his destructive activities has however a more concrete basis than in the case of Claggart: his over-riding misogyny is exacerbated by the discovery that Ricardo is attempting to involve himself with Lena - one need make no very extravagant suppositions about Jones' relation with Ricardo to appreciate the bitterness with which he reacts to the latter's moving out of his control. In this respect, instead of the vague connection between sexuality and destructiveness that we had in Claggart, there is something more readily comprehensible; and, since Jones' destructiveness had previously been established, the particular instance that leads to Lena's death is the more readily acceptable by the reader.

In addition to this correspondence of motivation, there is also between these two books a correspondence of approach inasmuch as, to go back to what was said earlier of *Billy Budd*, both are evocative in terms of their subject matter of other works. In the case of *Victory*, I would suggest that *The Tempest*, or rather the trio of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban, is brought to mind by the ghastly group mentioned above. I do not think that this is accidental. The presentation of the Pedro who is crudely devoted to Jones seems to me somewhat arbitrary otherwise; and I believe that it was Conrad's intention to render more forcefully by this association the unsettling effect on the order of the island of the visitation upon it of the uncouth trio.

At the same time, I would insist that this is a very minor element in the tale an added spice rather than a basic constituent. This, I think, points up an essential distinction between the two books; for, in *Billy Budd,* very heavy weather is made of the comparison between Billy's story and that of Christ. Despite this, it seems, to me that comparison sheds no illumination upon the story itself. It does not in any way advance our understanding of the nature of good or evil, duty or self-sacrifice. It is merely that a comparison is drawn, almost as though one were simply required to lend weight to a story that would otherwise have seemed too simple.

Ironically, Mason also mentions *The Tempest,* in declaring that *Billy Budd* resembles it in that the keynote of both is simplicity. This I think is misleading. The keynote of the resolutions of both may be simplicity, but whereas the contents, motivations and characterizations in *Billy Budd* are also simple, *The Tempest* is quite clearly a very complex work. Indeed, the only correlation that seems to me an instructive one for a critic to draw is that between Antonio and Claggart, in terms of the fundamental motivation for their bitterness. Even here, though, while Shakespeare discloses to us further reaches of Antonio's character, Claggart remains one-dimensional - which last, I would suggest, though nothing like as absurd an abstraction as was the case in *Moby Dick,* is symptomatic of the rarefaction that vitiates Melville's tales. It was perhaps because he was painfully conscious of this rarefaction that Melville made so much of his grandiose comparisons; so that what is essentially a story of simple extremes of character takes on the dignity of a complex myth.

These summary remarks have I trust contributed further to the distinction I wish to draw between these two writers. My argument is that, both on the large scale and on the small, Melville's use of parallels, which could in certain respects be described as symbolism, is meretricious in character; Conrad's is emphatically not. Where Conrad's comparisons expand our awareness of one or both branches of the comparison, Melville compares only to reassert what he had expressed in the single instance; where Conrad illuminates general principles through particulars that are readily to be seen as having universal significance, Melville in dealing almost entirely with abstract concepts seems on occasion to have hardly any human interest. The fundamental passions of Ahab and Claggart are thrust upon us, but the subtleties of the conduct of men in general who are subject to such passions is of no concern to Melville. In Conrad, on the other hand, microcosm and macrocosm, individual and humanity, are all brought together with an artistry that exemplifies how an artist should use those tools of his craft that are too often substituted for the material.