

**Terrestrial - celestial time and timelessness
in Conrad's heart of darkness**

« What we call the beginning is often an
end and to make an end is to make a
beginning” T.S.Eliot (1974, p.68)

Although space and time are interrelated conceptions that each object and body are concerned with, time is more elusive as a notion to be defined. For a man, it encloses intervals of his life span from birth to death. For society, it starts with its notion of national awareness. For mankind, its beginning is situated in the remote prehistoric era.

Time has started to rule our lives since man “created” mechanical time by which our modern society clocks itself. By mechanical time, it is meant the measuring of time in units which is only a recent discovery. It is dated only in 1659 when the first clock was realised by Huygens who created a functional device according to Copernicus' theory. Yet the measuring of time is a relative notion.

Many scientific theories have been developed to offer the plausible conception of time.

Cyril Upton in his book *What Is Wisdom?* (1959, p49) explains that “time, as we know now, has no reality” because “it is not an eternal flow, but merely space intervals between

events". The ancient people have known this conception before modern science declares it truthful.

The old Arab tale may be taken as a fact that the ancient cultures knew this by intuition.

The story goes this way: a visitor arriving at an oasis meets an old man to whom he inquires about the time necessary to reach the next town. The old man's answer baffles the visitor because despite his being an inhabitant of that very town, he was unable to tell him. Amazed the visitor continues his road for some time when he hears the old man's voice calling him back and saying that he can tell him that by this speed of walking he will arrive at the town in two hours. (Meyerovitch, 1978, p139)

To formulate it in a more theoretical way: what the ancient knew intuitively science has discovered recently, since one aspect of today's emerging science is called chronobiology, which concerns the study of how time interacts with life, that shows in fact, the differences in each individual's biological rhythm.

What we call "Time" is learnt by the cultural pattern. Cultures differ in how people perceive time. In Northern Europe, for example, life is tightly scheduled whereas in Southern Europe people take precedence over schedules.

The schedules of Western industrialized society, where people live under the tyranny of clock time, do not take into consideration man's natural inner rhythms, which are often out of synchronisation with clock time. On the other hand, the schedules of Southern less industrialized societies, where people live more in harmony with nature, are made with more flexible measurements of time and appointments are never seen as "business meetings", but social encounters, opportunities given to the human being to increase his awareness of the present as a moment of life.

Living under time pressure and hurry that obviously causes tension and stress results in diseases because people have become enslaved to time. We are also free to make our choice

and give way to time and be masters of it, since it seems to organize our lives.

To process these observations, one needs to understand these two notions: "temporalterrestrial time" and eternal-celestial or "metaphysical time".

Both are implemented in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as devices of construction of the narrative.

Physical or temporary time is one's life time from birth to death. All events of one's existence flow like a river. Since the river flow seems to flee away in apparently identical modes-sometimes stormy, sometimes calm, temporary time of one's life appears to be, also, full of either stormy incidents or moments of lull existence. These two alternative modes of flowing time are to be taken as tests for untried individuals on their spiritual path of evolution. Man becomes aware that swimming down the river time, he is the only one who makes of it his pleasure or hardship. It depends on his awareness of avoiding dangers coming ahead.

On the other hand metaphysical time or timelessness is more complex to be defined. To disclose timelessness, there is no better way to express it than to identify its notion with dreams. In fact, dreams being of different kinds are known as ordinary dreams, premonitory ones, omens or nightmares, but in spite of their diversity they have one point in common: they are timeless. Thus, Man may interpret timelessness through dreams and temporary time through reality or daily life. The one is defined by the ancient theories of philosophy as metaphysical time, the other as physical time. The first "temporary time" may be diagrammed as an horizontal line and concerns all human beings living on the earth, the second "timelessness" may be suggested as an invisible vertical thread coming down from higher spiritual sources out of which mystics and poets draw their inspiration. Both are represented with the cross as their symbol.

Another explanation is offered by Dr. Lincoln Barnett's exposition of time in his book *The Universe* and Dr. Einstein (1955) where he declares that we make time an objective concept yet the time intervals provided by a clock or calendar "are by no means absolute quantities imposed on the entire universe by divine edict? In fact, all the clocks ever used by man have been made according to the sun and our solar system". What we call an hour, he carries on, "is actually a measurement in space- an arc of fifteen degrees in the apparent daily rotation of celestial sphere". (L. Barnett, 1955, p90). With respect to this, a year is simply a measure of the earth's progress in its orbit round the sun.

However, inhabitants of other planets outside our solar system would have different notions of time, each planet has time conformed to its rotation around the sun. An inhabitant of Mercury, for example, would have a year and a day amount which refer to the same thing, for Mercury makes its trip round the sun in 88 of our days, and in that same period rotates just once round itself.

Even on our own planet, Dr. Barnett declares our terrestrial ideas of time become meaningless "when science ranges beyond the neighbourhood of the sun, for relativity tells us there is no such a thing as a fixed interval of time, independent of the system to which it is referred". (Barnett, *ibid*).

When two men, for example, talk on the phone one from New York, at 7 p.m. local time and the other from London, at midnight, we may say that they are talking "at the same time". That is so, because they are both residents of the same planet and their clocks "are geared to the same astronomical system" (*ibid*)

Apart from notions of time in Physics, there are notions of time in Metaphysics, which in fact, means beyond physical state. One, who is interested in universal spiritual values of mankind may find in books that there have been two-distinct periods of spiritual evolution: prehistoric or golden period and historic or apocalyptic epoch.

In *Scientia Sacra* (the author-Bella Hamvas), it is announced that mankind shares the same spiritual inheritance. According to this prehistoric epoch (i.e. meaning before the calendar and time counting of historic time) people lived in a temporal time in complete harmony with metaphysical time, for the symbols were acknowledged as signs which should have been followed on the path of brevity on one's life-span.

When mankind's history has started to be accounted, man has fallen into the pit of forgetfulness knowing neither symbols nor signs. He has taken, as it were, his existence within space and time as the only reality. Only poets, painters, composers and mystics have bridged metaphysical time thereon. How do we really know much more about the universe than Laotze, Confucius, Buddha, Zarathustra, Pitagora, Jesus knew nearly two or three thousand years ago? Certainly, in the field of observation and description of phenomena, enormous progress has been made especially since Einstein proclaimed his Unified Field Theory for the two basic forces of the universe- gravitation and electromagnetism. To those who have known, if only momentarily, the mystic experience- and such people have experienced and written much about it – the idea of a beginning and eventually an end seems illusory while the nowadays torment of the scientist is to discover the "First cause" and its ultimate destination.

To perceive the universal Truth, the mystic unites with Universal Spirit, the one who is longing for contemplation of truth has to establish peace in heart and mind. This is also Conrad's message, implicitly expressed by Marlow's position of Buddha at the beginning and the end of the story. On Conrad's balance, all things are rather put on mind and its acting. He, surely confirms Byron's words that "The mind can make substance and people planets of its own with beings brighter than have been and give a breadth to forms which can outlive fresh".(Cyril, 1966, p38).

When Marlow confirms that "mind of man is capable of anything" because Marlow pursues "everything is in his mind all

the past as well as all the future” it seems as if Byron’s words are echoed, here (1976, p48).

The Eastern wisdom expressed in the Book of Change (i.e. I Ching) has already expressed the same idea some three thousand years ago as well as the Buddhist perception of time. To illustrate this point more adequately one needs to refer to the ancient Eastern doctrine of time. The linkage of understanding and action, of the eternal and of the temporal, by which it is held that humanity can find its place and function in the total scheme of things may be attained only by being acknowledged through the next formulation”: eternity is the substance of transformation and change is the function of transformation. That which never changes is the substance of transformation, that which changes along with time is the function of transformation”.(Thomas Clearly 1986, p.8)

Further on, “the substance” is explained as being free from thought and contrivance” and “function is to be understood as “sense and response”. Becoming effective as far as sensitive response is concerned, without arbitrary actions, means understanding manifest, in fact in action. It describes as “direct perception of eternal laws of change and their temporal concretizations without interference of subjectivity”. Sense and response flow from openness characterized as freedom from thought and contrivance.

The actual meaning of being free from “thought and contrivance” represents, indeed, practical expressions of two opposed yet complementary modes of existence – movement and rest (active/passive; male/female; creative/receptive; light/dark; day/night; sun/shadow). These terms are represented in Chinese as yang and yin.

They are usually used as binary opposites specifically as antonyms in Conrad’s context to express not only the coming and fading away of day and night but the movement and rest of the body too. Everything including the advance and withdrawal of persons, the arising and vanishing thoughts, the fortune and

adversity of the world, the success and failure of tasks is a matter of the alternating rise and fall of movement and rest making and plain therein.

To achieve the illumination and self-realisation, thereby, it is recommended the control of thoughts and senses thus “when you are mindful in times of rest, you are observant in times of movement”. (Cleary, op.cit) If you have self-mastery in times of rest you can be decisive in times of movements. Briefly – rest is the foundation of movement; movement is the potential of rest. When one does not lose the constancy in movement and rest, his path will be illumined.

Taking into consideration these facts, the reader of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* may apply almost identical concepts to Marlow’s acting through the use of symbols and his interpretations of signs. Reading the signs Marlow knows when advance is possible and when withdrawal is necessary, both important as the indications of what to aim for, and what to avoid, for survival or destruction.

The same idea concerning these symbols is expressed in Sufism. The Sufi, in fact, lives in the universe of symbols. The symbol for Sufic philosophy is not “abstract and does neither result from mental constructions nor from social conventions.” (Bonaud, 1991.p.19)

According to the doctrine of Sufism, which parallels the Buddhist doctrine comprising four successive epochs of mankind: golden, silver, bronze and iron (golden – prehistoric period and three others concern the historic era), at each epoch of time there appears the plenary manifestation of the divine Essence – (Insan Kàmil –Logos,i.e.”eternal verb”-the original Adam).

Otherwise he is by his divine Essence – the synthesis of all divine attributes – he is the Pole – visible or concealed, known or unknown, he represents “God’s shadow” (Zill Allah). (Bonaud, p. 30).

Worded differently, he (the Pole) comes to awake the awareness of those who for want of taking this world for reality, have fallen into the pit of forgetfulness of the Supreme Reality.

On the other hand, for those who are eager to understand the symbols, there are signs enough to indicate their actual spiritual path of realisation.

Indeed, realisation in Sufism means:

“to become aware of what has been and has never ceased being in spite of illusion and forgetfulness. Realisation is nothing but an anamnesis, a recalling of what we had consciousness of in the primordial agreement, a journey back to our first spiritual origin.” (Bonaud, p38)

These two explanations of concepts of time, metaphysical and clock measured time are my attempts to offer a plausible explanation of Marlow's pose of a meditating Buddha although Conrad's use of metaphysical time is implicitly expressed. Indeed, he uses explicitly timelessness and its solitude of dreams in the construction of the antonymic couple: human time versus natural time.

According to William W. B. Bouney, for twenty years a critical debate has continued concerning the significance of what have been termed “The Buddha Tableaux” in *Heart of Darkness*. (1980.p.7) One may assume approximately close significance only when all arguments offered therein are taken into consideration with the unique aim to meet Conrad's philosophy. Compared to the Buddhist and other Eastern philosophical concepts, his philosophy no less than others, stipulates that nothing can be done for the community unless man becomes aware of his potentiality and aspiration. Man alone, in space and time, may attain the higher degree of his spirituality in meditating over his right or wrong acting in order to correct himself and help others. Yet, these are exactly the precepts of Buddhism, for the Buddhist there are two inseparable qualities, which only man possesses, that can lead him to his self-realisation: humility and altruism.

Against the menace of darkness, which in Conrad's context means the darkness within, those drums awaken in the essential of man the awareness that all men are brother-like, the only difference which may distinguish them is the choice: the right choice may be achieved, in Conrad's context, by isolating people in solitude; otherwise, through meditation which offers possibility to transcend temporal time and perceive eternity.

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