

Katarzyna Sokołowska¹
Department of British and American Studies
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

A Critical Approach to *homo theoreticus* in *Victory* by Joseph Conrad

[Krytyczne ujęcie *homo theoreticus* w *Zwycięstwie* Josepha Conrada]

Streszczenie: W powieści *Zwycięstwo* (1915) Joseph Conrad kreśli portret Axela Heysta, typowego dla swej twórczości bohatera ambiwalentnego, który po śmierci ojca, słynnego szwedzkiego filozofa, postanawia wprowadzić w życie zasady jego sceptycznej filozofii, a zwłaszcza oderwanie od relacji z innymi i dystans do rzeczywistości. Jednak spotkanie z Leną i napad bandytów Jonesa budzą w nim wątpliwości, czy nie powinien zrewidować tych założeń. Opracowana przez Petera Sloterdijka koncepcja *homo theoreticus*, typowego dla nowożytności modelu podmiotu, który stawia obiektywne poznanie i bezinteresowną obserwację ponad angażowanie się w zajmowanie stanowiska i skłania się do wycofania w wewnętrzny świat swoich myśli, rzuca światło na odmowę zaangażowania i wybór życia kontemplacyjnego przez Heysta oraz konceptualizację siebie jako „ja” oglądającego. Jednak destabilizacja dychotomii tego, co wewnętrzne i co zewnętrzne, obiektywizmu i subiektywizmu, intelektu i zmysłów, nieważnia projekt ustanowienia spójnego teoretycznego „ja”. Nie mogąc utrzymać stabilnej tożsamości wolnej od przeciwstawnych dążeń, Heyst wybiera samobójstwo jako radykalną formę dystansu.

Summary: In *Victory* (1915) Conrad portrays Axel Heyst, an ambiguous protagonist, who after his father's death decides to follow his sceptical philosophy and practises radical detachment. However, an encounter with Lena and the assault of Mr. Jones's gang put Heyst in a quandary about whether he should reevaluate his assumptions and take action. Peter Sloterdijk's concept of *homo theoreticus*, typical of modern subjectivity, who privileges disinterested observation over taking a position and encourages withdrawal into the noetic sphere of one's thoughts sheds light on Heyst's preference for reducing his life experience to contemplation and accounts for his self-conceptualization as the observing ego who refuses to act. However, the destabilisation of the dichotomies of the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective, the

¹ Katarzyna Sokołowska, Department of British and American Studies, Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4A, 20-031 Lublin, Poland, katarzyna.sokolowska@mail.umcs.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7971-6113>.

intellectual and the sensual invalidates the project of establishing the coherent theoretical self. Unable to sustain his stable identity, Heyst chooses suicide as an extreme form of detachment.

Słowa kluczowe: Peter Sloterdijk, Joseph Conrad, *homo theoreticus*, „ja” oglądające, niezaangażowanie, nowoczesny podmiot.

Keywords: Peter Sloterdijk, Joseph Conrad, *homo theoreticus*, observing ego, detachment, modern subjectivity.

Introduction

The narrative of *Victory* (1915), which represents the late stage of Joseph Conrad's writing career, revolves around a typically Conradian ambivalent protagonist whose puzzling portrayal has provoked a multitude of interpretations. *Victory* is one of those novels by Conrad whose aesthetic merits have evoked widely divergent critical evaluations. Thomas Moser (1957, p. 1–4) and Albert J. Guerard (1958, p. 254–255) were among the first to dismiss *Victory* as a text exemplifying Conrad's creative decline after *Chance* was published in 1913. Their critique based on the achievement-decline theory which enabled them to offer a neat, if not overly simplistic, categorization of Conrad's oeuvre, shifted the focus to the flaws of the text and gave rise to a number of objections against the novel's incoherent fusion of allegory (Watts C., 1983, p. 76, 77) and melodrama (Moser T., 1957, p. 108; Park D.B., 1976, p. 168–169; Ressler S., 1988, p. 154), the shallow presentation of the characters' psychology (Moser T., 1957, p. 106; Baines J., 1971, p. 477)² and narrative inconsistency (Guerard A.J., 1958, p. 273; Batchelor J., 1996, p. 225). However, an increasing number of critics abandon reductive interpretations of the text as an allegory and appreciate it for complexity which puts the novel beyond conventional genre classification (Kaehele S. and German H., 1964, p. 72; Geddes G., 1980, p. 47) and for its captivating plot balanced with an insightful treatment of moral issues (Gurko L., 1962, p. 212). Moreover, the aesthetically meaningful generic hybridity of the text and its discontinuous narrative structure convey the protagonist's inner disintegration (Erdinast-Vulcan D., 1991, p. 182) and highlight the erosion of Western metaphysics with its promise of transcendence (Bonney W.W., 1980, p. 187–188).

The enigma of the protagonist, Axel Heyst, attracted critical attention since the publication of the novel in 1915. Heyst represents another version of a Conradian character who fully deserves the label of *homo*

² Bernard C. Meyer (1967, p. 233-234) points out that Conrad fails to add the touch of realism and breathe vitality into the portrayal of characters in his post 1910 fiction, including Heyst.

*duplex*³ unable to come to terms with „irreconcilable antagonisms” intrinsic to Conrad’s vision. Axel Heyst, the son of a famous Swedish philosopher, aspires to follow his father’s sceptical philosophy after his death. However, despite his endeavour to live a life of detachment, Heyst unexpectedly gets involved in a relationship with Lena and commits suicide after her tragic death, which raises the question about the reasons for his undoing. Trying to address the central enigma of the protagonist critics have come up with a variety of formulas that might ensure a more adequate understanding of his attitude. There is a unanimous agreement that Heyst is a sceptic, but the question remains open what stimulated such a radical form of scepticism. Daniel R. Schwarz (1982, p. 61, 62) maintains that artistic temperament and the habit of excessive reflection enhance Heyst’s preference for observation without getting involved in life, whereas Steve Ressler (1988, p. 152) invokes the concept of a modern antihero who fails to confront the challenges that come along his way and Gary Geddes (1980, p. 71) calls him an Everyman who struggles with his own inner darkness. Heyst is referred to as a romantic (Kaehele S. and German H., 1964, p. 67), but also as „the *fin de siècle* protagonist” who perceives the world as a text and, hence, finds himself disempowered and unable to act (Erdinast-Vulcan D., 1991, p. 174, 173; Batchelor J., 1996, p. 235). Another formula for Heyst’s decadent identity is an „entropic man” whose attitude reflects the crisis of metaphysical certainties and the pessimistic vision of the ultimate annihilation haunting the Victorian society at the end of the nineteenth century (Spittles B., 1992, p. 154). If most of the critics recognize Heyst’s passivity and withdrawal as the source of his inner void (Baines J., 1971, p. 474; Cox C.B., 1974, p. 128; Ressler S., 1988, p. 154), there are few who argue that he is nonetheless capable of active resistance and a refusal to submit to fate (Spittles B., 1992, p. 159). Not the least among the factors contributing to the broad range of disparate critical responses to the protagonist is the multi-faceted depiction which baffles the readers and ensures that Heyst remains a mystery (Geddes G., 1980, p. 60; Hampson R., 1992, p. 232), a man of paradox tortured by inner conflict (Gurko L., 1962, p. 214; Raval S., 1980, p. 420) and contradictions which arise from the clash of the rational and the irrational (Geddes G., 1980, p. 71; Hampson R., 1992, p. 231), idealism and egoism (Park D.B., 1976, p. 153), „life and death forces” (Karl F.R., 1979, p. 769).

³ Jocelyn Baines (1971, p. 477) considers Heyst one of the most complex Conradian character.

Conrad and Philosophy

Heyst, a sceptic, is frequently recognized as an alter ego of Conrad⁴, a master of disbelief who insists that the truth about the world can never be penetrated. The letter of 16 September 1899 to Edward Garnett is a manifesto of Conrad's sceptical attitude and a refutation of objective, unquestionably certain knowledge: „All is illusion [...] Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt – and the doubt itself is lost in an unexpected universe of incertitudes” (Conrad J., 1986, p. 198). At the same time, despite the appeal of scepticism, Conrad (1946, p. 43) seeks to qualify its one-sided, radically subversive dimension and turns to idealism as a bulwark against despair by asserting „that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy!”⁵. As a matter of fact, Conrad never unreservedly subscribed to any particular philosophy; hence neither his scepticism nor idealism represent an intellectually coherent statement of his views. In the letter of 20 July 1905 to Garnett Conrad (1988, p. 276) himself explicitly stated his lack of interest in any philosophy: „For myself I don't know what my philosophy is. I was not even aware I had it”. Cedric Watts (1993, p. 74) points to anti-intellectualism⁶ as the most adequate term which defines Conrad's mindset and accounts for a wish of „get[ting] rid of consciousness” since, as he explains in the letter of 31 January 1898 to Cunninghame Graham, „[w]hat makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it” (Conrad J., 1986, p. 30). Reiterating the theme of reflection as „the most pernicious of all the habits formed by the civilized man” (V, p. x–xi)⁷, Conrad anticipates the portrayal of the protagonist whose marked penchant for taking an intellectual standpoint eventually derails his moral and emotional growth.

Conrad resents any project of reducing the whole of human experience to a single formula and subordinating life to some universal principle. His suspicion of the obsessive reliance on one idea that eventually leads to the protagonists' undoing is exemplified by Charles Gould in *Nostromo* whose „fixed idea” (*Nostromo* 379) of restoring justice and political stability in

⁴ See Erdinast-Vulcan D., 1991, p. 185; Schwarz D.R., 1982, p. 69; Park D.B., 1976, p. 150, 164, 165; Geddes G., 1980, p. 79.

⁵ Mark A. Wollaeger (1990, p. 2) articulates this paradoxical combination of the need for affirmation and the lure of negation claiming that „in Conrad's best work skepticism remains continually at odds with the various forms of refuge [...]”.

⁶ Watts (1993, p. 74) places Conrad's anti-intellectualism within the tradition of „Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Bergson” who „sought to disparage conventional rational awareness and to emphasise the potency of instinctual or anti-rational being”.

⁷ The abbreviation V will be used for Conrad J., 1948, *Victory* throughout the whole article.

Costaguana eventually wreaks havoc on the whole country and triggers an unending cycle of political turbulence. In *Lord Jim* the protagonists's decision to take blame for Brown's betrayal and accept death from Doramin's hand only to rescue his heroic image is framed as a gesture of complying with some abstract unearthly ideal: „He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct” (Conrad J., 1946, p. 416). To register his profound mistrust of theory and its reductive nature which thwarts the writer's creativity and his potential for rendering the infinite multiplicity of phenomena, Conrad (1983, p. 205), in the letter of 15 March 1895 to Garnett, refers to theory as „a cold and lying tombstone of departed truth”. He reiterates his reservations in the letter of 9 December 1897 to a reviewer of *The Nigger of the „Narcissus”* where he claims that he abstained from resorting to any aesthetic theory and instead drew upon his deep-seated emotions while writing the novel: „I wrote this short book regardless of any formulas of art, forgetting all the theories of expression. Formulas and theories are dead things, and I wrote straight from the heart – which is alive” (Conrad J., 1983, p. 420–421). „Instead of relying on formulas and theories”, Conrad (1986, p. 348) asserts the importance of contradictions, in the conviction that life and human nature are based on „irreconcilable antagonisms”. In the letter of 2 August 1901 to the „New York Times” Saturday Review Conrad comments on the sources of his art and explains the significance of apprehending the complexity of life that disrupts the boundaries of a rationally designed system: „The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous – so full of hope” (Conrad J., 1986, p. 348–349).

The Rise of *Homo Theoreticus*

Peter Sloterdijk's book *The Art of Philosophy*, which introduces the term *homo theoreticus*, combines a comprehensive account of the theoretical self and some of its aspects that have been overlooked or have received a perfunctory treatment such as the longing to avoid position-taking and to become a collector of impressions turned into immobile noetic images with a critical perspective on the attempt to subordinate one's life to a philosophical doctrine. In the Western tradition, the inner/outer dichotomy functions as the axis of modern subjectivity and defines our understanding of the self who turns inward and stands in opposition to external reality (Taylor C., 1989, p. 111, 113–114). The prototype of *homo theoreticus* emerged as early as in Plato's philosophy and evolved to become the dominant model

regulating the relationship between mind and reality and ensuring the hegemony of reason over desires as the source of identity and the unified self (Taylor C., 1989, p. 115, 119). The model of „radical reflexivity” underlying the theoretical self triggered the emergence of „the modern notion of interiority” (Taylor C., 1989, p. 131, 120) and its identification with thought and reason. René Descartes takes Augustine’s innovative formula of the inner/outer dichotomy implicit in his project of elevating the soul over the world to a radical extreme and turns it into the subject/object duality, hence establishing the subject as „an external observer” who „take[s] a disengaged perspective” (Taylor C., 1989, p. 129, 146). The delegitimization of the subjective and the idea of a purely objective knowledge invulnerable to the context and to the multiplicity of perspectives came under criticism in Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of genealogy and his refutation of the absolute point of view which assumed the form of perspectivism. The Nietzschean critique challenging the Western philosophical project of affirming abstract concepts over the experience of life echoes in Sloterdijk’s (2012, p. 18) denunciation of the theoretical self, *homo theoreticus*, who opts for a withdrawal from life, i.e. „de-existentialization”.

In his commentary on the emergence of the Western model of subjectivity Sloterdijk points to the limitations of the theoretical self. Sloterdijk (2012, p. 18) indicates the destructive impact of construing the modern self as a theoretician who asserts one’s superior position by mastering „the art of suspending participation in life in the midst of life”, who dismisses subjective experience in favour of the objective study of phenomena, reduces life to the contemplation of ideas and cognitive activity and forsakes an interest in practical matters in order to „acquire the initially unlikely habit of circumventing the ‘things themselves’ in a disinterested way”. Thus, the practice of detachment and „an exercise in not-taking-up-a-position” produces the model of „[t]he observing ego” who „transform[s] sights [...] and random visible and palpable life substances into fixed inner images devoid of context” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 18, 19). The commitment to contemplating phenomena and producing their noetic images turns the mind of *homo theoreticus* into the archive which includes objects that are “released from the imposition of being real”, „liberated, decontextualized, and de-animated over time” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 19). Seeking the metaphor that might convey the formation of the theoretical self who privileges observation over participation and aspires to an absolute point of view, Sloterdijk draws upon the rhetoric relying on the topos of the world as theatre. Thus, the advent of dissidents who insist on identifying themselves as observers correlates with the transformation of the world into a stage: „If all the world becomes a stage, it is because there are secessionists who claim to be only visitors here, not

participants” (Sloterdijk P., 2013, p. 221). Sloterdijk (2012, p. 41, 46, 55) argues that *homo theoreticus* inverts the universally shared derogatory evaluation of defeat and tends to perceive it as success, linking the so-called loser romanticism, i.e. the celebration of defeat as victory, with Plato’s reinvention of „philosophy as the art of winning by losing” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 43).

Predominantly interpretations of Heyst either focus on the psychological component of his uniqueness, i.e. emotional inhibition or define him in philosophical terms as a sceptic, a rationalist and a decadent of the *fin de siècle* era who experiences inner void. The term *homo theoreticus*, the theoretical ego, coined by Sloterdijk, offers an overarching formula that weaves merges together those separate strands in a logical and coherent explanation. The use of this term suggests that Heyst’s disengagement should not be traced back merely to scepticism, but rather to the very sources of the European philosophical thought which relies on the tension between immediate experience and reflection, the constitutive element of the Western mindset. Sloterdijk’s analysis of *homo theoreticus* provides the conceptual framework for linking Heyst’s radical detachment and rationalist bias with an endeavour of practising philosophical *ars moriendi* that the theoretician equates with the contemplative approach. The textual depiction of Heyst’s confrontation with contradictory impulses that challenge his self-identification enables Conrad to dismantle the dichotomies of the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective or the intellectual and the sensual underlying *homo theoreticus*. Thus, by subverting the theoretical model of subjectivity that Heyst, inspired by his father’s teachings, struggles to embody in his life, Conrad articulates his critique of the philosophical paradigm dominant in the West and reveals its limited capacity for tackling the mutable and chaotic nature of life.

The Observing Ego

By proclaiming that we live in the „scientific age” (V, p. 3), the first sentence of the novel delineates the intellectual context that formed the protagonist’s mindset and that has its roots in the ideals of the Enlightenment. The epoch which promoted the cult of science and „the religion of reason” (Sloterdijk P., 2013, p. 95) put the modern individual on „the quest for perfection” (Sloterdijk P., 2013, p. 317), thus consolidating the attitude of an unswerving obedience to scientific or philosophical dogmas. As Sloterdijk (2013, p. 233) maintains, the evolution of the modern individual is fostered by „the ‘self-doubling’ of the contemplator” and assisted by

„a superior partner, comparable to a genius or an angel, who stays close to its charge like a spiritual monitor”. Heyst’s father fulfils the role of „a superior partner” and „a spiritual monitor” who helps the subject to keep tabs on himself and maintain strict discipline. Heyst is shown as an avid student of his father’s philosophy⁸ who has learned „a profound mistrust of life” (V, p. 91) and has acquired the habit of reflection „which is a destructive process” (V, p. 91). Senior Heyst’s portrait which perpetuates the sense of his presence in his son’s life maintains self-doubling even after his death. The stern look on the father’s face in the portrait represents uninterrupted supervision, reminding the son of the obligation to exercise intellectual discipline that keeps emotions in check and to reject involvement in favour of observation. Heyst’s habit of sitting under the portrait and reading his books signals his unwavering subordination to the father’s ideas and by establishing a vertical axis of „above” and „below” remodels the father-son relationship after the hierarchical dependence between the teacher and the student. In accordance with his father’s teachings, Heyst defines his position as settling down on the shore to watch the flow rather than participating in the endless movement of the stream: „The dead man had kept him on the bank by his side. And now Heyst felt acutely that he was alone on the bank of the stream. In his pride he determined not to enter it” (V, p. 175–176). This Heraclitean metaphor, which captures the appeal of the *bios theoretikós* privileging theoretical reflection over changeable, unpredictable, irrational life, invokes the concept of „recession”, i.e. „the withdrawal of each person from the mode of being that is immersed in the river bed of worldly matters – or [...] an exit from the river of life to take up a position on the shore” which was instrumental in the emergence of the modern subject (Sloterdijk P., 2013, p. 227). Thus, envisaging his father as „the voice on the bank” Heyst refuses to join „the flow of life’s stream, where men and women go by thick as dust, revolving and jostling one another like figures cut out of cork” (V, p. 175), fearing that this decision would convert him into a mindless marionette swayed by what the masses believe and desire. At this point Heyst encapsulates his plan for life in the phrase „I’ll drift” and compares himself to „a detached leaf drifting in the wind-currents” (V, p. 92), the image that conveys his intention to enjoy freedom from the obligation to form bonds with others. By embracing the idea of drifting Heyst seeks to embody the ideal of *homo theoreticus*, a disinterested observer reluctant to make any commitment.

⁸ Numerous critics have discerned the influence of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy on the presentation of senior Heyst’s sceptical views (Johnson B., 1971, p. 160; Cox C.B., 1974, p. 127; Tanner T., 1986, p. 126–130; Spittles B., 1992, p. 150; Batchelor J., 1996, p. 231–232; Levin Y., 2013, p. 5). Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan (1991, p. 175) mentions also Nietzsche as a likely philosophical inspiration for the figure of Heyst’s father.

The *bios theoretikós* privileges the observing ego who cultivates freedom from „existential ‘thrownness’” over the position-taking ego (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 17, 18). To convey the formation of the subject who cherishes detachment and renounces participation in favour of observation, Sloterdijk also refers to the rhetoric relying on the topos of the world as theatre. The self-identification of secessionists as observers correlates with the transformation of the world into a stage: „If all the world becomes a stage, it is because there are secessionists who claim to be only visitors here, not participants” (Sloterdijk P., 2013, p. 221). The topos of the world as a stage is implicit in the advice that old Heyst offers to his son: „Look on – make no sound, [...]” (V, p. 175). Heyst closely follows his father’s counsel reducing his own presence in the world to the status of „an unconcerned spectator” (V, p. 185), who dismisses reality as „nothing but an amusing spectacle” (V, p. 178).

Keen on studying phenomena rather than stepping into the flow of life, the theoretician tends to immobilize visual impressions into „fixed inner images devoid of context” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 19). Heyst applies this procedure by founding a refuge on his island where he can practise recession and relish engaging in „internal’ operations” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 28). Thus, the solitude of Samburan enables Heyst to avoid position-taking and establish himself an „observer of facts” who „seemed to have no connection with earthly affairs and passions” (V, p. 60), an individual oblivious of the external world and attentive solely to the images arising in his mind. The mountainous landscape of the island fosters the delights of contemplation and detachment especially when Heyst, having climbed to the top, enjoys the view of the world from an almost divine perspective. The association of serenity and peace that pervade Samburan with „the music of the spheres” (V, p. 66) cancels the transient quality of impressions converting them into immobile images. The world that Heyst and Lena face on their walk up the path in the forest becomes even more intangible and visionary as the mist that conceals the horizon disperses into an „unsubstantial shimmer in the pale and blinding infinity” (V, p. 190) rendering the view luminous and immaterial. Heyst’s contemplative style of perception frames the surrounding world as part of inner landscape composed of fixed inner images such as the sun that freezes into „a disc of iron cooled to a dull red glow” and the sea that crystallizes into „the circular steel plate of the sea” (V, p. 235), part of the realm beyond change which *homo theoreticus* is eager to set up.

However, the mode of reflective life, which relies on the contemplation of ideas, traps the theoretician in a disembodied existence that amounts to dying to external reality and eventually results in self-annihilation. Accordingly, the island of Samburan is presented as the domain of stasis

which is separated from the flow of life by „the calmness” and „the infinite isolation” (V, p. 190). The undisturbed silence and seclusion of the island enable Heyst to cultivate the habit of receding from the world in order to immerse himself in his vision of the ideal. Yet, the theoretician’s power to combine the position of an observer and a master invulnerable to external influences is undercut by the sense of living in the shadow of an imminent death. The life-denying nature of the island is suggested by funereal imagery that pervades the description: „the ruins of the spot”, „the general desolation” and the „funeral blackboard sign of the Tropical Belt Coal Company” which resembles „an inscription stuck above a grave” (V, p. 42). The comparison of the forest on Samburan to „the repose of a slumber without dreams” (V, p. 190) anticipates the final word of the novel „Nothing!” (V, p. 412) which evokes death, the moment of cancelling any mental representations. Thus, the images of lifelessness challenge the ethos of the theoretician whose strategy of de-existentialization eventually leads to the immersion in the void rather than the serene contemplation of noetic images and turns into self-destruction when Heyst, devastated by Lena’s demise, decides to commit suicide.

Pure Cognition

Conrad subverts the model of the theoretical self which privileges the myth of pure cognition free from the existential context and which relies on the suppression of the subjective. As a theoretician committed to disinterested observation, Heyst cultivates a desire to build up knowledge free from the distortion of feelings so that he could „think clearly [...], seeing life outside the flattering optical delusion of everlasting hope, of conventional self-deceptions, of an ever-expected happiness” (V, p. 82). One of Heyst’s nicknames, „Hard Facts” (V, p. 8), reflects his focus on the objective circumspection of the phenomena. Instead of enjoying emotional warmth that Lena exudes, Heyst seeks to grasp the truth about the girl and reduces his infatuation to the obsessive activity of deciphering „a script in an unknown language” (V, p. 222) that she represents and formulating a reliable definition. However, his insistence on absolute objectivity clashes with „the sensation of something inexplicable reposing within her” (V, p. 192). The promise of attaining pure cognition is undermined by the invasion of the subjective which takes the form of the temptation of the sensual and the promise of physical and emotional intimacy with Lena. The rapture that her proximity evokes puts to test Heyst’s deeply ingrained preference for disengaged circumspection and weakens his capacity for grasping the

essential. The image of „a light veil (that) seemed to hang before his mental vision [...]” (V, p. 82) conveys his failure to take an objective view of Lena. Thus, the clash of the sensual appeal with the habit of reflection which culminates in the delight of contemplating her beauty undercuts his aspiration to ensure a detached perspective. Unable to sustain the ideal of objective cognition or to reconsider the relevance of the subjective approach that he has deemed inferior so far, Heyst abstains from articulating his affection and chooses to withdraw into silence: „He broke off [...]. Simple words! They died on his lips” (V, p. 221). Both the resistance he encounters while trying to pinpoint the source of bafflement caused by Lena’s presence and the unsettling conflation of her contradictory depiction as „a little child” and „something as old as the world” (V, p. 359), prevent Heyst from unravelling her mystery by offering a variety of explanations: “stupidity or inspiration, weakness or force – or simply an abysmal emptiness” (V, p. 192). As a result, Heyst experiences confusion typical of the theoretician when his insistence on grasping clearly defined ideas and excluding the irrational is frustrated.

Dismantling the Inner/Outer Dichotomy

Heyst’s identity of a theoretician relies on the dichotomy of inner life and external reality which is inscribed in the long-standing hierarchy privileging the noetic over the empirical. Pursuing intellectual activity, which verges on trance or waking dream, Heyst assumes that only the cogito undeniably exists and opts for disembodiment as a primary mode of life. Caught up in the inner space of mental images and tangible objects dissolving into dream-like figments, Heyst perceives himself as a spectre, „a calm, meditative ghost in his white drill suit” (V, p. 83). On the whole, faced with the dichotomy of the inner and the outer, of the intellect and the senses, Heyst opts for conceptualizing himself as *homo interior* who fends off the temptation of savouring the newly discovered appeal of the sensual. Therefore, even after enjoying Lena’s company for a longer time, Heyst does not entirely discard the habit of focusing on the content of his mind and continues to deny her tangible reality dismissing her as „vague, [...] elusive and illusory” (V, p. 222). Accordingly, he turns the experience of bodily proximity with Lena into the contemplation of dream-like images within the noetic sphere: „The fleeting weight of her body on his knees, the hug round his neck [...] might have been the unsubstantial sensations of a dream invading the reality of waking life [...]” (V, p. 319).

However, at the same time, Heyst is not entirely invulnerable to the pleasure of the senses and his first encounter with Lena exerts a strong

impact that brings him in touch with reality. Unexpectedly to Heyst, her sight at Schomberg's hotel triggers the transformation of dream into tangible reality: „It was a shock to him [...] to find the girl so near him, as if one waking suddenly should see the figure of his dream turned into flesh and blood. [...] her glance was no dream thing. It was real, the most real impression of his detached existence – so far” (V, p. 92–93). Lena's intrusion into his life destabilizes the neat inner/outer dichotomy underlying his contemplative attitude so that instead of immersing himself in the inner world, he „desire[s] her constant nearness, before his eyes, under his hand [...]” (V, p. 222). The moment Heyst discovers that Lena is mortally wounded by one of the bandits who invaded the island sets him deploring his failure to abandon detachment and, thus, to re-conceptualize himself: „Heyst bent low over her, cursing his fastidious soul, which even at that moment kept the true cry of love from his lips in its infernal mistrust of all life” (V, p. 406). The tragic finale of his love affair with Lena forces Heyst out of his inner fortress challenging his tendency to privilege the noetic over the real.

Conclusion

The message that Heyst imparts to Davidson before committing suicide registers his awareness of the destructive nature of his self-conceptualization as the theoretical self unable to join the flow of life: „woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love – and to put its trust in life!” (V, p. 410). These words raise the question whether Heyst's suicide is a gesture of self-condemnation or rather the ultimate assertion of his identity as a theoretician and the corollary of his mounting desire to proceed with the radical form of withdrawal. Heyst's choice to perish in the fire which, as Davidson comments, „purifies everything” (V, p. 410), liberates him from the tension between the oppositions that no longer function within the stable hierarchy and threaten to disrupt his identification with what he deems hierarchically superior. Thus, Heyst seeks to maintain his self-conceptualization by resorting to the paradigm of the romantic loser who turns his own death into the triumph of the philosopher's reason by effacing emotions and „realities” (V, p. 350) that might interfere with his ego ideal. Yet, although the narrative of Heyst dramatizes his withdrawal to assume the position of an observer invulnerable to the disruption of the subjective and the irrational, it culminates in the recognition that the project of creating the theoretical self is inherently flawed. *Homo theoreticus* who takes refuge in „the inner citadel” (Sloterdijk P., 2012, p. 82) hoping to assert his

independence and create space where he can enjoy mastery over reality, ends up facing the inner rupture between the attitude of objective distanced observation and the lure of the irrational. The title of the novel ironically encapsulates the compelling power of Heyst's theoretical attitude typical of the Western mind and his inability to renounce it in favour of the immediate experience of life. Although Lena's self-sacrifice is frequently deemed a triumph of compassionate love and moral integrity, in fact her magnanimous gesture failed to inspire Heyst to revise his philosophy; on the contrary, it further consolidated his refusal to participate in life. The theoretical self, troubled by the unresolved strife between contradictory drives, is paradigmatic of modernist anxiety over the breakdown of the monolithic, stable subjectivity. In the letter of 23/24 March 1896 to Edward Garnett, Conrad (1983, p. 268) encapsulates the fluid, precarious status of the modern subject in the phrase which emphasizes its shifting nature of „'ever becoming-never being'” and he labels it as „a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown” (Conrad J., 1983, p. 267). Although Heyst insists on conceptualizing himself as *homo theoreticus*, he ends up being trapped between oppositions of the objective and the subjective, the intellectual and the sensual, the noetic and the empirical which refuse to be stabilized as hierarchically superior and inferior and which eventually undermine his pursuit of the ideal of the coherent self putting him on the path from de-existentialization to death and nothingness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baines Jocelyn, 1971, *Joseph Conrad, A critical biography*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
- Batchelor John, 1996, *The life of Joseph Conrad. A critical biography*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Bonney William W., 1980, *Thorns and arabesques. Contexts for Conrad's fiction*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London.
- Conrad Joseph, 1946, *Lord Jim*, Collected Edition, J.M. Dent and Sons, London.
- Conrad Joseph, 1947, *Nostramo*, Collected Edition, J.M. Dent and Sons, London.
- Conrad Joseph, 1948, *Victory*, Collected Edition, J.M. Dent and Sons, London.
- Conrad Joseph, 1983, *The collected letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 1, F.R. Karl and L. Davies (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Conrad Joseph, 1986, *The collected letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 2, F.R. Karl and L. Davies (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Conrad Joseph, 1988, *The collected letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 3, F.R. Karl and L. Davies (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cox C.B., 1974, *Joseph Conrad: the modern imagination*, J.M. Dent and Sons, London.
- Erdinast-Vulcan Daphna, 1991, *Joseph Conrad and the modern temper*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

- Geddes Gary, 1980, *Conrad's later novels*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal.
- Guerard Albert J., 1958, *Conrad the novelist*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Gurko Leo, 1962, *Joseph Conrad: giant in exile*, Macmillan Company, New York.
- Hampson Robert, 1992, *Joseph Conrad: betrayal and identity*, Macmillan Press, London.
- Johnson Bruce, 1971, *Conrad's models of mind*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Kaehele Sharon and German Howard, 1964, *Conrad's Victory: a Reassessment*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 10(1), p. 55–72.
- Karl Frederick R., 1979, *Joseph Conrad: the three lives. A biography*, Faber and Faber, London.
- Levin Yael, 2013, *Masters of disinterest: everything you always wanted to know about Conrad's Victory but were afraid to ask James*, *Conradiana*, 4(3), pp. 1–19.
- Meyer Bernard C., 1967, *Joseph Conrad. A psychoanalytic biography*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Moser Thomas, 1957, *Joseph Conrad. Achievement and decline*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Park Douglas B., 1976, *Conrad's Victory: the anatomy of a pose*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* No. 31(2), p. 150–169.
- Raval Suresh, 1980, *Conrad's Victory: skepticism and experience*, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* No. 34(4), pp. 414–433.
- Ressler Steve, 1988, *Joseph Conrad. Consciousness and integrity*, New York University Press, New York.
- Schwarz Daniel R., 1982, *Conrad: the later fiction*, Macmillan Press, London.
- Sloterdijk Peter, 2012, *The art of philosophy. Wisdom as a practice*, transl. Karen Margolis, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Sloterdijk Peter, 2013, *You must change your life. On anthropotechnics*, transl. Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Spittles Brian, 1992, *Joseph Conrad. Text and context*, Macmillan Press, London.
- Tanner Tony, 1986, *Joseph Conrad and the last gentleman*, *Critical Quarterly*, 28(1–2), pp. 109–142.
- Taylor Charles, 1989, *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Watts Cedric, 1983, *Reflections on Victory*, *Conradiana*, 15(1), pp. 73–79.
- Watts Cedric, 1993, *A Preface to Conrad*, Longman, London.
- Wollaeger Mark A., 1990, *Joseph Conrad and the fictions of skepticism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.