

Maria Paola Guarducci

Irony and the Absurd in Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress"

Abstract I: The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility of reading "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), the first fiction where Joseph Conrad deals with Europeans in Africa, through Samuel Beckett's categories of alienation and the absurd. The perspective opened up by such a comparison can illuminate, I argue, the irony underlying Conrad's writings, especially as regards his debated attitude towards the Empire, largely based on *Heart of Darkness*, after Chinua Achebe's and Edward Said's critical interventions on it.

Abstract II: In questo articolo vorrei proporre una lettura di "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), il primo testo letterario in cui Joseph Conrad si confronta con la presenza degli europei in Africa, attraverso le categorie beckettiane di alienazione e assurdo. Ritengo che una simile comparazione possa illuminare l'ironia che sottende la scrittura conradiana, soprattutto in rapporto alla posizione dell'autore rispetto all'impero, largamente fondata su *Heart of Darkness*, così come questa si è sedimentata a partire dagli interventi di Chinua Achebe e dello stesso Edward Said.

Introduction

As Joseph Conrad himself wrote: "'An Outpost of Progress' is the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa, the main portion being of course 'The Heart of Darkness'" (1). Conrad's stay in the Belgian Congo in 1890, due to last three years according to his initial commitment, ended abruptly after eight months and the author returned to Europe to be hospitalized for a long time for bad physical and psychological conditions. Much has been written about the

weight of this crucial African experience in Conrad's life and works. The author's debated position towards the Empire, which has been viewed as either pro-Empire, owing to his racially charged depictions of the African people, or anti-imperialistic – by virtue of his enlightened awareness of the rapacity of colonialism – is largely built, though, on *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Nonetheless, "An Outpost of Progress" (1897), written a couple of years before his renowned masterpiece, was by his own judgment his favourite story (2). In this short and puzzling work, where he dealt for the first time with Europeans in Africa, Conrad felt he had achieved that unity of tone he was pursuing in his early writing activity (3).

In his first, thorough study of Conrad titled *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, a revised version of his PhD dissertation at Harvard, Edward Said devoted many pages to *Heart of Darkness* leaving a limited critical space to the analysis of "An Outpost of Progress". To Said, Kayerts and Carlier, the two white agents in Africa who feature as protagonists of the story and who eventually die for their inability to cope with the place and the people "had surrendered themselves to a commercial enterprise confirming the victory of the idea of imperialism and conquest" (Said 1966: 143). I will return to this interpretation of the triumph of imperialism. When Said resumed his work on Conrad in 1993 in various sections of *Culture and Imperialism*, almost twenty years had passed since Chinua Achebe's anathema against the Polish writer in his American lecture "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", which had in the meantime become one of the most debated essays of postcolonial criticism, along with its object, *Heart of Darkness* itself. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said rightly 'defended' Conrad's most famous novella from Achebe's historically motivated attack by placing it in a cultural context according to which its politics, aesthetics and epistemology could only be imperialist (4). Conrad was a man of his time and so is Marlow; no matter how enlightened Marlow might at times sound in his account of his trip along the river

Congo, according to Said he (and Conrad) failed to see the signs of “a world *resisting* imperialism” (Said 1993: 34) and would not acknowledge the right to freedom to the ‘natives’ (5). But what about the Europeans in Africa? “An Outpost of Progress”, which I believe is possibly even more telling than *Heart of Darkness* on the subject, does not feature in Said’s analysis, as it does not come across anywhere in Achebe’s reflection on Conrad.

It is fair to remark, though, that since the Nineties, with the notable exception of Jakob Lothe in 1989, several scholars have turned their interest to “An Outpost of Progress” and agreed on its profound relevance within a discourse which tries to position Conrad with respect to the European colonial enterprise underling his ambivalence and uneasiness towards it, rather than his supposed racism (Achebe) or historically ‘unavoidable’ ideological support (Said) (6). Even so, in one of these readings it is stated that Conrad depicted the Africans either as part of the wilderness – that is, incomprehensible to Western minds/eyes, as it happens in *Heart of Darkness*, – or as ‘mimic men’, corrupted by Western manners which they imitate with comic, undignified or disturbing results (7). In their works, Jakob Lothe, Keith Carabine and Nils Clausson have correctly underlined the role of irony in this story; Carabine and Clausson, in particular, have specified that it is irony which gives the text the unity of tone Conrad felt he had finally achieved, a type of irony that the author was due to exploit also in some of his longer fiction (8). Even more specifically, Clausson has turned his attention to the way Europeans are portrayed by Conrad and pinpointed that the irony perceived in his depiction of Kayerts and Carlier should be equally detected in his ‘stereotyped’ description of the Africans: why should we, in fact, think that when Conrad is writing about Europe and Europeans he is being ‘ironical’ while if he describes Africa and the Africans he is being a victim of the contemporary popular clichés? (9).

Starting from these critical appraisals and from the emphasis given by scholars to the role played by irony in “An Outpost of Progress”, this article

explores the possibility of reading Conrad's story through a new set of lenses, that is through Samuel Beckett's categories of alienation and the absurd. The perspective opened up by such a comparison can show how irony in this text contributes to the creation of a modern atmosphere of absurdity, thus locating the writer in a not so conservative ideological scenario as the one normally associated with him. If we acknowledge the novelties of Conrad's first African fiction by letting it 'converse' with the works of Beckett, distant from Conrad for endless reasons, many of the traditional ways of framing the author into conformist positions do not hold anymore.

I have no evidence that Beckett ever read "An Outpost of Progress", but my point is not to hypothesize rewritings; it is rather to establish a dialogue between two classics through their texts and the meanings these keep on producing if questioned from new perspectives. I want to see if Beckett can be of any help in reading Conrad. Can our familiarity with Beckett's world and its 'discontents' make us read Conrad differently? Could we consider the idea that one of the paths opened by Conrad led to Beckett's tragic but also poignant 'nihilism'? Can this thought produce new interpretations of "An Outpost of Progress" and of its postcolonial relevance within Conrad's canon? I believe the two authors partake of a similar tragi-comical, 'pathetic' idea of life leading both of them to an analogous form of humanism in their depiction of the individual. They both underline, in obviously different manners, the lack of sense and effectiveness in the mechanism of life *per se*, a mechanism whose victims are both human beings, often reduced to puppets, and language, deprived of its immediate meaning and logic. Truth itself comes out as a farce, a performance no one can be sure about, including those who put it on stage. There is a slow process of deprivation which Conrad activates in his literary writings, stripping them of actions and rationality. *Mutatis mutandis*, subtraction is Beckett's distinctive cipher. I am convinced that both Conrad and Beckett are concerned about how to reproduce their tragic sense of life in art through

language and subtractions, and that irony played for both a key role, providing a way to achieve this goal. As Beckett himself put it in his *German letter of 1937*: “on the way to this literature of the unword, which is so desirable to me, some form of Nominalist irony might be a necessary stage” (Beckett 1984: 172-173).

A Not-so-awkward Comparison

The names of Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett are rarely found associated in criticism and only in the context of discussions about writing in a language different from one's mother-tongue. The distance from their countries of origin and their settlement in different cultures, where they were in some ways 'exiles', together with the problematic choice of using, respectively, a third and a second language – in both cases learned as adults - for their creative writing, played a fundamental role in the shaping of their lives and literary works. However, there are also other kinds of fruitful comparisons between the two which may provide new ways to look at Conrad and which can, in particular, cast an interesting light on the way he portrayed the European colonial enterprise in Africa. I am thinking in particular of the possibility of comparing their use of ironical discourse, which is never too explicit but rather a sort of 'detached' irony. This is particularly relevant in “An Outpost of Progress” where, unlike the case of *Heart of Darkness*, the distance between the authorial narrator and the two protagonist of the story, together with the lack of sympathy on behalf of the narrative voice towards Kayerts and Carlier, increase the idea of estrangement surrounding the two Belgians (10). If it is true that Conrad does not completely identify with Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, it is also true that there is an authorial closeness between the two, whereas “An Outpost of Progress” displays a problematic triangle among author, narrative voice and the two main characters.

While imbued with Victorian values, Conrad in fact continually undermines them through the inconclusive structure of his prose, especially his

peculiar use of narrative voices and the deconstruction of traditional plots, thus opening the way to Modernism. In many regards, "An Outpost of Progress" presents several aspects which foreshadow Beckett's aesthetics: the use of symmetry and opposition, the focus on failure rather than on heroism, the depiction of immobility, the puppet-like features of the two main characters and their childishness, the lack of meaning in their behaviour, their idleness, pettiness and vacuity, the tragi-comical absurdity of the situations portrayed, the notion of displacement informing the story and, last but not least, the pervasive scepticism with which the tale is told, that is, the destabilization of language and of the rhetoric it carries. The same elements also play an important role in *Heart of Darkness*, where – on the other hand – Marlow's consciousness and his efforts to make sense out his trip to Africa, together with the aura surrounding Kurtz and his station before, during and after Marlow's encounter with him, push all the rest to the background. As Said puts it:

Thus Marlow's encounter with the improbably white-suited clerk in the middle of the jungle furnishes him with several digressive paragraphs, as does his meeting later with the semi-crazed, harlequin-like Russian who has been so affected by Kurtz's gifts. Yet underling Marlow's inconclusiveness, his evasions, his arabesque meditations on his feelings and ideas, is the unrelenting course of the journey itself, which, despite all the many obstacles, is sustained through the jungle, through time, through hardship, to the heart of it all, Kurtz's ivory-trading empire. Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz's great looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing act of imperial mastery and will in (about) Africa (Said 1993: 25).

At the beginning of "An Outpost of Progress", a cynical Managing Director leaves Kayerts and Carlier in charge of an irrelevant commercial station along the river Congo with the promise that he will be back six months later. Being too

busy elsewhere to bother, he will end up leaving them there for much longer. Kayerts and Carlier are out in Africa, as many Western people were in that period, with the prospect of making easy money trading ivory, but they also flatter themselves, as many ended up doing, with the rhetoric of the civilizing mission, of which they like to portray themselves as agents; a rhetoric still in vogue at the end of the century and bolstered up in the newspapers of the time:

They also found some old copies of a home paper. That print discussed what it was pleased to call 'Our Colonial Expansion' in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilisation, of the sacredness of the civilising work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, 'In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here, Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms. Civilisation, my boy, and virtue – and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilised men to live in this very spot!' Kayerts nodded, 'Yes, it is a consolation to think of that' (Conrad 1997: 8).

If we take into account that "An Outpost of Progress" was published the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, Conrad's accent on David Livingstone's three 'C' - Civilisation, Christianity, Commerce – in the above mentioned passage ("light, and faith and commerce") and the fact that the supposed "civilising work" is here to be achieved by two such dull and incompetent characters as Kayerts and Carlier encourage a political interpretation of Conrad's irony and scepticism. The story shows that there is no continuity between the pompous rhetoric of Empire and its factual, squalid reality. On the contrary, language and its contents are in strident contrast with each other and their combination produces, as in Beckett, comic results. The two protagonists

are obviously no heroes: "Look at those two imbeciles" (Conrad 1997: 4) says of them the Managing Director at the very beginning of the text. They are two insignificant, narrow-minded and uninteresting characters, whose background, quickly sketched by the unmerciful anonymous narrator, reveals less than ordinary lives 'at home'. In Kayerts and Carlier, as well as in their colonial enterprise, we find no trace of Marlow's complexity and depth. The fantasy of the birth of a 'civilized' town in the middle of Africa envisaged by Carlier in a moment of self-celebration provoked by the magniloquent language of the papers they found, as the passage quoted shows, is contradicted and ridiculed by the total lack of practical skills of the two men. What comes through is that they will never be able to build anything at all, nor will they create the preconditions for such an enterprise. Their incompetence speaks of both individual deficiencies and the irresponsible historical behaviour of European powers, which were evidently not in charge of what was going on in Africa, supposing that such a job as the ivory 'trade' in Congo, and all that went with it, could have been properly managed and justified.

On the other hand, and as a proof of that, Kayerts and Carlier seem to be no exception to the rule, as their predecessor at the station was yet another loser; he is described as "an unsuccessful painter who, weary of pursuing fame on an empty stomach, had gone out there through high protections" (Conrad 1997: 3). We are told he died in unclear circumstances; possibly of a fever, as Makola (a Sierra Leone man in charge of the relationship with the locals at the station) reports as the only witness; or maybe for the same reason Carlier himself at last succumbs, as the reader is led to believe when Makola lies about Kayerts' accidental killing of his mate and eventually claims the man died of fever. Language is hardly presented in this story as a reliable medium for truth, and truth itself, here as in all of Conrad's writings, is a notoriously slippery concept. "An Outpost of Progress" suggests, without appeal, that whatever the Europeans were doing in Africa, they were not sending there their best

specimens. Physically frail, psychologically weak, these two (three, if we also include the first agent) come out across the text as 'children' to be taken care of. Conrad portrays them as "two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds", walking "arm in arm drawing close to one another as children do in the dark", thus subverting the contemporary oratory of Empire and the thoughts of its self-proclaimed agents (11). "'I can hardly believe it,' says Kayerts tearfully. 'We took care of them as if they had been our children'" (Conrad 1997: 14) is the first thought which comes across Kayerts' mind once the ten station (black) men have disappeared; not to mention a whole literature of the time, of which Rudyard Kipling is but the most famous example, producing the same patronizing image of non-Western people as children. The peculiar features of Kayerts and Carlier, which can equally be found in many secondary characters of *Heart of Darkness* mainly to add to Marlow and the reader's bewilderment, contribute here to the creation of a "theatrical farce" (Paccaud-Huguet 1996: 93): a tragicomedy in two parts, as it were, a sort of ur-text for *Waiting for Godot*. In both Conrad and Beckett we find the ordinariness of life – everyday actions, conversations, human needs – portrayed as farcical in order to convey a wider sense of the tragic fate of life, that is its irrational and unmanageable route leading inevitably to failure and death.

The 'Non-sense' of Waiting

It is not surprising to find Kayerts and Carlier often compared by critics to Bouvard and Pécuchet, most recently by Laurence Davies in his essay on Conrad's ironic shadowing (12). The inability to perform any sort of practical work – they can't fish, can't hunt, can't farm – which they share with the two characters created by Gustave Flaubert, also foreshadows Beckett's favourite character, the ineffectual Belacqua, who migrates to the Irish playwright's prose straight from Dante's *Purgatorio*, where he is depicted outside the door of the

afterworld's middle reign, hugging his knees and waiting for the passing of time in order to access the place where he can start his proper expiation: another wait due to last the same number of years as his indolent life. Waiting is indeed the only activity Kayerts and Carlier are engaged in: "The two men understood nothing, cared for nothing but for the passage of days that separated them from the steamer's return" (Conrad 1997: 8).

In the criticism related to "An Outpost of Progress" I found only one passing reference to Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, whose names feature in a list including the above mentioned Bouvard and Pécuchet, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (13). Conrad portrays Kayerts and Carlier chatting "persistently in familiar tones" (Conrad 1997: 5) to distract themselves from the fear instilled by an unknown and unappealing (to them, but not to the natives nor to the narrator) landscape and by people they fail to understand while waiting for the steamer to come back. They soon develop nostalgia for their trifling routine at home. Also Vladimir and Estragon, whose past we more or less ignore, find themselves in yet another alienated and inexplicable environment such as an almost empty stage - but for a single bare tree in the first act, with five leaves in the second - where they have to entertain themselves waiting for someone who does not turn up. 'While waiting', they perform trivial actions and talk nonsense. Their relationship with the place is not particularly emphasised by Beckett but for one allusion: "We're not from these parts" (Beckett 1970: 16) says Estragon to Pozzo in the first act. According to Beckett's indications when the play was first performed in the US, the two were originally meant to speak with an Irish accent underlining a displacement familiar to Beckett and which the two do not share with the master and slave couple of Lucky and Pozzo, the master claiming to be the actual owner of the land where the play takes place. Beckett's characters develop absurd strategies and purposeless dialogues to pass the time which separates the present from their expectations, the arrival of Godot. There is no future for them,

and time flows, as in most of Beckett's works, as the sun shines "having no alternative, on the nothing new" (Beckett 1957: 1); that is, in a series of repetitions depriving both language of its primary functions and actions of progress, meanings and targets. Beckett's depiction of immobility in *Waiting for Godot* has become iconic: "Shall we go? / Let's go. *They don't move*" (Beckett 1970: 61) being possibly among the most quoted theatre lines ever. But also Conrad's subtle denial of that progress he ironically recalls in the title of his story activates, I think, a capsizing which works as a palimpsest for modernity. If action takes place at all, as some critics have underlined, it leads, rather, to a regression (14).

There is a theatrical aspect in Conrad's story which has not been underlined enough so far and which frames the European colonial enterprise of "An Outpost of Progress" within the significant structure of a farce. Whereas the setting of *Heart of Darkness* is dynamic, presenting a progression along the river and backwards, let alone Marlow's trips back and forth from Europe to Africa, and, within Europe, from London to an anonymized European city that suggests Brussels and back, the location of "An Outpost of Progress" is static and looks like a theatre stage. But for some circumscribed references to Kayerts and Carlier's previous life in Belgium, the station is the only location we see. Together with the two agents and three different groups of natives coming and going in and out of the scene, we are never allowed to leave the setting of the trading station, which thus becomes a symbolic site.

Couples

Vladimir and Estragon form a very close duo although they are different from each other and we are given no hints of their common past. Their physical and psychological differences are the cause of endless minor fights and seem to suggest, more than once, a possible parting. Although they keep on asking themselves "if it wouldn't be better for us to part" (Beckett 1970: 12); or saying that they would "have probably been better off alone, each one for himself"

(Beckett 1970: 36) and eventually suggest “If we parted? That might be better for us” (Beckett 1970: 61), they do not separate, because “It’s not worth while now” (Beckett 1970: 36), whatever that ‘now’ means in such a timeless environment. Among their ineffective entertainments they also consider committing suicide by hanging, an option deprived of its tragic implications and discarded because it would leave one of the two alive and alone. “Gogo light – bough not break – Gogo dead. Didi heavy – bough break – Didi alone” (Beckett 1970: 13) says Estragon in the first act in an exchange which once again stresses their mutual tie and the impossibility/fear of any form of separation. In the second act, towards the end of the play, the suicide plot is mentioned and discarded once more: the cord they would use, originally holding up Estragon’s trousers, breaks. They decide that they will hang themselves ‘tomorrow’ with a proper rope: no possibility of taking the plan seriously for the audience at this stage, not only because ‘tomorrow’ is likely to be the same as ‘today’, but also because Estragon’s trousers are down and he is left on the stage in his underwear. A figure of fun and ridicule, he looks more like a character in a gross variety show than a tragic hero, as the situation should suggest. The nameless protagonist of Beckett’s *Act without Words* (1956) also tries to hang himself, but the only branch of the palm tree he plans to use folds down against the trunk. Belacqua as well is notoriously familiar with failed attempts at suicide, not to mention Bouvard and Pécuchet’s misplaced determination to kill themselves.

Kayerts and Carlier, whose first names we ignore – as we ignore Vladimir and Estragon’s last names - but whose alliteration and rhyming hint at a unity of sorts, are also very different, both physically and psychologically. The former short and fat, the latter tall and slim, the contrasts between the two often lead to comical outcomes. Kayerts is more emotional, ready to be moved to tears by the Managing Director’s “kindness” in giving such “an exceptional opportunity for them” (Conrad 1997: 4) in that ‘promising’ outpost of progress and trade. On the contrary, Carlier is cynical, less idealistic and more pragmatically interested

in the profits to be made through the ivory trade, exploiting the 'savages' employed for the task. Left at the station by the Managing Director, possibly alone for the first time ever in their lives, they soon develop an unlikely affection one for the other. By the end of the first day/page each would refer to the other as "my dear fellow" (Conrad 1997: 7) and they would consider themselves as brothers, out of the not-so-remote fear that one of the two could die, leaving the other one alone, as the narrator informs us, ruthlessly revealing their petty and secret thoughts. As in *Waiting for Godot*, the couple should stay, no matter what, and loneliness is a condition to avoid at all cost.

Death, evoked in *Waiting for Godot* by the comical attempts at suicide performed, and by Vladimir's laconic comment about life: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps" (Beckett 1970: 58) is a creeping presence in "An Outpost of Progress" from the very beginning of the tale, and although it turns into brutal facts, Conrad does not spare it an ironical treatment, especially in the case of Kayerts's final and successful suicide. Near Kayerts and Carlier's house lies the grave of the first agent marked by a lopsided cross. The presence of the grave acquires an emblematic relevance by being introduced in the same sentence where we are also informed of Kayerts' appointment as first agent. There is a creepy symbolic continuity in this sentence prefiguring the whole evolution (or involution) of the plot: "The director had the cross put up over the first agent's grave, and appointed Kayerts to the post" (Conrad 1997: 4). Carlier will later on fix the cross properly, this being the only practical task he succeeds in achieving:

[...] early one day, Carlier went out and replanted the cross firmly. 'It used to make me squint whenever I walked that way.' He explained to Kayerts over the morning coffee. 'It made me squint, leaning over so much. So I just planted it upright. And solid, I promise you! I suspended myself with both hands to the cross-piece. Not a move. Oh I did that properly' (Conrad 1997: 8-9).

At the end of the story a dazed Kayerts will look at the cross and see “a dark smudge, a cross-shaped stain, upon the shifting purity of the mist” (Conrad 1997: 22), just before hanging himself from it. Thanks to the good carpentry work of his mate, his resolution is successfully achieved. Death and tragedy are not the outcome of the unfamiliar environment the two feared so much, nor are they the product of a conflict between Kayerts and Carlier and the natives (with whom they fail to establish any kind of connection), as the reader is led to foresee at the beginning of the story. Death and tragedy come from inside, they are Kayerts and Carlier's own produce, the outcome of their practical and human incompetence, and of their fatal interaction one with the other. Empire and its agents are here portrayed in the route leading to their implosion by virtue of their own inner structural and ethical inappropriateness.

The Unbearable Truth

The tie between Kayerts and Carlier is seriously undermined when the two find out that Makola, the “Sierra Leone nigger” (Conrad 1997: 3), who significantly turns out to be the only one really in charge at the station, has exchanged ten black men belonging to the Company for six trunks of ivory from some Angolan traders. Where the two European lower-middle class men have failed, the polyglot, multitask, double named African Makola-Henry Price succeeds. Makola's unambiguous exchange proclaims the divorce between a fake philanthropic idea of progress and civilization and the harsh reality of colonial trade, based on slavery. The actual sense of the European presence in Africa becomes so manifest that the faint balance which has sustained Kayerts and Carlier together so far is lost forever. “Slavery is an awful thing” (Conrad 1997: 15), had said Kayerts in an embarrassed exchange with his mate after Makola's private initiative; “you stingy old slave-dealer” says Carlier to Kayerts in a verbal fight over some sugar which will lead them to tragedy.

Abandoned by the other group of natives in charge of provisions, the two quickly run out of food and wait more and more anxiously for the Managing

Director to come and rescue them. Time goes by, the silence is heavy, tension mounts: "The steamer was late. At first they spoke of delay jauntily, then anxiously, then gloomily" (Conrad 1997: 17). Two more months pass. "Every evening they said, 'Tomorrow we shall see the steamer'" (Conrad 1997: 18). The steamer is busy somewhere else, its Managing Director thinking "that the useless station, and the useless men, could wait" (Conrad 1997: 18). The absence of any sign of the steamer and of a future to come reminds us again of the timeless and static setting of *Waiting for Godot*, where the future never comes because it has already happened and everything, every moment and action, just repeats itself. In Conrad's story, though, repetition is threatened by anxiety. Exasperated by fear, loneliness and hunger, the two have a major fight over a silly matter such as some sugar that Kayerts wants to keep for emergency while Carlier would like to use, considering their current situation an emergency. Following a farcical chase around the house, comical for both characters' physical unfitness for this kind of activity, Kayerts, who is armed and fears Carlier could be armed too and wanting to kill him, accidentally shoots Carlier. Comedy turns into tragedy. Once he finds out, through Makola, that his mate had no gun, he sits and – once again - waits. But the steamer is not Godot; it arrives, albeit late, piercing the air with its acute shriek in which Kayerts can hear progress calling for him: "Progress and civilization and all the virtues. Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to return to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done" (Conrad 1997: 22). Once again Kayerts is portrayed as an infant. It is his turn, now, to perform his own sole successful action in the story and he hangs himself from the cross his mate so dutifully fixed. The Director finds him in a grotesque posture: "His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen

tongue at his Managing Director" (Conrad 1997: 23). The swollen tongue, sticking out of Kayerts's livid mask, can be read as a grimacing comment on the role of speech in this story and, more generally, on the rhetoric and paternalism of colonialism. Carlier and Kayerts eventually succumb to (15). I do not subscribe to Said's idea that this work portrays the "victory of the idea of imperialism and conquest". On the contrary, I would say that it depicts imperialism as a tragic destroying force and, at its best, as a farce, as in the ambiguous character of Makola-Henry Price. When Makola says that Carlier died of fever, just as we were told that his predecessor did, Kayerts remains silent: lies, death and failure await the West in charge of the Congo station. In Kayerts' suicide and in his final grimace we find the objective correlative of a possible political stance, but also a poignant prefiguration of Beckett's ironical fight against the tricks of the tongue and the mystifications of language, put forward by characters whose discourse points to the stripping of meaning, the assault against words, the "destruction of language in the name of beauty", as Beckett himself wrote in his already quoted letter to Axel Kaun.

Although it is not possible, and beyond the scope of this article, to establish a direct link between Conrad and Beckett, I have tried to highlight some of the many paths that Conrad's fiction opened up and I would like to conclude with another suggestion which links Conrad and Beckett's 'pessimism'. A special brand of pessimism tinged with pathos for humankind, a mixture which makes us despise and pity Kayerts at the same time. The rubbish heap evoked at the end of Conrad's story brings me back to Beckett once more. Kayerts acknowledges he belongs to a rubbish heap, but could no longer go back to it; he would rather crucify himself in the Empire's 'outpost of progress'. In 1968 Beckett composed a provocative play lasting only 25 seconds, featuring no characters and no words, called *Breath*. Progressive subtractions throughout the years have only left rubbish on the stage: "no vertical, all scattered and lying" according to the playwright's indications; the intensity of lights slowly increasing

and decreasing synchronized to the sound of a breath, a leftover of humanity, finally united to the rubbish heap.

NOTES

1. Conrad 2006, w. p.
2. I am here referring to the first publishing dates of the two works which appeared, respectively, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 165 (February 1899): 164-460; vol. 166 (March 1899): 460-621 and vol. 167 (April 189): 620-781 and *Cosmopolis*, vol. 6 (June 1987): 609-20 and vol. 7 (July 1987): 1-15.
3. See Hilson & Timms 1990: 112; and Hamner 2001: 173.
4. See Said 1993: 26.
5. See Said 1993: 34.
6. Among these: Jeremy Hawthorn (1990); J. C. Hilson, D. Timms (1990); James M. Johnson (1996); Josiane Paccaud-Huguet (1996); Ted Billy (1997); Robert Hamner (2001); Nils Clausson (2009); Joseph A. Kestner (2010); Todd Kuchta (2010); M'hamed Bensemmane (2011). In Italy, Maria Antonietta Saracino (1996)'s afterword to her translation of the text (alongside with *Heart of Darkness, The Congo Diary and Up-river Book*) is the groundbreaking appraisal of the text.
7. See Johnson, 1996: 65-67.
8. See Lothe 1989: 53-54, Carabine 1997: ix and Clausson 2009: 73.
9. See Clausson 2009: 72.
10. See Lothe 1989: 45-56.
11. See Clausson 2009: 81.
12. See Davis 2005, but also Paccaud-Huguet 1996 & Billy 1997.
13. See Billy 1997: 65.
14. See Kestner 2010: 102-104.
15. See Paccaud-Huguet 1996: 97.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achebe, Chinua. 1989. *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Hopes and Impediments. Selected Essays*. New York: Doubleday, 1-20.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1957. *Murphy*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1968. *Breath*. <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/breath.htm>, (accessed on 30 June 2013).
- Beckett, Samuel. 1970 [1954]. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1984. *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ruby Cohn ed. New York: Grove Press.
- Bensemmane, M'hamed. 2011. Conrad's Picture of Irony in "An Outpost of Progress". *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 56: 145-152.
- Billy, Ted. 1997. *A Wilderness of Words. Closure and Disclosure in Conrad's Short Fiction*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.
- Carabine, Keith. 1997. Introduction. Joseph Conrad. *Selected Short Stories*. London: Wordsworth Editions, vii-xxvii.
- Clausson, Nils. 2009. "A scrupulous unity of tone": Irony, Narrative Focus, and the Representation of Africa(ns) in Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress". *The CEA Critic. An Official Journal of the College English Association*, 71, 3: 70-84.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1997 [1897]. *An Outpost of Progress*. Joseph Conrad. *Selected Short Stories*. London: Wordsworth Editions, 3-23.
- Conrad, Joseph. 2006 [1898]. *Tales of Unrest*. The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Tales of Unrest*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm>, (accessed on 1 July 2013).
- Hamner, Robert ed. 1990. *Joseph Conrad: Third World Perspectives*. Washington: Three Continent Press.
- Hamner, Robert. 2001. The Enigma of Arrival in "An Outpost of Progress". *Conradiana*, 33, 3 (Fall): 171-187.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy. 1990. *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hilson, J. C. & D. Timms 1990. Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" or the evil spirit of civilization. Robert Hamner ed. *Joseph Conrad: Third World Perspectives*. Washington: Three Continent Press, 107-116.

Johnson, James M. 1996. Into Africa: "the Black Savages and the White Slaves" in Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress". *English Language Notes*, 33, 4: 62-71.

Davis, Laurence. 2005. 'The Thing Which Was Not and The Thing That Is Also': Conrad's Ironic Shadowing. Carola Kaplan, Peter L. Mallios & Andrea White ed. *Conrad in the Twenty-first Century*. New York-London: Routledge, 223-237.

Kestner, Joseph A. 2010. *Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction. 1880-1915*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Kuchta, Todd. 2010. *Semi-Detached Empire. Suburbia and the Colonization of Britain. 1880 to the Present*. Charlottesville-London: University of Virginia Press.

Lothe, Jakob. 1989. *Conrad's Narrative Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Paccaud-Huguet, Josiane. 1996. The master discourse and the irreverent tongue in "An Outpost of Progress". *L'Epoque Conradienne 1996. Actes du Colloque de Lyon II: "Joseph Conrad et la rupture épistémologique"*, 22: 93-114.

Said, Edward. 1966. *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Saracino, Maria Antonietta. 1996. Viaggi di carta. Joseph Conrad. *Un avamposto del progresso. Cuore di tenebra. Diario del Congo*. Milano: Frassinelli, 231-267.

Maria Paola Guarducci (PhD Uniroma Tre) is a Lecturer in English Literature at the Università degli Studi Roma Tre (Italy). Her research interests focus on Anglophone African literatures (particularly South African literature), contemporary British literature and on the relationship between the British literary canon and the Empire. She is the author of *Dopo l'interregno. Il romanzo*

sudafricano e la transizione (Aracne, 2008) and of several articles published in Italian and English. She has also edited a number of Italian translations of South African novels and short stories, including *Il vestito di velluto rosso. Racconti di scrittrici sudafricane* (Gorée, 2006).

mariapaola.guarducci@uniroma3.it