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Negation, Privation, Absence

The “Negative” Adjectives: Range and Types

A DISCUSSION OF CONRAD’S STYLE in general and his adjectival style in particular cannot afford to dismiss lightly the objections raised by a number of critics against one special class or group of adjectives that Conrad uses with some insistence: those of the type “impenetrable.” Keeping our focus on “Heart of Darkness,” where they occur most frequently, we shall in the following consider this feature in the context of Conrad’s other works and the works of the control group.

First of all it has to be noted that negative adjectives in general, that is, all those defined morphologically by the prefixes un- or in- (or one of its allomorphs) have a considerably higher incidence than in the control group, not only in “Heart of Darkness” but in the corpus constituted by six of Conrad’s major works.

Secondly, the deverbal negative adjectives (the type “impenetrable”), most frequent in “Heart of Darkness,” still occur in the Conrad corpus at an average considerably above that of the control group. Thus, while Conrad’s total use of adjectives, as we have seen, quantitatively differs very little from that of other writers of the period, his use of negative, and especially of deverbal negative, adjectives certainly does.

Conrad’s use of this kind of adjective no doubt owes something to the influence of French. He does not simply take over French words, however, although such obvious gallicisms as “incult” (The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” The Sisters), “inabordable” (The Nigger of the “Narcissus”) or “inexprimable” (in a letter to Garnett) occur in the early writings. Even if he did not create any neologisms in this area, this writer usually praised for his extraordinary visual imagination often seems to go out of his way to describe an object by what it is not, evoking a visual or generally sensory aspect only to deny its presence in the object or event under view.1 Thus we read of “sombre, uncrested waves” (Lord Jim, 337), of the “unglittering level of the waters” (The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” 104), of “unsmiling” faces and glances (The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” 41; “Amy

Foster,” in *Typhoon and Other Stories*, 110; *The Secret Agent*, 216; *The Rover*, 77, 216), of “ungleaming” eyes (*The Rover*, 165), of an “unglowing” daybreak (*The Shadow-Line*, 77), of “unringing” voices (*The Nigger of the *Narcissus,* 148; *Under Western Eyes*, 351; *The Shadow-Line*, 109), of an “unpicturesque” Captain Fidanza (*Nostromo*, 527), of the “unfeminine” timbre of Natalia’s voice (*Under Western Eyes*, 348). But it is not only in the area of sensory perception that such adjectives abound. The Russian sailor in “Heart of Darkness” is ruled by the “uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure” (127); seafaring is called an “inglorious” struggle (*The Nigger of the *Narcissus,* 15), life an “unentertaining and unprofitable business” (“Typhoon,” 18), Winnie Verloc is habitually “incurious” (*The Secret Agent*, 198, 199, 237, 239), the city of London “unlovely and unfriendly to man” (*The Secret Agent*, 56). The catalogue could be extended.

The adjectives of the type “impenetrable” form a special, morphologically defined subclass of the negative adjectives and are here called deverbal negative adjectives, because the greatest part of them derive from a (usually transitive) verb, whether they are of native origin or French or Latin loanwords. For the statistician neither the incidence of the negative adjective in general nor of the deverbal negative adjective in particular is “significant” in Conrad’s works. Still, quantity is not the decisive factor, as has already been pointed out, and the many critical objections to this kind of word indicate its considerable “informational” potential. Indeed, in terms of informational theory, they are “powerful” words. The particular transformation that produces them also invests them with several functions usually assigned in the language to distinct lexemes. As far as they derive from (transitive) verbs, they denote the negation of the ability to perform an action; the ordinary dictionary gloss, “that cannot be + past participle,” makes this quite clear even to the non-linguist. Not only do we notice here again a tendency away from a verbal towards an adjectival form of expression; we also witness a process by which a failure or a deficiency on the part of the cognizing subject is transformed into a property attributed to the object. Is the subject (Conrad) projecting his own basic anxieties as objective features of the universe? The question must be waived for the time being.

“Heart of Darkness” has a total of forty different types of the deverbal negative adjective, ten of which together provide more than half (46) of the 89 occurrences (tokens): “impossible” (7); “impenetrable” (6); “inconceivable” (6); “incredible” (5); “incomprehensible” (4); “innumerable” (4); “inscrutable” (4); “intolerable (4); “unextinguishable (3); “unspeakable” (3). Whether Conrad, in writing this story, deliberately followed Carlyle’s