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Moments in Joseph Conrad's Fiction

Yuriko Morita

There is fairly general agreement that the belief in continuous "Progress," which most of the early Victorians accepted, was gradually lost between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20 th century. J. H. Buckley wrote: "By the end of the [Victorian] period the idea of progress had altogether lost its authority among the poets and writers of imaginative prose";[1] furthermore Hans Meyerhoff points out that "the fragmentization and the 'meaninglessness' of history were reinforced by the decline of the idea of progress."[2] As a result of this gradual transformation, the writers of Modernism tried to describe, in their works, the "moments" or the discontinuity of time rather than its linear continuity, on which basis the Victorian and Edwardian writers had created their novels. During that period when the writers were keenly conscious of time, Joseph Conrad also contrived ways to express such a discontinuity in time, and went so far as to write, in the Preface to *The Nigger of the* "Narcissus" (1914), that to catch moments in the passage of time is the essential task of artists as follows: "To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing of life, is only the beginning of the task."[3] His moments, however, have not been thoroughly considered, despite Virginia Woolf's critical appraisal of Conrad's "moments,"[4] nor have they been analysed as frequently as those of other Modernist novelists. Therefore, the aim of this paper will be to examine the consciousness of time in Conrad's fiction

and, in particular, to investigate the specific nature of his moments by referring to Romantic moments and also other Modernists' moments.

*

Among Modernists, who devoted themselves to "time," Conrad can be marked by the wide range of space in his fiction. In a sense it might be said that he is the writer who dealt with "place" or conflicts arisen from "places" with different languages or cultures like post-colonial writers. Conrad's fiction has often been mentioned in post-colonial studies in recent years.[5] And yet, at the same time, we cannot dispense with considering his acute sense of "time." In his fiction, the highly complex technique such as the "flashback" or the "time-shift (chronological looping)"[6] is often used to manipulate the structure of time. *Chance* (1913) is even criticised for its manipulation of time which overburdens the story itself.[7] Therefore, most of his works are not narrated with ordinary chronological sequence and forward moving continuity. In other words, his novels are mainly based on the discontinuity of time.

It should also be noted that "moments," a kind of reversal to the linear time-continuity, are often described in his works. Some critics have pointed out that Conrad described the moments which have an epiphanic mode, resembling those of the other Modernists. M. H. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), mentioned "Joseph Conrad's 'moment of vision' that reveals 'all the truth of life'" as one of the varieties of the Modern Moment.[8] Morris Beja also referred to the fact that Conrad's novels are full of moments of revelation.[9] Such a moment often takes on a crucial role to organise the story. For example, a moment of vision is described at the climax of *Heart of Darkness* (1899):

> 'I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror — of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: "'The horror! The horror!'[10]

This passage is narrated by Marlow, a narrator besides acting as one of the characters, who has pursued Kurtz into the heart of darkness and has striven to find an answer to the "uneasiness" or "unnaturalness" which he has been instinctively feeling in the colonial society. Marlow goes up the river toward Kurtz to see and get the answer from him. At last the narrator arrives at the place where Kurtz is, however, Kurtz is nearing his end. Marlow suggests that a "moment of complete knowledge" which Kurtz gained on his death-bed, was a moment of vision that made him see the truth of life. Robert F. Haugh observes that "'Heart of Darkness' is an 'epiphany' story, in the sense used by James Joyce."[11]

Another example of an epiphanic moment is found in *Lord Jim* (1900). Marlow narrates a "moment" triggered by a remark of "an elderly French lieutenant," who had helped tow a ship, the *Patna*, to Aden. When the narrator is listening to the French lieutenant's story, a trivial and commonplace remark brings about a moment of awakening as follows:

> 'Mon Dieu! how the time passes!' Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It's extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it's just as well; and it may be that it is this very dullness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome.

> Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much — everything — in a flash — before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence.[12]

This oft-quoted passage seems to suggest that this moment of illumination conforms to the tradition of epiphany,[13] to borrow Abrams' phrase, "a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation";[14] or to quote Beja, "a sudden spiritual 'manifestation' — a showing forth, an illumination, a revelation . . . [which] may be produced by any one of a number of things: an ordinary concrete object, a work of art, a snatch of talk overheard on the street, a gesture — or some 'memorable phase of the mind itself.' "[15]

In recent years, Jay B. Losey gave much attention to Conrad's moments, which had not been thoroughly examined, and discussed them in "'Moments of Awakening' in Conrad's fiction" (1988), as can be seen in the following quotation:

> Conrad's use of epiphany marks him as a writer following in a tradition established by Wordsworth, continued by Rossetti, Tennyson, Browning, and Pater, and appropriated by such contemporaries as Proust, Woolf, Faulkner, and Joyce.[16]

Losey extensively surveyed Conrad's epiphanic moments and modes in his works. Yet it seems that he was eager only to pick out and classify the writer's awakening moments, and did not fully try to investigate the specific nature of Conrad's moments and their differences from Romantic moments and those moments of his contemporaries, such as Woolf's "moments of being" or Joyce's "epiphany." In addition to that, Losey's discussion seems to neglect the viewpoint of "time" or "time-

consciousness," which "moments" originally involve, by focusing only on the epiphanic mode of an experience. Conrad undoubtedly, as Losey argues, sought to reveal epiphanic moments throughout his novels, but, as Beja put it, "their form is remote from that of *Dubliners* [(1914)]."[17] Moreover it is true to say that Conrad's "moments" give us an important suggestion to consider the time-consciousness peculiar to him. Consequently we must look more carefully into the specific types of moments found in Conrad's novels.

More nihilistic moments can be seen in *Nostromo* (1904). The following description is the scene in which Decoud, one of the important characters in the novel, is writing a letter to his sister in the silent darkness while waiting for Nostromo:

> "I am waiting for him here now.... He has been long gone already. This delay gives me time to talk to you. By the time this pocket-book reaches your hands much will have happened. But now it is a pause under the hovering wing of death in that silent house buried in the black night.... But no! feeling for you is certainly not dead, and the whole thing, the house, the dark night, the silent children in this dim room, my very presence here — all this is life, must be life, since it is so much like a dream."
>
> With the writing of the last line there came upon Decoud a moment of sudden and complete oblivion. He swayed over the table as if struck by a bullet. The next moment he sat up, confused, with the idea that he had heard his pencil roll on the floor.[18]

This moment of complete oblivion can be regarded as a moment of a hollow void, in which no visions can be gained, nor can an awakening of a revelation be attained. Furthermore, the important point to note is that it is "a hole in time".[19] It can be said that it is the moment in which time itself disappeared completely. Another similar example of "a hollow void in

time" can be found in *Nostromo*:

> The only thing he wanted to know now, he said, was whether she did love him enough — whether she would have the courage to go with him so far away? He put these questions to her in a voice that trembled with anxiety — for he was a determined man.
>
> She did. She would. And immediately the future hostess of all the Europeans in Sulaco had the physical experience of the earth falling away from under her. It vanished completely, even to the very sound of the bell. When her feet touched the ground again, the bell was still ringing in the valley; she put her hands up to her hair, breathing quickly, and glanced up and down the stony lane.[20]

This passage quoted above is one of the scenes where Conrad utilises the time-shift technique. Here Charles Gould proposes marriage to Emilia (Mrs. Gould) when they are still young. The moment she decides to accept his proposal, everything vanishes completely around her as if time as well as place were cut away. Her loss of consciousness is clearly emphasised through the effective use of the sound of the bell in the silence around the countryside in Italy. This moment of complete vanishing takes on an essential role in the story as an allusion to her later existence with loneliness and doubt in Sulaco. Thus in *Nostromo*, "moments of nothing," or "moments of a hollow void in time" can be found as being the very extreme moments of a discontinuity in time.

Nostromo, Conrad's first long novel, is generally accepted as one of his greatest works, and his technique in the novel, including the manipulation of time, seems to be at its highest level. All events are narrated in a very complicated time scheme. The narrative is "thickly textured" by interweaving numerous past events whilst the story line moves ahead.[21] It might be said that the time sequence is fragmentised with the

intention of showing or emphasising the important passing moments interspersed in the narrative texture. Furthermore, we may say that to experience "moments of nothing" is the only way for the characters to go out of a closed cycle of history in *Nostromo*. The story is set in a fictitious country, Costaguana, in South America, which had been settled by Spanish colonists long ago. The novel delineates the country's history with "a sense of oppressive deadlock."[22] It has had no development nor progress in spite of repeated revolutions. It seems that the characters have nowhere to go in such an endless repetition of history. In a sense they can escape from the historical net only by gaining "moments outside time"; however they have no visions nor revelation to relieve them through the moments.

Let us consider Conrad's "moments of nothing" a little further by referring to Romantic moments. Buckley mentions, in his book, that Romantic poets gave intimations of "everlastingness" or eternity in their works; for example, Wordsworth's "spots of time" show his "essentially religious impulse to fulfill the desire for everlastingness."[23] He writes that "Romantic poets . . . were similarly concerned to discover tokens of permanence or stasis in or behind their passing impressions, and most came to regard their own deepest emotions and intuitions as partaking somehow of the timeless."[24] Moreover, while surveying the tradition of epiphany from Wordsworth to Joyce, Buckley picks out the following passage in *Lord Jim*:

> On that occasion the sort of formality that had been always present in our intercourse vanished from our speech; I believe I called him 'dear boy,' and he tacked on the words 'old man' to some half-uttered expression of gratitude, as though his risk set off against my years had made

> us more equal in age and in feeling. There was a moment of real and profound intimacy, unexpected and short-lived like a glimpse of some everlasting, of some saving truth. He exerted himself to soothe me as though he had been the more mature of the two. 'All Right, all right,' he said, rapidly, and with feeling.[25]

This is a description of the scene in which Marlow narrates his experience shared with Jim, a young sailor, who is leaving for Patusan. As has already been mentioned, some of Conrad's moments have an epiphanic mode, and especially the moment quoted above indicates its similarity to Romantic moments by intimating that Marlow had a glimpse of some everlastingness or "timeless time" in the fleeting moment. And yet it should be remembered here that Conrad describes another "timeless moment" in *Nostromo*, which is clearly different from these Romantic moments' "timelessness."

Abrams also writes that Romantic writers often described "the unsustainable moment which seems to arrest what is passing" as "an intersection of eternity with time." Furthermore he explains the paradoxical "timeless time" in Romantic moments by tracing back to Rousseau and Augustine. Rousseau, in his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, tells us that the moment of revelation manifests "timelessness" as its attribute, and he discovers "the supreme felicity" in the moment in which "time means nothing."[26] In a sense, as mentioned above, the moments of a hollow void in *Nostromo* can also be said to reveal "timelessness," in which time itself disappears or "time means nothing." What we have to note, however, is that they are fundamentally different from Romantic moments because, through experiencing the hollow void, the characters cannot even have a glimpse of "eternity," nor can they discover "the supreme felicity" or "the divinity." The

void is no more than just nothing.

In addition to nihilistic "moments of nothing" in Nostromo, it should be emphasised that another characteristic type of moment can be pointed out in Conrad's fiction. Let us turn to the following two quotations from *The Shadow-Line* (1915). In *The Shadow-Line*, the passing moments look as if each of them were stressed and recorded in the novel as the narrator often uses the word of "moment." Firstly, the following passage is a description of an exquisite moment experienced when "I," who is narrating his own experience, was appointed to the captain of a ship.

> A ship! My ship! She was mine, more absolutely mine for possession and care than anything in the world; an object of responsibility and devotion. She was there waiting for me, spellbound, unable to move, to live to get out into the world (till I came), like an enchanted princess. . . . A sudden passion of anxious impatience rushed through my veins and gave me such a sense of the intensity of existence as I have never felt before or since. I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically. . . . I had an exquisite moment. It was unique also.[27]

"I" thought of the concrete existence of his own ship, thereby gaining a supreme moment of joy. An ordinary object for a seaman, a ship, suddenly changes into a static vision. It can be said that this is also one of the moments with an epiphanic mode, however, what should be noticed is that the vision is neither supernatural nor transcendental. It seems that visions in Conrad's moment have a tendency to remain connected with a visible and empirical world.

Moreover, in *The Shadow-Line*, there is one other passage that is very important in order to consider a specific nature of

Conrad's moments:

> I sat down in the arm-chair at the head of the table — the captain's chair.... A succession of men had sat in that chair. I became aware of that thought suddenly, vividly, as though each had left a little of himself between the four walls of these ornate bulkheads; as if a sort of composite soul, the soul of command, had whispered suddenly to mine of long days at sea and of anxious moments.
> "You, too!" it seemed to say.... [28]

When "I," a young captain of a ship, sat down in the captain's chair for the first time, he experienced an unusual moment which made him keenly aware of the tradition of captains who had taken over the ship before him. This is also a moment of vision that the narrator gained suddenly through the concrete object of the captain's chair, and more significantly, in this moment, the consciousness of the connection with others can be found, which is expressed in phrases such as "A succession of men," "a sort of composite soul" and "You, too!" This moment reminds us of the "moment of real and profound intimacy" which Marlow shared with Jim in *Lord Jim.* The moment which "I" gained, had also been experienced by the successive captains; therefore it seems to be clearly unlike Modernist moments, which another person cannot share, and which are more personal and esoteric, reflecting the solitary artist's spirit as shown in Joyce's epiphany.

Furthermore, what is more important, in connection with this passage, is that this type of moment, the discontinuity of time, contradicts the revelation of the traditional view of continuous time. Conrad has tried to catch a moment, a stasis in time, but, at the same time, he also reveals the continuum of time, namely, a succession or a tradition of captains.[29] As another example of this type of moment, let us consider the

following quotation from the last part of 'Youth' (1898), in which the narrator is recollecting his youth.

> But for me all the East is contained in that vision of my youth. It is all in that moment when I opened my young eyes on it. I came upon it from a tussle with the sea — and I was young — and I saw it looking at me. And this is all that is left of it! Only a moment; a moment of strength, of romance, of glamour — of youth! [30]

After a lapse of twenty years, Marlow, the narrator, tries to recapture and describe a moment in his youth, which has already passed away. Yet, the important point to note is that the feeling of nostalgia can be keenly felt in this description of the moment. This strong attachment for a moment in the past seems to be evidence that the narrator has an unconscious awareness of the passing and irreversible continuity of time. The moment with nostalgic feelings indicates that the moment cannot remain. In other words, the nostalgic feeling about the moment comes from the premise that one cannot go back to it, and it emphasises the passing continuity of time between the past and the present. It also signifies that, unlike the moments in Proust's work, the moment in the past can never emerge from the past into the present. In *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), the time in the distant past which the character spent at Combray, suddenly appeared to him and thrilled him when he ate a "petite madeleine":

> Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray . . . had any existence for me, when one day in winter, on my return home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. . . . She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. . . . I

> raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me.[31]

A dead and old moment, which has been in the depths of his being, comes up to the clear surface of his consciousness and the visual memory of Combray suddenly reveals itself like a Japanese paper flower immersed in water. In this case, the moment in the past comes back to the same point as the present moment, that is to say, both exist together at the moment when he ate the "petite madeleine"; therefore the passing and irreversible continuity of time between the past and the present cannot be found in this description of the moment.

Finally, with relation to the discussion above, it should also be added that "moments" are often described or referred to in the autobiographical texts. *A la recherche du temps perdu* shows us that Proust receives moments passively through his (involuntary) memory of the personal past.[32] On the other hand, Conrad's autobiographical text, 'Youth' suggests to us, through Marlow's struggle to recapture the moment in words, that the novelist re-creates moments from his recollection in his fiction.

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This paper has argued that Joseph Conrad was keenly conscious of time and endeavoured to describe, in his fiction, the "moments," the discontinuity of time like other Modernists, and, above all, it has sought to examine the specific nature of his "moments."

Conrad's inclination to arrest a moment, as mentioned above, can be specifically identified in the Preface to *The Nigger of the* "Narcissus" which has been regarded as the principal

statement of his artistic standpoint; moreover, as some critics put it, Conrad described the moments which have an epiphanic mode. Yet, as has been pointed out above, the moments peculiar to him should be noted, namely, the moment in which time itself disappeared completely, and the moment which reveals the contradictory view of the continuity of time.

The former, "a moment of hollow void," seems to be the moment that "the discontinuity of time" has been developed to an extreme, and it also symbolises the existential theme in the story, that is, the doubt about the existence of the characters. It can be said that this moment signifies Conrad's modernity and, in a sense, it exceeds those of the other Modernists in its nihilistic aspect. On the other hand, the latter moment suggests his traditional point of view.

Needless to say, many critics have mentioned where they would place Conrad in the history of English Literature, for Conrad's fiction has contradictions and some unclear, inexplicable points. We may say, as Higdon in fact does, that "Conrad is a transitional figure." Higdon points out two different aspects inherent in Conrad's fiction as follows:

> Readers frequently forget how crucially transitional are the novels of Joseph Conrad. Their emphasis on duty, choice, moral dilemmas and causal relationships would have been instantly recognised by any Victorian novelist or reader, yet their existential themes, techniques and fractured chronologies are distinctly modernist in intention. Especially in his handling of time is Conrad a transitional figure.[33]

It seems that these two aspects are reflected in the moment that conceals the continuum of time, and yet the moments, especially those in *Nostromo*, suggest to us that Conrad has another aspect which cannot be clearly explained by the fact

that he is a transitional figure.

Notes

* This is an expanded and revised version of the paper read at the 46th annual conference of Chugoku-Shikoku branch of the English Literary Society of Japan, 23 Oct., 1993, at Shimane University. Some arguments in this study expand upon the ideas and materials already discussed in two of my earlier papers printed in the *Osaka Literary Review* 30 (1991) and 31 (1992).

1. Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 63. He examines the idea of progress during the Victorian period and also quotes Macaulay's remark: "The history of England is emphatically the history of progress." Ibid., p. 34.
2. Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 102. He writes: "There is no doubt that the belief in progress has sharply declined within our own generation, and no doubt that this decline has added another brick to the burden of time as it weighs upon human lives." Ibid., p. 104.
3. Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the* "Narcissus," ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 147.
4. Woolf writes: "He sees once and he sees for ever. His books are full of moments of vision. They light up a whole character in a flash. Perhaps I prefer Marlow the instinctive to Captain Whalley the moralist. But the peculiar beauty is the product of the two together." Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Conrad: A Conversation" in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), p. 77.
5. For example, see Bill Ashcroft et al., eds, *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995).
6. See, for example, A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (London, New York: Peter Nevill, 1952), p. 20, p. 54 and p. 75.
7. Karl, by quoting Henry James' praise tempered by misgivings, writes: "the thinness of the novel [*Chance*] — as if in defiance of its elaborate technique — rests with our awareness that method tends to inundate

subject matter." Frederick R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1960), p. 78.

8. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 419.
9. Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1971), p. 49. Also, see Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of The Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa, London: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), p. 107, 121.
10. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 68.
11. Robert F. Haugh, *Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 39.
12. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (London, Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1923), p. 143.
13. Woolf points out the epiphanic mode in this passage. See Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 286-7.
14. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 385.
15. Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 15.
16. Jay B. Losey, "'Moment of Awakening' in Conrad's Fiction" in *Conradiana*, xx, 2 (1988), p. 89.
17. Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, p. 49.
18. Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 249.
19. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 239.
20. Conrad, *Nostromo*, p. 63.
21. See Karl, *A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad*, pp. 74-5.
22. Jim Reilly, *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad and George Eliot* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 143.
23. Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, p. 148.
24. Ibid., pp. 138-9.
25. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, pp. 240-1. Buckley also points out, in Conrad works, Paterian epiphanic mode, or exquisite moments of "absolute harmony." See Buckley, *The Triumph of Time*, p. 178.
26. See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, pp. 385-6.
27. Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-Line* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University

Press, 1985), p. 40.

28. Ibid., pp. 52-3.
29. Emilia's thoughts, narrated in *Nostromo*, should also be noted here: "It had come into her mind that for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after." *Nostromo*, pp. 520-1.
30. Joseph Conrad, 'Youth' in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 42.
31. Marcel Proust, "Swann's Way" in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin (London: Penguin, 1983; 1989), p. 48.
32. Woolf also writes that moments (of being) happen to her and she is always a receiver: "I often tell them [exceptional moments] over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly." Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (London: Grafton Press, 1989), p. 80.
33. David Leon Higdon, *Time and English Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 94. See also Woolf's comment in note 4.