


A TRAGIC VENUS. IDOLATRY, DESIRE AND SUFFERING IN “THE PLANTER OF MALATA” BY JOSEPH CONRAD¹

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the modern experience of love, to which the entire narrative of the *Planter of Malata* has been devoted. The modern approach to the subject will be understood here as the penetration of the sacred sphere into the domain of the profane. Thanks to this mechanism, it becomes possible to create the expression of an indirect, confused, quasi-sacred experience. Conrad’s protagonist thus sees a woman in terms of “sanctity,” which will be interpreted in terms of “modern idolatry” (J.-L. Marion), eliminating any distance between the worshiper and the object of worship. The main scope of the analyses will concern the consequences that result from the starting point established in this way. Conrad’s text confirms the assumption that “pain is a sign and a means of contact with the divine” (D. Morris), but at the same time indicates many levels at which this process takes place.

Keywords: love, idolatry, modern masochism

Never touch your idols: the gilding will stick to your fingers.

Gustave Flaubert

A reader who carefully follows the history of the infatuation in “The Planter of Malata” can encounter several times surprising expressions whose origins seems to have no relation to the context of the story being told. They state that the woman is “something—well—pagan”;² her choices are called “generosity divine” (19) and she herself is “a condescending and strong-headed goddess” (35) or “a tragic Venus” (36), before whom the main character celebrates “secret contemplation” (37).

¹ The project was founded by The National Science Centre (Poland) on the basis of decision number 2012/05/B/HS2/04065.

² Joseph Conrad, *Within the Tides: Tales* (London–Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1919), p. 8. This edition will be referenced directly in the text by page number in parentheses.

The introduction of religious language in the narrative remaining in the profane domain must be interpreted as a meaningful gesture which resists any reduction mechanisms.³ One cannot reduce these expressions to the role of stylistic ornaments, or even maintain that their function is to create an ideal (and devoid of eroticism) image of the woman. The basic assumption of this interpretation is the conviction according to which in the narrative field an experience closely related to the sacred sphere is present. From among many ideas regarding this issue, the most adequate hermeneutic tool seems to be the theory of idolatry developed by Jean-Luc Marion. The philosopher states that:

In the cases of life and death, of peace and war, of love and drunkenness, of spirit and beauty, we indisputably experience the irrepressible and panic capital of the divine, and we decipher or divine therein faces that we model in order that we might fix so many gods in them. These gods, therefore, conform first to us, or, less summarily, to the modalities of our multiform perception of the divine. The idol reflects back to us, in the face of a god, our own experience of the divine. The idol does not resemble us, but it resembles the divinity that we experience, and it gathers it in a god in order that we might see it.⁴

According to Marion, the experience of divinity is primitive and authentic and at the same time limited by solely human possibilities, and therefore it materializes in the form of an idol. It can become literally anything, although preferences regarding this type of “objects” can be historically variable. He emphasizes that:

To each epoch corresponds a figure of the divine that is fixed, each time, in an idol.⁵

A more important statement is the fact that:

no one, not even a modern of the age of distress, remains sheltered from an idol, be he idolatrous or not: in order for the idol to reach him it is sufficient that he recognize, fixed upon the face of a statue, the splendid brilliance of the first visible where, one day, his gaze was frozen in its scope.⁶

A statue is not the only form of an idol and that is why its most common examples nowadays come from politics and pop culture.⁷ In “The Planter of Malata” this is the role of the woman—a beauty Felicia Moorsom—and in this respect Joseph Conrad presents a position typical of literature at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth

³ My essay owes a lot to Owen Knowles’s article “Conrad and Mérimée: The Legend of Venus in ‘The Planter of Malata.’” Especially important for me is the thesis according to which: “Transcending the limits of his love-story, he [Conrad] appears to find in Felicia’s mournful immobility and failing magical potency the appropriate goddess for a colorless latter-day world of ‘potent immensity.’” Owen Knowles, “Conrad and Mérimée: The Legend of Venus in ‘The Planter of Malata,’” *Conradiana* 11, no. 2 (1979), p. 182.

⁴ J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, translated and with an introduction by Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁵ J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 28.

⁶ Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 15.

⁷ Cf. Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, pp. 6-7.

centuries.⁸ However, this fact has a serious consequence: the woman as an idol affects the realm of the senses, as well as releases the power of desire which in the standard idolatry is rather suppressed. The writer even precisely shows the transition from "pure" idolatry to the stage of dialectical coupling between idolatrous gaze and desire.

1. IDOLATRY

The initial phase is limited to the first meeting and its later reminiscences. When Geoffrey meets Felicia, he succumbs to her charm to such an extent that she appears to him as a kind of statue:

When she advanced her head into the light he saw the admirable contour of the face, the straight fine nose with delicate nostrils, the exquisite crimson brushstroke of the lips on this oval without colour. The expression of the eyes was lost in a shadowy mysterious play of jet and silver, stirring under the red coppery gold of the hair as though she had been a being made of ivory and precious metals changed into living tissue. (13)

Majestic beauty is sensual, so it will only be experienced in this way. The longer the hero watches, the more he becomes fascinated, which is nothing more than creating an idol with a look.⁹ The narrator reinforces this intuition when he states that the key role here was played by "the physical impression" (20)—and immediately adds that: "such impressions are the real origins of the deepest movements of our soul" (20). This comment concerns two closely related issues. The first is that Geoffrey can "see" Felicia even when she is not within his sight. He has no hallucinations because the narrator points out that these images are internal, created with the participation of memory or imagination and are only seen when the hero closes his eyes. It seems that the writer presents in this way a "freezing gaze": an idol always catches the eye and removes all movement, all intentionality that could seek divinity elsewhere.¹⁰ And that is why among these sensations is placed—as the second issue—a meditation on "unconquerable in its perfection" (21), which is to be Miss Moorsom. If all her choices are caused only by folly, fantasy or generosity, it means that they remain completely unconditioned, fully autonomous. In this way, the idol was considered to be the only visible incarnation of divinity, beyond which no one and nothing can be called for.

⁸ Cf. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹ Marion writes that: "The decisive moment in the erection of an idol stems not from its fabrication, but from its investment as gazeable, as that which will fill a gaze. That which characterizes the idol stems from the gaze. It dazzles with visibility only inasmuch as the gaze looks on it with consideration." Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Cf. Marion, *God Without Being*, pp. 25-27.

2. THE IDOL AND DESIRE

Adoration of the idol should only introduce Renouard into a state of ecstasy. However, Conrad's main goal is to present further complications. The writer assumes that the idolatry of a woman does not remove the dangers associated with the functioning of desire. For this reason, the narrator will reverse the initial proportions: the idolatry attitude will be minimized and the most important will be the analysis of the jealousy in which the hero plunges.

The appearance of such a feeling is quite unobvious. Geoffrey learns from the editor that Felicia's (and her family's) journey is an expedition whose purpose is to find a missing fiancé ("Master Arthur"). The chances of finding him are small, but it turns out that even such a hypothetical presence of a beloved makes revolutionary changes: Geoffrey has only adored Felicia, but now he will "also" love her.

However, when Conrad reverses the proportions between these states, he not only breaks the relationship between them, but even strengthens it. This issue was perfectly illustrated by the dream that Renouard had after spending the second evening in the company of Felicia:

[...] suddenly beheld his very own self, carrying a small bizarre lamp, reflected in a long mirror inside a room in an empty and unfurnished palace. In this startling image of himself he recognised somebody he had to follow—the frightened guide of his dream. He traversed endless galleries, no end of lofty halls, innumerable doors. He lost himself utterly—he found his way again. Room succeeded room. At last the lamp went out, and he stumbled against some object which, when he stooped for it, he found to be very cold and heavy to lift. The sickly white light of dawn showed him the head of a statue. Its marble hair was done in the bold lines of a helmet, on its lips the chisel had left a faint smile, and it resembled Miss Moorsom. While he was staring at it fixedly, the head began to grow light in his fingers, to diminish and crumble to pieces, and at last turned into a handful of dust, which was blown away by a puff of wind. (34)

With some irony, the narrator evokes "this rational explanation of the fantastic" (IV) that the protagonist makes. However, in this inadequate analysis, there is one accurate (and perhaps therefore later omitted) intuition:

But on closer examination he perceived that the reflection of himself in the mirror was not really the true Renouard, but somebody else whose face he could not remember. (35)

Conrad clearly wants to show the paradoxical nature of this character which is both similar (as "reflection of himself") and dissimilar (as "guide") to Geoffrey. How should it be explained? We can do it by assuming that it is not Geoffrey himself—but someone who he would like to be. The only person who fulfils this condition is that mysterious, undiscovered fiancé; and this means that Geoffrey "borrowed" from him the desire that leads to Felicia.

The fact that the role of "Master Arthur" is the most important, also justifies the final event of the oneiric story. When the lamp goes out and the alter ego disappears, then the idol—that is, the marble head—is no longer able to catch the eye, so it undergoes self-destruction. This scenario is negative (and in a sense prophetic), but at

the same time it suggests a question about a completely alternative solution. The idol would still remain an idol only if the alter ego did not vanish in the dark. Conrad, therefore, seems to assume that idolatry requires constant support from intense desire. And such a desire arises only thanks to the interaction between "self" and its "reflection," that is, thanks to competition. This dream does not imply any competition and limits itself to marking the elusive presence of the *alter ego*. This is exactly what the situation looks like in reality: "Master Arthur" is only indirectly present—in conversations, projects and, above all, in the feelings known to all that Miss Moorsom gives him. For this reason, the roles are changed: if direct interaction with the fiancé is impossible, Geoffrey will focus on the attitude of the fiancée.

The effect of this strategy is immediate. The protagonist is unable to spend one day without Felicia's company. When he is in her presence, his senses cease to function normally, creating various hallucinations. They are an obvious proof of a large increase in the strength of desire, which, however, is made with the significant contribution of the "third party." This is clearly indicated by the narrator's comments about the lack of resistance to:

the torments of jealousy: the cruel, insensate, poignant, and imbecile jealousy, when it seems that a woman betrays us simply by this that she exists, that she breathes—and when the deep movements of her nerves or her soul become a matter of distracting suspicion, of killing doubt, of mortal anxiety. (36)

It is evident, therefore, that Geoffrey loves Felicia the more she loves—or seems to love—Arthur. This is the only way to explain the appearance of jealousy. It is also evident that this kind of experience is very painful, especially since its occurrence, range and scale are completely unpredictable.¹¹ But it is completely unobvious that "the torments of jealousy" cannot discourage Geoffrey from Miss Moorsom in any way. On the contrary: "The Planter of Malata" suggests that if idolatry requires the participation of desire, it must be not only strong, but above all severe, hurtful. There are many indications that the writer uses here the old concept of the functionalization of suffering, which the modern era has taken over and modified. It is not without reason that the source of this concept was the former religious culture and the dolorism it propagated. One historian states that:

Pain for medieval Christian served as a sign and means of contact with the divine [...]. Had they denied pain, the medieval Christian community would have erased its spiritual value. A meaningless pain would threaten to cast them back upon an utterly meaningless world.¹²

Only in this context, the important statements of the narrator reveal their proper dimension:

¹¹ At this point, it should be emphasized that the lack of any power over jealousy is a direct result of the absence of a rival. If he appeared, then the situation in this respect could change radically. In a standard way: "curiosity, as a quality always associated with jealousy, has to do with the desire for control" (Louis Lo, *Male Jealousy: Literature and Film* [New York: Continuum, 2008], p. 6).

¹² David B. Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 48.

He felt himself in the presence of a mysterious being in whom spoke an unknown voice, like the voice of oracles, bringing everlasting unrest to the heart.

He was thankful enough to sit in silence with secretly clenched teeth, devoured by jealousy—and nobody could have guessed [...] that the man was engaged in keeping a sinister watch on his tortures lest his strength should fail him. As before, when grappling with other forces of nature, he could find in himself all sorts of courage except the courage to run away. (36)

Divinity, which manifests itself through the idol, is transcendental, unknowable, and at the same time—categorical, decisive for everything. It can be concluded that Geoffrey participates in the modern religious experience *par excellence*. Unspecified fear, exhaustion and severe suffering are nothing more than empirical “evidence”—and only as such are subject to affirmation—convincing him that the choice of the idol is accurate and indisputable. Since in idolatry—as Marion states—a gaze (and Conrad would also add: a desire): “is fixed in [...] and, far from passing beyond, remains facing what becomes for it a spectacle to *re*-spect.”¹³

3. TORMENTS

The main part of the story “The Planter of Malata” is filled with cyclical (almost daily) meetings. When the narrator wants to determine the feelings of the main character, he uses the term “torments” several times. If, however, we take into account the fact that Geoffrey surrenders to them completely voluntarily, then we can—to some extent—explain this in terms of masochistic experience.¹⁴ The definition and some manifestations of this phenomenon will be borrowed in this interpretation from the very instructive work of the psychologist Theodor Reik titled *Masochism in Modern Man*.

3.1. The suspense factor

One of the basic features of masochism described by Reik is as a state of suspension, tension between anxiety and the pursuit of pleasure. The difference concerns not only the scale of these sensations but their location on the timeline. What happens “now” contains (sometimes) punishment, which is why the future can bring full satisfaction. Suspension assumes, therefore, consent to the contemporary presence of suffering, which becomes a kind of price, which must be paid for the anticipated pleasure.¹⁵

¹³ Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 11.

¹⁴ It is worth noting here that “Planter of Malata” allows to see masochistic motifs in Conrad, which are not necessarily associated with the issue of colonialism. Cf. John K. Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission. Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 111-113.

¹⁵ The conclusion that Reik has reached is as follows: “First discomfort, humiliation, punishment: then pleasure and instinctual gratification. [...] The discomfort is not desired as such, but it constitutes the price of pleasure.” Theodor Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud. M. Kurth (New York: Grove Press, 1957), p. 123.

As we have already seen, the "painful" adoration which Geoffrey gives himself implies a similar mechanism. But Conrad completes this scheme, introducing a significant complication into it: here the arrangement resulting in the state of suspension turns out to be extremely fragile and unstable. Its duration depends on how Geoffrey behaves, but the longer the situation drags on, the more difficult it is for him to meet the necessary requirements.

The first problem is the need to hide the feeling itself. Miss Felicia is looking for the missing fiancé; it means that she needs Geoffrey only as a helper in this venture. He knows it perfectly well, that is why he tries to control himself (especially his gaze), thanks to which he avoids any suspicions. The necessity of making this effort could be discouraging, however, the narrator only once presents a real temptation (other seem to be apparent) regarding parting. Geoffrey, overhearing a conversation about himself, suspects that he will be unmasked by Felicia. It would mean to him shame, humiliation and, above all, the end of further acquaintanceship. The intention to escape is therefore a justified preventive action, which is to protect him from anticipated "revenge" of his beloved. But even such a danger cannot detach him from her. The most important thing, though, is that the fears and anxieties caused by the possibility of "revenge" do not disappear but—on the contrary—are attached to all negative states that Geoffrey experiences in the presence of Felicia.

The second more serious issue is the danger of ending the mission by the Moorsom family. Renouard became friends with them only because of his position as an expert, which is why his opinion largely depends on the future of the expedition. However, each of the possible solutions—that is, continuing the search, its success or fiasco—is extremely unfavorable to him. Therefore, he is trying to play for time, but this strategy is at some point interrupted by Felicia's father. Professor Moorsom intends to end this trip, but he does not dare to do this personally, that is why he wants to use the "dear young friend." When he tries to convince him, he presents Arthur's very negative characteristic. Renouard discovers what is the purpose of this strategy, so he decides to defend the fiancé's reputation. And painful consequences of it arise immediately:

"Surely the man must be worth it," muttered Renouard with a pang of jealousy traversing his breast like a self-inflicted stab. (39)

The interlocutor does not stop attacking:

"Well! And suppose he has become morally disintegrated. You know he was not a strong personality," the professor suggested moodily. "My daughter's future is in question here."

Renouard thought that the love of such a woman was enough to pull any broken man together—to drag a man out of his grave. And he thought this with inward despair, which kept him silent as much almost as his astonishment. (39)

When Geoffrey polemicizes with the professor's arguments, he exposes himself to devastating attacks of jealousy and despair, but if he admits that they are right, then—as he assumes—he would endanger himself even more. In this situation, every choice is bad, each of them brings pain, and the difference concerns only its scale.

It is therefore necessary to modify the initial thesis and state that despite some threats, the system creating the state of suspension turns out to be quite stable. If it ultimately disappears, it will happen for other reasons. It seems that Conrad emphasizes an interesting paradox in this way: the same circumstances that could destabilize the course of the experience, in fact, consolidate it, and even lead to its intensification. The more likely it seems to end this “painful adoration,” the stronger will be the suffering, whose sole purpose is to perpetuate the strained pattern.

3.2. The provocative factor

Another feature of masochistic experience is the provocative way of acting. Such a provocative person uses all available means (including persuasion or aggressive behavior) to persuade others to observe their sufferings or even—and it is important here—to enlarge them.¹⁶

It is significant that Conrad introduces provocative behaviors, ascribing them to Felicia. It is as if Geoffrey had the feeling that only she was able to truly hurt him. Before this happens, however, “preparation” appears in the form of a purely phantasmatic scene:

Renouard fancied himself overturning the table, smashing crystal and china, treading fruit and flowers under foot, seizing her in his arms, carrying her off in a tumult of shrieks from all these people, a silent frightened mortal, into some profound retreat as in the age of Cavern men. Suddenly everybody got up, and he hastened to rise too, finding himself out of breath and quite unsteady on his feet. (46)

If the imagination suggests to the protagonist such a scenario, it means that his suffering has already reached the level that triggers frustration, and with it—the need of aggression. The problem is that the implementation of this scenario would lead to very undesirable consequences: instead of a divine Venus in the hands of the conqueror there would be an ordinary, weak woman who can be controlled.

That is why Renouard got so scared that he immediately felt unable to carry out a similar undertaking. He regained his inner balance only when had the moment of contemplation of Miss Felicia, thanks to which he saw her again “like a magic painting of charm, fascination, and desire, glowing mysteriously on the dark background” (47). Then he also decided to make a more cautious provocation. He therefore intends to check if there is any chance of changing roles between Arthur and him. That is why when he talks to Miss Felicia, he talks about the end of the expedition. In this way he exposes himself to severe attacks of jealousy, but her reaction will bring him only real and strong pain: Miss Moorsom rejects the idea of stopping the expedition, clearly indicating that she is not interested in any relationship with him. Geoffrey’s revenge takes the form of a cruel phantasm, but the imagination has to give way to reality, because Felicia inflicts another severe blow: she implicates that he is someone foreign to her.

¹⁶ Reik clearly states that in this case: “Aggressive and forceful means are used in order to attain punishment, scolding, humiliation. The pain addict becomes a tormentor.” Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, p. 86.

After such torments, Geoffrey should—as is this custom—escape to his own ship. Conrad, however, again presents the extraordinary effects of such cruel proceedings:

"I am too near her," he thought, moving a little further on the seat. He was afraid in the revulsion of feeling of flinging himself on her hands, which were lying on her lap, and covering them with kisses. He was afraid. Nothing, nothing could shake that spell—not if she were ever so false, stupid, or degraded. She was fate itself. The extent of his misfortune plunged him in such a stupor that he failed at first to hear the sound of voices and footsteps inside the drawing-room. Willie had come home—and the Editor was with him. (49)

Just before the intrigue was resolved, the idol was elevated to the highest pedestal. *Mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans* merge into one sensation that removes from the image of the woman everything that is human and imperfect, leaving only the supernatural divinity.

It is worth paying attention to the existence of a discrete analogy between the suspension factor and the provocative one. In both situations, the protagonist seeks emancipation to eliminate an unfavorable arrangement; and each time these actions bring the opposite of the assumed effect. The difference here is only that of scale: in the case of the second strategy, the attempt to get close to the beloved ended with such a "duel," which showed that only Geoffrey is vulnerable. Felicia, on the other hand, remains beyond the reach of all imperfections, and thanks to this "purification" her power over the hero becomes absolute.

3.3. Fate

Talking twice to the editor about the employee in Malata, Renouard made two mistakes: he did not inform anybody about the man's death and—he betrayed his name. Both of these unfortunate events are undoubtedly interrelated, although not as much as the narrator seems to assume. When he retrospectively explains the behavior of the main character, he focuses only on the first conversation (and the first mistake), as if it determined everything, that is, it is thanks to this that knowing the fiancé's whereabouts became possible. It is obvious, however, that such a function was played by the second meeting (and the second mistake), if only because of the crucial role of the information regarding the name.

It is hard to resist the impression that the writer (using the narrator) tries to distract the reader from the second, decisive conversation. It is intriguing, above all, because this meeting should not take place. After the first visit, Renouard obtained from the journalist a complete set of interesting news about the Moorsom family. Therefore, if he comes again, it is not to expand the scope of his knowledge.¹⁷ The nervous atmosphere of the meeting suggests that its stake is the state of affection of one of the interlocutors. There is no doubt that the longer this dialogue is going on, and the more details about the fiancé's search the editor reveals, the stronger attacks of jealousy

¹⁷ It is worth noting that even J. Kehler, who deals with the problem of knowledge in this story, does not make the difference between the first and second visit of Renouard. Cf. Joel R. Kehler, "'The Planter of Malata': Renouard's Sinking Star of Knowledge," *Conradiana* 8, no. 2 (1976), pp. 148-162.

Geoffrey succumbs to. The only relief in this tense state brings him a change in the subject of the conversation, but then he loses his self-restraint—and inadvertently reveals the name of the employee. And when the editor does a more detailed investigation, Geoffrey understands what has happened and ostentatiously ends the conversation.

The disclosure of the name begins a sequence of events that ends with a disaster for Renouard because his delay strategy will prove impossible. The catastrophe was predicted by him from the beginning, but then it was about exactly the opposite: the existence and finding of the fiancé. Thus, Geoffrey always has a premonition of his own defeat, although—curiously enough—he never rebels against it. Instead he experiences a profound affirmation of his unfortunate destiny,¹⁸ which is recorded almost every time by the narrator:

He accepted the immense misfortune of being in love with a woman who was in search of another man only to throw herself into his arms. With such desperate precision he defined in his thoughts the situation, the consciousness of which traversed like a sharp arrow the sudden silences of general conversation. (35)

When everyone is preparing to leave for Malata, Renouard wants to run away. Initially considering such a possibility, he quickly gives it up:

On deck he stumbled and stood still.

Wherefore this haste? To what end, since he knew well before he started that he had a pursuer from whom there was no escape. (53)

Ultimately, there will be a conviction that:

And now it was done! Fatality had willed it! With the eyes of a mortal struck by the maddening thunderbolt of the gods, Renouard looked up to the sky, an immense black pall dusted over with gold, on which great shudders seemed to pass from the breath of life affirming its sway. (53)

It seems that Conrad repeats this motif to draw attention to it; to—strictly speaking—its uniform structure. Already during the second conversation, there is a wretched connection between the area of desire and the area of praxis: Geoffrey's jealousy caused both—love for Felicia and acting against himself. Both phenomena are called (regardless of some stylistic differences) the same: fate. Thanks to previous analyses, it is possible to indicate common features which justify using one name. These are: (1) the belief that “evil approaches the person from without” (Reik), that is, from Arthur and the inquisitive editor; (2) the lack of proper recognition according to which “evil comes from within” (Reik); that is, from one's own feelings and mis-

¹⁸ For masochistic attitude, this situation is not unique. It results from the displacement, about which Reik writes as follows: “Ill-treatments and humiliations by a person who has become the object of love are replaced by blows of fate, various sufferings and privations, voluntary and involuntary renunciations, awkward and self-damaging behaviour. In all these cases the evil seems to approach the person from without. Actually, however, it comes from within, even if ill-will and adverse incidents can be proved. With unconscious skill these are utilized in a masochistic sense. Fate [...] has replaced the humiliating and beating partner.” Reik, *Masochism in Modern Man*, p. 304.

takes; and (3) the syndrome of self-fulfilling prophecy: the attitude that what will soon happen will be a catastrophe that not only cannot be prevented, but in which it is necessary to take an active part. Conrad’s irony is, of course, that Geoffrey only realizes the “fatalistic” connection between (1) and (3), while the finale of the story will lead to a closer relationship between (2) and (3), thereby changing—very unexpectedly—the meaning of the catastrophe.

4. FALL(S) OF DESIRE, FALL(S) OF THE IDOL

The joint expedition and the initial stay on the Malata, however, seem to contradict the fatalistic prophecies. Felicia’s figure is subject to even stronger idolatry, as a result of which she acquires complete dominance over the “vanquished” (66) Renouard. The narrator clearly emphasizes that the power of his desire—aided by eye contact—increases immeasurably and even reaches its apogee. *Prima facie*, one could say that the reason is obvious: if jealousy disappears (and suffering with it), then Geoffrey’s love can develop without hindrance. And even the moral discomfort from the lie about Arthur’s journey does not have a significant impact on this situation.

However, one can find another—and more consistent with previous inquiries—explanation of the sudden increase in desire. To do this, one needs to consider the words that Geoffrey spoke to Felicia during a decisive conversation:

You are merely of the topmost layer, disdainful and superior, the mere pure froth and bubble on the inscrutable depths which some day will toss you out of existence. But you are you! You are you! You are the eternal love itself—only, O Divinity, it isn’t your body, it is your soul that is made of foam. (75)

Geoffrey already knows that the source of divinity cannot be any obstacle (for example, a rival). Authentic divinity is known by the fact that it “automatically” creates distance, radical separation. In the case of a woman it means that she is perfectly indifferent to every desire. Geoffrey comes to this conclusion when he realizes that Felicia wanted to marry Arthur only out of a sense of duty. And after this discovery, another one appears immediately, according to which the functioning of indifference does not exclude other people’s feelings, on the contrary: “eternal love” constantly needs some love—not to reciprocate it, but to resist it. Geoffrey remarkably recognizes that this is possible only when the identity of the single becomes ostentatiously binary. The “body” and—much more important here—the “soul” become two objects, between which love should flow, that is—someone else’s desire. The “soul” stimulates and attracts it, but—simultaneously—resists it, making the “body” even more desired.¹⁹

¹⁹ At the theoretical level, this phenomenon already was described by Jean-Paul Sartre in the work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). The philosopher noticed that for a lover, a woman becomes both an object (body) and a subject. The main problem of an erotic experience can be summarized as follows: “So the Other’s For-itself must come to play on the surface of his body, and be extended all through his body; and

No fiancé—no jealousy, does not change much here. Geoffrey loves (and deifies) Felicia the more, the more she is unavailable to him. The “aristocratic soul” of the woman is responsible for this, but she does not take into account the violent breakage of her own resistance. And that is what happened when Geoffrey’s desire suddenly turned out to be unmanageable. His earlier phantasm is fulfilled: he rides Felicia in his arms, touches her body. The effect of their closeness is surprising:

But this contact with her, maddening like too much felicity, destroyed its own end. Fire ran through his veins, turned his passion to ashes, burnt him out and left him empty, without force—almost without desire. He let her go before she could cry out. (77)

Conrad follows the path of the nineteenth-century European novel, which discovered the principle of the disappearance of desire with its fulfillment.²⁰ The writer captures the issue much more radically, because he introduces only a foretoken of fulfillment that instantly annihilates the power of desire. Without that—Conrad’s consistency is perfect—there are no metaphysical features of the idol. Felicia, whose resistance can be overcome and whose body can be touched, ceases to be “divine.” She also does not try to invalidate his disappointment; she drastically confirms it by saying: “I am not perhaps the extraordinary being you think I am. You may believe me” (77).

As we know from the later preface to *Within the Tides*, Conrad thought he did not write this scene well because he made his characters too unpredictable and too honest. However, today we can understand the essence of the masterful drama of this conversation. When Geoffrey realizes the complete failure of the idolatry project, he makes the final, desperate attempt to defend himself. The logic of this procedure is clear: if Felicia is no longer an idol, then he can become an idol himself. To this end, he needs “only” a strong desire that will be addressed to him by Felicia. The roles would have been changed, but the structure would remain perfectly identical.

Even the narrator noticed his resemblance “to antique bronze, the profile of Pallas, still, austere, bowed a little in the shadow of the rock” (78). This look should attract a gaze, followed by desire. Geoffrey does everything to make it happen: he demands

by touching this body I should finally touch the Other’s free subjectivity. This is the true meaning of the word possession. It is certain that I want to *possess* the Other’s body, but I want to possess it in so far as it is itself a ‘possessed’; that is, in so far as the Other’s consciousness is identified with his body. Such is the impossible ideal of desire: to possess the Other’s transcendence as pure transcendence and at the same time as body, to reduce the Other to his simple facticity because he is then in the midst of my world but to bring it about that this facticity is a perpetual appresentation of his nihilating transcendence” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Washington Square Press, 1993], p. 394). It is also worth noting that the adoption of such an explanation eliminates the contradiction (or incomprehensibility), which Conrad was often accused of at this point. Cf. Jeremy Hawthorn, “Conrad and the Erotic: ‘A Smile of Fortune’ and ‘Planter of Malata’,” *The Conradian* 28, no. 2 (2003), p. 136.

²⁰ It is worth to recall at this point the memorable scene from Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*. When the main character won his first lover, his remark was as follows: “‘Heavens! Is to be happy, to be loved, no more than that?’ Such was Julien’s first thought on his return to his own room. He was in that state of astonishment and uneasy misgivings into which a heart falls when it has just obtained what it has long desired.” Stendhal, *The Red and the Black. A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014), p. 77.

Felicia’s spontaneous love that would allow him to forget who she really is. And this very project—an attempt to provoke a feeling connected (quite paradoxically) with disrespect—caused her anger and contempt for Renouard. Once again, the effect of his actions is opposite to what he assumed: instead of stimulating her desire, the situation makes Felicia disgusted,²¹ which causes a categorical and irrevocable break of the relationship with him.

It can be concluded that Geoffrey Renouard first put the woman on a metaphysical pedestal, and then he himself threw her off it. This finale does not look like catharsis or regaining the lost freedom. It looks more like collecting evidence against himself: now that the (ex) idol is gone and self-deification has also failed, there are well-founded reasons for despair and suicide.²²

5. CONCLUSIONS

Before “Master Arthur” became a ghost who threatened workers and natives in Malata, he had already “scared” Geoffrey during his meetings with Felicia. Conrad is interested in this problem the most: here is a lost fiancé who, like a ghost, can be anywhere and nowhere,²³ bringing Renouard to the attacks of jealousy, causing him cruel suffering and making him addicted to it. The writer clearly emphasizes the fact that only in such circumstances does the most stable form of idolatry appear. The events happening at Malata show that even such a “ghostly” presence of a rival is better than his radical absence. Revealing the death of the fiancé immediately destabilizes the existing arrangement, because Felicia must perform both roles (the obstacle and the object of desire) at the same time. In this situation, the divinity becomes too accessible, too fragile and, finally, disappears during the attempt of intimate contact.

The final part of the story has something theatrical in it; something that resembles a correction of a *qui pro quo* error. This effect has been strengthened even by contrast: only the editor retains his former identity as the meddling journalist (or “friend”). The others reveal their true but urgently hidden nature. Arthur is no longer a demonic rival but a compassionate vagrant who, at the time of his death, renounced his

²¹ An analogous situation was described by Julia Kristeva. Abjection is a reaction to the threat of what “[...] lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects.” Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Len S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.

²² Only in this sense is it possible to accept Edward. W. Said’s thesis according to which “Planter of Malata”: “is Conrad’s most pessimistic story, and a masterpiece nonetheless.” Edward. W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 162.

²³ Daniel Lance took this mechanism precisely, stating: “Le berceau du désir se situer bien entre deux rivaux potentiels. Le rival est nécessaire: s’il n’existe pas, on le crée.” [The cradle of desire lies between two potential rivals. The rival is necessary: if it does not exist, it is created]. Daniel Lance, *Au-delà du désir. Littérature, sexualités et éthique* (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 2000), p. 25-26.

fiancée. Felicia was degraded to the role of an average or even petty woman from the idol position. The most important problem, of course, is in answering the question of who Geoffrey Renouard really is. He himself suggests that his suicide was a form of revenge on Felicia: he wants—as a ghost—to scare her for the rest of her life. A grotesque project to take seriously. The only truth here is the intention of meeting death. His life has no value for him from the moment when all idolatry is over. He is a modern atheist—“in the original sense: being deserted by the gods”²⁴—who can no longer justify his existence. He cannot do it because without gods he is unable to oppose his self-destruction. He is, therefore, a modern subject that secretly cares about exactly what he ascribes to others: contempt and hatred for his own life.

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²⁴ Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, p. 7.