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LITERATURE

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Representing the Woman: The Modern Subject in Quest of Mastery in *The Arrow of Gold* by Joseph Conrad

Abstract. Conrad's last novel *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) not only dramatizes the intricate relationship between the protagonist, Monsieur George, and Doña Rita, but it also brings into focus the modern subject's endeavour to exert control through the representation and objectification of women, ultimately perpetuating the oppressive discourse of patriarchy. George, a young seaman involved in gun-running for the followers of Don Carlos, the pretender to the Spanish throne, develops desire for Rita. His attitude towards Rita defines him as the subject who seeks to appropriate her by objectifying and transforming her into visual representation. The feminist critique of the modern subjectivity, heir to the Cartesian cogito rooted in the the mind/body dichotomy, points to its significant role in providing the conceptual framework which justifies women's subservient position. According to Elizabeth Grosz, the mind/body dichotomy, which the narrator relies on to construct Rita's representation, accounts for the emergence of somatophobia involving the disavowal of the female body as the locus of irrational impulses and, therefore, the source of women's inferiority. Thus, George's representation of Rita is marked by the tendency to subordinate the female body to discipline and constraints as well as to desubstantialize her by reducing her to a spectral vision. Although Conrad never declared the intention to speak up for the cause of feminism, yet in *The Arrow of Gold* he exposes the dichotomous conceptual framework that limits Rita's autonomy and legitimizes the male subject's will to mastery.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Elizabeth Grosz, modern subject, representation, objectification, somatophobia

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1. Introduction

For many years *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), one of Conrad's late novels, functioned as a classic exemplification of Thomas Moser's theory of achievement and decline and was widely reproached for its uninspired style, deteriorating artistry, poorly developed plot, and stereotyping in the portrayal of the characters, allegedly intrinsic to the texts published in the last phase of his career (Moser 1957, 3-4, 180-91). In the prevalent critical accounts, *The Arrow of Gold* was classified as the weakest novel by Conrad (Baines 1971, 493, Gurko 1962, 225, 228; Batchelor 1996, 256, 260), but gradually this critical trend has been reversed. Stephen Land finds the claim that Conrad lacks creativity in his last novels objectionable and points out some new developments in the plot construction as well as the increased focus on the female protagonist (1984, 224-25). Gary Geddes points to his innovative approach to the aesthetics of the visual (Geddes 1980, 121) and Robert Hampson refutes the objections against the allegedly incoherent form of the novel (Hampson 1992, 271). Monsieur George, the novel's protagonist, and the author of the diary which makes up the major part of the narrative, is interpreted as an immature egocentric with a streak of weakness whom the adventures of gun-running and a love affair with Doña Rita de Lastaola put on the precarious path of initiation (Schwarz 1982, 129; Hampson, 1992, 251; Roberts 1992, 531; Meyer 1967, 46-47), but also entangle in an entirely unrealistic passion (Lester 2008, 60, 65). Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan departs from a psychological interpretation of George's involvement with Rita and links him with the late nienteenth century *taedium vitae*, the sense of the *fin de siècle* pessimism which produce an unstable identity (Erdinast-Vulcan 1991, 191, 199). Invoking the feminist perspective, critics increasingly interpret George as a representative of patriarchal discourse who strives to deny Rita's autonomous subjectivity by turning her into a beautiful object of art (Geddes 1980, 122-23; Hampson, 1992, 254; Roberts 1992, 530-31; Levin 2004, 127). However, Rita's independent voice is smothered not only through aesthetic objectification but predominantly through representation, the modern subject's fundamental strategy of exerting control over being. In his relationship with Rita George articulates his will to mastery by inscribing his representations of Rita within the somatophobic discourse denigrating her body as an inferior element, freezing it into immobility and silence and desubstantializing it as an elusive shadow.

Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka point out that not only political and social, but also philosophical discourses are based on patriarchal patterns that establish a hierarchy of superiority within the male/female dichotomy (Harding and Hintikka 2004, ix-x). Jane Flax places Descartes' invention of the new concept of the self, the cogito or the subject, within the patriarchal paradigm. Struggling to establish an irrefutable correspondence between the inner and the outer, mind and body, the cogito reduces body to an idea or representation, in order to make it fully knowable and to attain epistemological certainty (Flax 2004, 259). However, the longing for certainty is not innocent, as it correlates with "a desire for control" (Flax 2004, 259), "the desire to dominate" over body and nature (Flax 2004, 260) which also extends to women (Flax 2004, 261). Although the body/

mind dualism has haunted Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle, yet it assumes an even more radical form in Descartes who construes the opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* as "mutual exclusivity" so that "brute materiality" (Bordo 1987, 93) and the mind "purified of all material 'contamination'" (Bordo 1987, 93-94) stand apart with nothing to bridge the gap between them. By rupturing the connection between mind and body, Descartes constructed the cogito as an incorporeal subject who strives to reach the knowledge of the object "unfettered by the perspectival nature of embodied vision" (Bordo 1987, 95). Thus, in philosophical reflection since Descartes, the subject is defined as a disembodied entity floating beyond time and space, whose essential attribute is thinking (Bordo and Moussa 1999, 297). According to Elizabeth Grosz, Western philosophy, which seeks to defend its unique position by upholding its claim to ensure rational insights, can accomplish this goal "through the disavowal of the body" and "elevation of mind as a disembodied term" (Grosz 1994, 4). Grosz elucidates how the Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the prerequisite for the emergence of the cogito, is organized into the hierarchy of the superior mind and the inferior body (Grosz 1994, 6). In an attempt to re-evaluate the foundational concepts of the Western thought from the feminist perspective, Grosz argues that somatophobia not only participated in the dichotomous style of thinking from the very onset of philosophy (Grosz 1994, 5), but it also accounts for such a conceptualization of the male/female opposition that establishes the correspondence between "man and mind, woman and body" (Grosz 1994, 4). The modern paradigm, which denigrates the body "as a source of interference in […] the operations of reason" (Grosz 1994, 5), contributes to the exclusion of women from the realm of the rational and to their confinement within the realm of the corporeal. Eventually, it encourages the dismissive attitude towards femininity and perpetuates the underprivileged position of women (Grosz 1994, 9)[1] by denying them the status of "knowing philosophical subjects and […] knowable epistemic objects" and perceiving them as "philosophy's eternal enigma, its mysterious and inscrutable object […]" (Grosz 1994, 4).

Referred to as the imperial "I" and the monolithic "I" (Bordo and Moussa 1999, 297),[2] the cogito meets numerous objections on the grounds of cultivating the will to mastery by resorting to the reification of being through representation (Levin 1988, 129). Unable to engage in a direct contact with reality, the modern subject seeks legitimacy in the capacity for the perfectly objective circumspection of things. It is guaranteed by the power to form clear, distinct ideas or representations which give rise to universal knowledge (Bordo 1987, 95). This epistemological project would not be viable, if the ego-subject did not petrify multiple impressions into immobile images that resist opening up to the plurality of perspectives (Cascardi 1992, 126). The insistence on an objective and

[1] Grosz also maintains that feminist theory should recognize the role of the philosophical dismissal of the body as inferior to mind in the tendency to diminish femininity or, otherwise, it might be charged with complicity in sustaining "the oppression of women" (9).

[2] However, Bordo and Moussa refuse to endorse the postmodernist project of entirely discarding the category of the subject and argues in favour of "non-Cartesian models" of the self (299).

universally valid perspective is one of the factors that point to the aggressive nature of representation (Levin 1988, 66-67). David Michael Levin argues that representation relies on "presence mastered […] by the will of the ego-subject; presence […] reduced to a superficial image" (Levin 1988, 127). Therefore, he defines representation as "an exercize [sic] of power" (Levin 1988, 127) that the modern subject, anxious to attain certainty, pursues and, thus, it consolidates its control over the object by putting it under scrutiny and exposing to the possessive gaze. This model of modern subjectivity seems instrumental in the emergence of the conceptual framework justifying women's subordinate position. By inscribing femininity within the mind/body dualism inherent in the cogito**,** Western philosophical thought promoted the oppressive modes of thinking about women which were implicated in fostering their conceptualization as objects of representation or "the *reified* presence" (Levin 1988, 127).

2. The Modern Subject and the Desire for Representation

The protagonist and the first-person narrator, Monsieur George, is a young seaman who seeks adventure in Marseilles. His involvement in smuggling guns for the supporters of Don Carlos, the pretender to the Spanish throne, brings George in touch with Doña Rita de Lastaola, a peasant girl who became the model and the lover of Henry Allègre, a famous painter. Having inherited his considerable fortune, Rita rises to the status of a financially independent woman and decides to support the Carlist conspiracy. At the same time she grapples with Captain Blunt's possessive desire and George's exalted passion. By virtue of George's central position in story-making as the first-person narrator, he construes himself as as an observer in front of whom the spectacle of the events plays out. He begins his story with the scene of a carnival party taking place in the famous street La Cannabière in Marseilles. Yet, he refuses to join the chaos of the carnival and keeps his distance from the revelry which is marked by "a touch of bedlam" (Conrad 1947, 7) and which might undermine his stance of rationality and self-mastery. The protagonist seeks refuge in the safe space of a café, where unexpectedly a group of people wearing masks intrude upon his privacy and create "the wiggling chain" which was "winding in and out between the chairs and tables" (Conrad 1947, 9). One of the women „in a black dress sewn over with gold half moons" and in a "black velvet mask" (Conrad 1947, 9) teases George and pokes her tongue at him. His focus on a mysterious woman in a mask that invites fantasizing and speculation about her identity anticipates the modern subject's attitude of reducing Rita to the object of representation.

On the very first encounter with Rita, George establishes himself as a subject who stands in front of her and, hence, assumes the stance of opposition perceiving her as an object that can be appropriated by turning her into visual representation.[3] Therefore, look-

[3] Levin recalls "the etymology of the word *object* (ob-ject, *Gegen-stand*)" to elucidate the subject/ object duality which "is inherently organized around opposition, conflict, struggle and violence" (120).

ing at Rita he relishes the pictorial effect evoked by "the visual impression [which] was more of colour in a picture than of the forms of actual life," by a "dressing gown of pale blue silk embroidered with black and gold designs," and her slippers "of the same colour, with black bows" (Conrad 1947, 66). To make the picture complete, George grasps colour correspondences between the details of her attire and the staircase of her villa where she first appears in front of him: "The white stairs, the deep crimson of the carpet, and the light blue of the dress made an effective combination of colour to set off the delicate carnation of that face […]" (Conrad 1947, 66) producing "a vivid sense […] of absolute harmony" (Conrad 1947, 67). His admiration of Rita's beauty is inextricably bound with domination that the ego-subject longs for by turning all that exists into representation and by establishing itself as the author of clear and distinct ideas which convey reliable knowledge. The narrator articulates his desire to wield power over Rita by reiterating that she might be nothing more than fiction fabricated by Blunt when he was spinning his yarn about her: "It seemed as though he were inventing it all rather angrily. I had doubts as to your existence" (Conrad 1947, 122-23); "[O]f course I couldn't tell that you weren't a product of Captain Blunt's sleeplessness" (Conrad 1947, 123). George also pays attention to the spatial configuration of Rita's abode and especially her drawing-room so as to prepare the spectators' gaze for interpreting the view as a picture. The room where he meets Rita resembles a gallery with paintings on display and ends with "a rotunda with many windows" (Conrad 1947, 68) which provide frames enclosing the characters and invite the readers to decode them as painted figures. As a consequence, when George observes Rita's conversation with a journalist "in the recession of a window" (Conrad 1947, 78), the window frame that surrounds the two interlocutors turns their encounter into a silent image. Immediately after the journalist's departure, Rita "with her back to the room […] continued to contemplate out of the window the bare and untidy garden" (Conrad 1947, 78), thus assuming the role of a figure placed within the window frame. In this way, she becomes another pictorial embodiment of the Byzantine Empress or the Girl in the Hat painted by Henry Allègre, who asked her to pose for these portraits. In one of the farewell scenes between Rita and George, who leaves for one of his smuggling expeditions, she says goodbye by pressing her hand to his mouth and repeats the gesture of "turn[ing] away to the window" (Conrad 1947, 105) as if she withdrew from the real world into the space of the picture delimited by the window frame.

3. Representation of the Woman: Exclusion from the Realm of the Logos

To assert his dominant position of the rational subject, George also ensures that the representation of Rita is mute, which portrays her as woman unable to vocalize her craving for autonomy and to proclaim her feminine presence. From the perspective of male logocentrism a woman belongs to the domain of silence, which reflects her passivity and accounts for defining female identity in non-intellectual terms. Although Rita is not a si-

lent woman and shows capacity for deftly using her skill of persuasion, yet the narrator banishes her from the realm of the logos by reducing her voice to a string of incomprehensible sounds. Unaware of his demeaning attitude, George admires Rita's ability to use her voice without delivering a meaningful utterance and insists that it is the seductive quality of its sound that compensates for her discursive inadequacy. By succumbing to the appeal of her "mysterious" voice (Conrad 1947, 80, 94) and its "seductive inflexions" (Conrad 1947, 202), George reveals how much he ignores any communicative potential of her words to the point of denying her the identity of the articulate subject: "Her words bewildered one often and bewilderment is a sort of stupidity. I remedied it by simply disregarding the sense of what she said. The sound was there […] It was more absorbing than the mere obscurity of her speeches" (Conrad 1947, 107). To affirm this prevalent view of the woman banned from the realm of rationality, George resorts to the association of femininity with nature[4] and compares her voice to "warm waves" (Conrad 1947, 146) which highlight its fluid quality, resistant to the clarity of a distinctly delineated form. Another comment on her "words [which] seemed to form themselves, fiery or pathetic, in the air, outside her lips" (Conrad 1947, 85) calls into doubt her aptitude for delivering a coherent speech. What is more, her immobility, which renders her passive and subordinate to his control and which he finds so captivating, encourages George to claim the authorship of her utterances: "And the stillness of her lips was so perfect […] that I wondered whether all this had come through them or only had formed itself in my mind" (Conrad 1947, 100). George has the impression that even her whisper, a muffled, barely audible voice, has its source in his consciousness, stating that "the intense whisper of these words seemed to form itself right in my very heart; not as a conveyed sound but as an imparted emotion […]" (Conrad 1947, 145). Thus, by establishing himself as the source of the words that Rita utters, the narrator asserts his status of the rational subject and excludes Rita from the domain of the logos. The references to mystery sustain Rita's status of representation constructed by the male subject who conceives of her as the locus of indeterminacy and, consequently, resistance to the hegemony of the logos. George's comment on her being "fascinating in an undefinable way" (Conrad 1947, 78) conflates his experience of Rita's mesmerizing power with a proclivity to view her as absence that cannot be articulated on a rational basis. The depiction of Rita's "mysterious and unforgettable face" which combines "the brilliance of sunshine together with the unfathomable splendour of the night […]" (Conrad 1947, 242-43), relies on the juxtaposition of the tangible and the intangible. It defines her in negative terms by employing the image of lucidity that disperses into darkness deprived of any limits. Similarly, the comparison of her "infinite sadness" to "the sunlight of our life hiding the invincible darkness […]" (Conrad 1947, 200) identifies her with the lack of form which erodes the shiny surface with its promise of being graspable and knowable. Hence, the narrator's emphasis on her mysterious nature links her with unreason and perpetuates the deprecatory perception of Rita.

[4] See Karen J. Warren 328, Sherry B. Ortner 27-37.

4. Representation of the Woman: Somatophobia and Discipline over the Female Body

To construct Rita's representation in the diary describing his adventures in Marseilles, the narrator resorts to the mind/body dichotomy which gave rise to the discourse of somatophobia, a hallmark of patriarchal ideology. The discourse of somatophobia consigning body to the margins as a source of irrational drives (Grosz 1994, 4-5, 14) accounts for the narrator's desire to discipline the body, which is implicit in his numerous references to Rita's immobility. By highlighting her tendency to freeze in motionless poses, George envisages her as a person endowed with the potential for self-discipline, the will to control one's own body representing lower nature and a dangerous otherness that should be tamed or, if possible, entirely eliminated. Therefore, he refers to her in negative terms as "unmoved" (Conrad 1947, 145) and brings into focus her "closed lips" (Conrad 1947, 146), "faint smile" (Conrad 1947, 79), the subdued "play of facial muscles" (Conrad 1947, 85), and "narrowed eyes" (Conrad 1947, 145-46) suggesting self-control that she exercises over her body and the use of the senses. It is predominantly Rita's immobility that triggers George's delight and renders him "enchanted by the almost imperceptible play of her lips" (Conrad 1947, 75). The representation of Rita as immobile enhances the appeal of a body deprived of spontaneity, capable of suppressing unpredictable, irrational reactions, and complying with the socially accepted feminine ideal of modesty and forbearance. Ocular restraint, another aspect of her immobility, further augments the narrator's enchantment: "Her face […] and downcast eyes was as if veiled in firm immobility and was so appealing […]" (Conrad 1947, 74). Rita is shown to have renounced freedom to move her eyes and to direct her gaze at the object of her choice. On her encounter with George immediately after her return from Paris, "[s]he never even raised her eyes […]" and "[s]he kept her eyes obstinately fixed on the pages of a book […]" (Conrad 1947, 288). By drawing attention to her downcast eyes, George emphasizes how much he relishes her withdrawal since it sets her apart from reality and renders her an easy victim of his desire to subordinate her as a phantasm confined to his mind. As a consequence, immobility that is so striking in her representation undermines Rita's nature of a flesh-and-blood human being and makes her part of "immortal art, not transient life" (Conrad 1947, 93). Furthermore, George disempowers Rita portraying her as a person who refrains from looking straight at her male interlocutors and as a dreamer "lost in an infinite reverie" (Conrad 1947, 77). Such representation conveys both her failure to extricate herself from the realm of the ideal and the male subject's will to separate her from the ugly aspects of the corrupt world. Tempted by the promise of innocence that subdues sensuality, George degrades her mature female body to the child's asexual body, which is implicit in the infantilizing description of Rita as "a very young child" (Conrad 1947, 91), whose "adolescent" head is not only "mysteriously feminine in the power of instant seduction" but also "almost childlike in the freshness of detail" (Conrad 1947, 288). Apart from the images of immobility, the narrator's utterances abound in spectral

imagery which highlights Rita's disembodiment and, hence, maintains the perspective of somatophobia. During subsequent meetings, George increasingly refers to Rita as a "shadowy figure" (Conrad 1947, 94), "a cold illusion" (Conrad 1947, 297) or "the insensible phantom of the real you that is in me" (Conrad 1947, 296). His insistence on perceiving Rita as a shadow testifies to her status of representation whose properties include lifelessness and colourlessness: "[W]hatever our gaze reaches appears to be dull and inert; paltry: not glowing and vibrant" (Levin 1988, 68). By depriving Rita of her body so that she loses her separate identity, George adopts the dominant position of the subject who is bent on exercising control and who dictates the mode of being that she should embrace: "You exist in me. I don't know where I end and you begin" (Conrad 1947, 224). Once again he insists that what fosters his fascination is transforming Rita into an intellectual construct, an unchangeable, eternal idea that paves the way to "the ultimate wisdom beyond all dreams and all passions" (Conrad 1947, 288). The comment that summarizes George's illumination: "She was that which is to be contemplated to all Infinity" (Conrad 1947, 288), establishes her as an object forever imprisoned in the male subject's imagination. The lure of Rita's immobility, pallor bordering on transparency, and the lack of expression reduces her to a fixed image in the inner universe of the modern subject. Thus, the investment in the act of representing reflects the cogito's intention to exclude body that interferes with its search for absolute certainty and "the ultimate wisdom."

The recurring image of Rita as a statue does not only involve her aestheticization and objectification, but also implies a form of disciplining her body through imposing restraint as well as monitoring the impression that her appearance conveys to the observers. To become attractive, a woman has to convert the imperfect body subject to corruption, the site of uncontrollable inexplicable drives and the source of disruption, into an incorruptible, eternally perfect substance, free from change.[5] By perceiving Rita as a statue "carved six thousand years ago" (Conrad 1947, 146), a "[w]oman of granite" (Conrad 1947, 298) whose eyes resemble "melted sapphires" (Conrad 1947, 200), George transforms her transient body into a durable substance made of indestructible rock and precious stones. These images devalue the body by attributing Rita's power to evoke admiration and erotic excitement to her status of an eternal being whose appeal depends on eliminating the base corporeal element. Rita herself submits to the perspective of somatophobia that men who keep her company subscribe to. In response to Captain Blunt's use of the word "person" to refer to her, she ironically corrects him saying "This body" (Conrad 1947, 147). Her ironic stance re-enacts her trauma of being reduced to an aesthetic and sexual object first by Henry Allègre, who

[5] Sandra Lee Bartky distinguishes three types of disciplinary practices that a woman's body is subordinated to. Rita's immobility and her portrayal as a beautiful work of art made of indestructible substance correspond to the second and the third type of disciplinary practices, i.e. "those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (65).

met her as a fifteen-year-old girl in the countryside and succumbed to the lure of her outstanding beauty. Her remark implies the perception of her own body as "*alien*, as the not-self, the not-me" (Bordo 1993, 144), a strategy that enables her to deny her identity of a woman stigmatized as sexually depraved at the cost of distancing herself from her body. Vexed by her refusal to admit her ambiguous position, Blunt insists: "Well, it is you, […] You haven't borrowed it.… It fits you too well" (Conrad 1947, 147). Rita invokes irony to expose Blunt's declarations of infatuation as a camouflage for his contempt for her as a fallen woman. However, she still seems unable to entirely discard the ideologically dominant dichotomy which denigrates the body because it bears the stigma of sexual impurity and, hence, it is denounced as a site of disruptive forces beyond the control of reason.

The implicit contempt for the female body is signalled by the recurring descriptions of an ugly, disfigured dummy which Henry Allègre used as a model for painting the robes of the Byzantine Empress in his famous picture. George admits that the dummy conjures up the image of Rita and calls it her "trusted personal attendant" (Conrad 1947, 241). He also confides to Rita that his love for her actually began before she personally entered his life, as he listened to Captain Blunt recounting the details of her life and, at the same time, peeked at "that amazing decapitated, mutilated dummy of a woman lurking in a corner" (Conrad 1947, 122). Critics predominantly interpret the dummy as a symbol of the male tendency to objectify and to degrade Rita (Harrington 2017, 98; Hampson 1996, 148),[6] which is achieved by drawing attention to the deformity of the dummy, its incomplete, crippled, headless body with arms and legs chopped off. However, the figure of the dummy also conveys George's implicit desire to subordinate the woman's body to strict discipline which borders on sadism, to suppress its otherness and divert a threat of anarchic impulses encroaching upon the male subject's rationality. What is more, the deprecatory gesture of linking Rita with an imperfect body resonates with George's experience of his own split between the tired, feeble body and the active, lively mind that Blunt's account stimulates: "[M]y head was in a whirl. […] I was feeling quite inanimate as to body and frightfully stimulated as to mind all the time" (Conrad 1947, 122). George's association of the dummy, whose "mangled limbs and insensible, hard-wood bosom" (Conrad 1947, 240) inspire disgust, with a beautiful woman reflects his ambivalent attitude towards the body which is fragile and vulnerable to damage and whose aesthetically pleasing appearance can be easily distorted and envisaged as an object of repulsion.

[6] Schwarz suggests that "the headless dummy represents the sterile aestheticism of Henry Allègre's world" (134).

5. The Recovery of the Subject's Power to Represent

George's representations of Rita reflect his dread of losing self-control and mastery over external reality. After Rita's departure, George is haunted by a nightmare which depicts her as "a nymph haunting a riot of foliage, and raising a perfect round arm to take an arrow of gold out of her hair to throw it at me by hand, like a dart" (Conrad 1947, 255-56). The disturbing dream enacts his anxiety over Rita's power which threatens to reduce him to a prey pursued by a hunter and eventually brought to subjection. Furthermore, it anticipates his loss of the potential to produce vivid and distinct representations which start dissolving into vague, intangible, hallucinatory images: "All my impressions were blurred; and even the promptings of my instinct were the haziest thing imaginable. Now and then I had acute hallucinations of a woman with an arrow of gold in her hair" (Conrad 1947, 267). Although at the time of Rita's absence George continues to envision her as an image in his mind, yet he grants this vision the power to claim control over his inner life. As a result, he discovers that it "presided at every council, at every conflict of my mind, and dominated every faculty of my senses" (Conrad 1947, 274). The sensual quality of her image which appeals to all the senses: the vision – "It floated before my eyes […]," the touch – "[I]t touched my elbow […]," the hearing – "[M]y ears seemed to catch the sound of her footsteps […]," the smell – "[S]he enveloped me with passing whiffs of warmth and perfume […]" (Conrad 1947, 274), testifies to all-pervading influence that she exerts on him. Thus, for a while George's superior status of the subject enjoying control is threatened by the dismantling of the master/slave opposition implicit in the male/female dichotomy. However, as a rational subject who cultivates self-mastery and keeps in check any inexplicable disruptive drives, George refuses to abdicate his sovereignty and realizes the jeopardy that Rita poses to his self-conceptualization. Thus, on one hand he is overwhelmed with a desire to kiss Rita's forearm which he describes as "an insane impulse" (Conrad 1947, 74), but then he immediately thwarts attraction claiming that he refrained from kissing since "[i]t was nothing uncontrollable […]" (Conrad 1947, 74). From the very onset of their acquaintance the frailty of rational subjectivity in confrontation with Rita startles the narrator who perceives her charisma and "poignant heart-gripping presence giving occupation enough to one's faculties" (Conrad 1947, 107) as a subversion of his self-control. Yet, even when he surrenders for a brief moment, he insists that he could overcome the attraction in the twinkling of an eye: "I submitted, knowing well that I could free myself by one more effort which it was in my power to make" (Conrad 1947, 224). He maintains his stance of a master taking initiative and kissing her unexpectedly, which prevents Rita from continuing her advances: "With a stifled cry of surprise her arms fell off me as if she had been shot" (Conrad 1947, 224). Although he experiences an overwhelming infatuation, George struggles to repress desire which might destabilize rational subjectivity intent on pursuing self-mastery and aspiring to bring all that is external to mind under control.

In the final scenes, Rita secretly returns to Marseilles and here she is assaulted by her cousin Ortega, deranged and obsessed with a desire for her. In a fit of fury he

attempts to force a marriage consent from her, at the same time voicing his contempt and hurling insults such as "*Catin*" (Conrad 1947, 320) at her. Similarly to George, Ortega wavers between the perception of Rita as a divine creature "a princess, with pure cheeks like a carved saint" (Conrad 1947, 316) and contempt for her body: "[Y]ou brown-skinned, lean, grinning, dishevelled imp […] you are in all your limbs hateful: your eyes are hateful and your mouth is hateful, and your hair is hateful, and your body is cold and vicious like a snake […]" (Conrad 1947, 318). Trapped in the romance convention, George still retains his dominant position of the subject who demonstrates his self-control and presence of mind when he confronts Ortega and manages to keep Rita out of danger holding her in arms and soothing her alarm. However, this most dramatic and dynamic scene in the novel subverts the generic conventions of the romance with Rita as a damsel in distress and George as a chivalric saviour. As a matter of fact, he fails to empathize with her even when he witnesses her nervous breakdown that ensues the experience of humiliation. Instead, George, like Ortega, although in a much subtler way, insists on representing Rita as a person who is estranged from her own body. He conveys this estrangement by envisioning her as a piece of half inanimate matter frozen to stone, "cold like a block of marble" (Conrad 1947, 320), "indistinctly rigid and inanimate" (Conrad 1947, 328) as well as by pinpointing her apprehension "of living flesh and blood" (Conrad 1947, 334). Yet, attracted to her mode of being, George, at the very end of the commotion caused by Ortega, qualifies the radical thrust of his rhetoric by indicating that the frigidity of her body can be reconciled with being alive and does not deprive her of captivating charm: "I know how cold you can be – and yet live" (Conrad 1947, 334). Eventually, Rita's frigidity seems another form of her motionlessness which George finds strangely appealing. It creates the somatophobic representation of the woman who is subject to discipline and whose corporeality is brought under control by suppressing its sensual aspect.

6. Conclusion

Defending his own and Rita's reputation, George fights a duel with Blunt, who puts a bullet through his chest. As long as he remains half conscious struggling for his life, Rita is taking care of him, but immediately after his recovery, she vanishes forever. Rita's disappearance is often interpreted as an affirmation of her independence, an expression of her longing after self-mastery and freedom from the limitations that society dictates (Hampson 1996, 150; Jones 1999, 186; Harrington 2017, 102). However, Conrad withholds the definitive closure to Rita's fate and lets George and his friend Mills articulate the final comments on her. George recollects that during his recovery he experienced an unsettling conflation of "unsatisfactory visions of Doña Rita" (Conrad 1947, 347) with the voice and face of Rose, her maid, which prompts an interpretation of her disappearance as a loss of separate identity. Mills encapsulates Rita's deliberations whether she "she [could] go through life veiled from head to foot or go out of it altogether into

a convent?" (Conrad 1947, 348) in a word "elusive" (Conrad 1947, 351) which imposes his perspective and questions her right to define herself. George himself loses the arrow of gold, the last reminder of Rita, "in a stormy catastrophe" (Conrad 1947, 351). In fact he considers the loss to be the turn for the best since now the object invested with such a profound emotional value is concealed from "the cold eyes of ignorance" (Conrad 1947, 352). Eventually, when the last trace of Rita's physical presence is no longer available, he reiterates his desire to deny her autonomy by turning her into a spectral image, a shadow in his memory. Hence, Rita's withdrawal into the unknown marks the suppression of her voice in favour of the male one and cancels the promise of defying the male subject's distorting representation. Even though Rita does not succeed in resisting the oppressive discourse that construes her as representation and confines her to an idea in the protagonist's mind, she subverts the modern subject's ambition to retain control by making herself invisible to the male gaze. Rita's gesture results in George's compulsive and eventually insatiable urge to detect her features in the faces of all women he encounters after her disappearance. It also denounces his obsession with her as the will to master reality through representation. In alignement with the cogito's epistemological stance, George's representation of Rita which relies on the alternating images of cold immobile body and intangible apparition draws upon the split between body and soul, the corporeal and the incorporeal. Thus, Conrad's portrayal of the relationship between George and Rita exposes the construction of the modern subject rooted in Cartesian dualism as a negation of women's autonomy by inscribing them within the binary oppositions of male/female, passive/active, mind/body. Although Conrad was far from embracing the cause of feminism, in *The Arrow of Gold* he succeeds in problematizing the dichotomous conceptual framework which disempowers Rita and feeds the male subject's will to mastery eventually contributing to the demeaning perception of womanhood in the Western mindset.

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