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A.J. CRONIN: CONFLICT AND LIBERATION THROUGH ROMANCE

Fusco A.

Conflict which involves both the external and individual inner world is the central theme of Cronin's narrative world. Heroes in the fiction and Archibald himself struggle to achieve their aims and will never give up in front of difficulties. "Hatter's Castle", "The Stars look Down", "The Keys of the Kingdom" contain dramatic tones that reach the top in "The Judas Tree": the hero after a long wearing interior debate, puts an end to his own life. Conflict presented in Cronin's lifelong romance has, however, a positive epilogue in which the hero is free from all his anxieties. "Desmonde" is the final chapter of Cronin's story.

Keywords: A.J. Cronin, conflict, external world, inner world, anxiety, search, writing, faith, confession, liberation.

А.Д. КРОНИН: КОНФЛИКТ И ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЕ ЧЕРЕЗ ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЕ

Фуско А.

Конфликт, который включает как внешний, так и индивидуальный, внутренний мир является центральной темой художественного мира Арчибальда Кронина. Герои произведений, как и сам автор, стремятся достигнуть своих целей и никогда не сдаются, встречая на своем пути препятствия. «Замок Броуди», «Звёзды смотрят вниз», «Ключи от Царства» – это все примеры драматического повествования, которое достигает своего пика в романе «Дерево Иуды», где горой после долгого изнуряющего спора с самим собой, прекращает свою жизнь. Однако конфликт, описанный в романе длиною в целую жизнь, имеет позитивный финал, где герой освобождается от всех тревог и забот. «Дезмонд» – это последняя глава истории А. Кронина.

Ключевые слова: А.Дж. Кронин, конфликт, внешний мир, внутренний мир, тревога, поиск, творчество, вера, исповедь, освобождение.

A.J. Cronin: doctor or writer?

A.J. Cronin wrote his first novel *"Hatter's Castle"* in 1930 after his professional experiences as Inspector of the mines in Wales in 1924 and his practicing as doctor since 1925 which made him a rich man in five years after hard times. *"Hatter's Castle"* basically was the concrete result of a wishing that had accompanied young Archibald for years, the first answer to his great interrogative: doctor or writer? Cronin himself makes clear his position in an article entitled *"Doctor into writer"* and admits that, during his practicing as a doctor, he often felt coming to the surface from his deep inside a wishing to use his pen not for medical prescriptions but to report "something vivid and which deserved to be set down" [3, p 231].

In *"Adventures in two worlds"* (1951), the author focuses his attention on his perplexities as a young doctor. Being in contact with "miners' families, he could follow the natural process of life from the miracle of birth" [1, p. 280] to suffering and finally death. It was then that he lost "his superiority" [1, p. 280] on his wide outlook on life. "He realized that the compass of existence" [1, p. 280] could not be contained in his books of medicine. He was on the way of "new values" [1, p. 280] of life, he was moving his "first steps towards God" [1, p. 280].

The first opportunity to let young Archibald's dream come true, was offered by a healthy problem, which made him interrupt his practice as doctor and have a period of rest in a peaceful and solitary place in the country where he wrote his first novel. The author himself, in one of his article describes the scenery that he could enjoy from the window of his room, a natural paradise, source of inspiration for the romantic poet in the past and surely for our young author too.

"A long green field ran down to a bay of the loch. There was a movement. Six cows, couched in the shadow of a hawthorn hedge, ruminated; an old goat with an arresting beard tinkled his bell in search, I thought, of dande-lions; a yellow butterfly hovered indecisively above a scarlet spur of fuchsia; some white hens pottered about, liable to sudden flusters and retreats, some more majestic fowls strutted in sudden excitements and pursuits" [3, p. 234].

The profuse serenity that came from the view of the world in front of his eyes remained impressed in his memory for a long time in such a way that, after fifteen years, Cronin painted the same vivid scenery with great passion in *"Adventures in two worlds"* [5, p. 251].

After writing *"Hatter's Castle"* he felt so deeply gratified for what he had been able to realize that he could enjoy life at last: "The relief, the sense of emancipation, was inexpressible. It was finished; I had done it; in three months I had written a novel; and so a sense of achievement intermingling subtly with a glorious feeling of freedom, I began to row, to fish, to climb those mountains to my heart's content" [3, p. 238].

Cronin continued writing possessed by "a kind of cumulative force, the tremendous and despairing pressure of dire necessity" [8, p. 106]. Archibald enjoyed immensely the pleasure to follow his creative genius, but he detested writing, as he himself clears up in one of his articles: "I believe there are writers who enjoy writing. For my part, I loathe and abhor it. I enjoy immensely sitting in easy chair in before the fire, closing my eyes and rapturously envisaging the sweep, the drive, the sound, and the fury of the masterpiece" [8, p. 106].

Cronin could not find the right equilibrium between his dragging creative force and his pressing necessity of writing. As a result, the anxiety he accumulated, made him feel his desk as an "infernal" [8, p. 107] object.

The torment he lived during the writing of a novel was appeased sometimes by meaningless moments of everyday life such as meeting a cat. The link with reality through the cat was certainly important for a lonely man in search of himself "what this cat saw in me I do not know, but it solemnly attached itself to me during the entire period of my tribulation" [8, p. 108].

Dr Cronin's anxiety as writer reminds all his past uneasiness derived from an accumulation of troubles and frustrations during his childhood.

When Archibald was six, his father felt very ill and after two years' suffering he died leaving his family in financial difficulties. The little child moved to his mother's house in Dumbarton, where he attended later the Dumbarton Academy. He

was a brilliant student, but because of his catholic origins (his father was a catholic, while his mother a Presbyterian), he was mocked and humiliated by his schoolmates. In *"Adventures in two worlds"* he talks about those dramatic days and puts in evidence the way the child reacted: "When I was sent to a Protestant school, my religion, soon discovered, brought upon me the jeers of the class, and indeed of the master…For many months thereafter, a pariah harassed and badgered by a predatory mob, I suffered to the full-since I stubbornly refused to deny the creed into which I had been born" [1, p. 241].

Considering young Archibald's hard life, we can understand his needs to achieve a final gratification as a prize for his sort of urge to accomplish to all his duties: his manuscript was the reason of his final enjoyment. We read in his article *"The stars look down"*: "the time was about 1a.m. It was a still and dewy night. I went out upon the terrace and stood, rather dizzily, gazing upwards. The stars were a great soft velvet canopy, milky with myriads of stars. To my slightly; feverish fantasy the stars seemed like little shining eyes gazing down upon the earth. The stars look down, I thought wearily. I felt, with renewed conviction, that I must make this the title of the book. Then I yawned. And taking my candle I tottered up to bed" [8, p. 117].

From the scenery of the diabolic desk, Archibald moves to the scene of his own sublime enjoyment in communion with nature and gives the title to his new novel *"The Stars Look Down"*.

The Judas Tree (1961): the collapse of Cronin's heroes illusions

Mary in *"Hatter's castle"* (1931), David in *"The stars look down"* (1935), Father Francis Chilsom in *"The keys of the kingdom"* (1941) are heroes who struggle against tyranny and social injustices and never give up on the hard way towards the achievement of their ideals.

Mary rebels against her father, a prototype of Victorian pater-familias, a very strict and cruel father as Cronin himself reports in one of his article *"The alleged cruelty of Victorian fathers"*(1931). She reacts with great vehemence against her father: "A torrent of rebellion swirled trough he; as she felt the injustice of such

unnatural restraint, unconditional limitation of her freedom" [4, p. 64]; she will be deeply confident in her life principle: "Mary never knows defeat" [4, p. 89]; she will always trust in a possible future for her, even in the hardest moments of her life: "She had been cast out shamefully, but she was alive, she had felt for ever a home which had become lately a prison; and now she plucked together her shattered forced and bravely fixed her mind upon the future" [4, p. 158].

David, will struggle against social injustices and will be particularly interested in bettering work conditions in the mines, a dream he had chased since he was a child, as a miner's son and later he himself as a miner: "He was only fourteen… in this rich and beautiful world he had gone as a beast to the field and taken a turnip to appease his hunger… A sudden passionate aspiration in him to do something… Something… Something… to prevent all this. Something to uplift and heal humanity" [8, p. 23]. David will see all his project to build a better world vanish, but he will not lose his hopes in a better future: "Courage came to him from the thought. Perhaps one day he would rise again from the pit, one day, perhaps, help plodding army towards a new freedom. Instinctively he lifted his head" [8, p. 506].The emerging figure of the hero, David, comes out of the obscurity of the pit and resounds on the brilliant scenery of the stars. A sublime conclusion to represent human suffering on a quiet natural scenery. "The cage dropped. It dropped suddenly, swiftly into the hidden darkness. And the sound of its falling rose out of that darkness like a great sigh which mounted towards the furthermost stars" [8, p. 508].

Father Francis Chilsom, finally, in *"The keys of the Kingdom"* will chase his dream of brotherhood all life along, even when he gets old and shabby. He will never give up his mission in China: "…I have no wish to retire" [7, p. 10]. He is the symbol of a faith which believes in a God present on the earth "don't think that heaven is in the sky… it's in the hallow of your hand…it's everywhere and anywhere" [7, p. 11]. He is the hero that devotes all his life to human regeneration.

Apart from all heroes from Cronin's narrative world, we must say that the author himself can be considered animated by an inexhaustible strength to realize his ideals: he is the hero of two worlds in *"Adventures into two worlds"* (1951). Let us

follow young Archibald's enterprises after a hard childhood: "…at all cost I must succeed. That, indeed was my dominant passion, the leitmotif of my life, the very reason of my being, implanted in my breast of those ten years of unbelievable hardship which had followed upon the death of my father… nothing can succeed the longing of a poor youth, beaten down by circumstances, to rise above misfortune… with every pulse-beat I seemed to hear, throbbing in my ears the words get on , get on, get on… to riches, high position, fame" [1, p. 10].

After achieving the goals he had been longing for, Cronin, a rich and famous man, felt not satisfied and abandoned himself to a deep commiseration: "I was rich. Was I happy?... I experienced a feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction" [1, p. 235].

Religion will have an important role in Cronin's life and will be the answer to all his existential problems. He will follow the inner light which is the only way to find God: "It is this seeing eyes , this inner fusion of light which alone can show us God… the revelation of God comes only from heart" [5, p. 314].The discovery of the spiritual world after a long and hard way would bring our hero to find peace trough a "voluntary act of recognition which makes faith sublime" [5, p. 319].

In *"The Judas tree"* the hero is not animated by a positive vision of future which sometimes flows into an utopian idealism. The hero lives his drama with no hope in a possible future: his drama changes inevitably into tragedy. David Moray, the main character is a doctor who, after achieving all his targets, is terribly lonely and desperate. His story is part of everyday life in which an individual has to struggle between his own aspirations and sense of guilty.

Four female characters are present in the meanders of his conscience in search of certainties. Mary, his first love, opens the way to doctor's David's *scruples* divided between his love for her and the prospective of a future as a rich doctor with another woman: Doris.

David, even though "uncertain and undecided" [6, p. 94] will choose the way of success and will get married with Doris. This one presents serious mental disease, which will bring her in a clinic and later to death.

David, a lonely man, will feel unhappy in spite of his richness. Nevertheless, he will try to build a new life through another woman: Kathy. She will represent for him the way towards "liberation" and "conversion" [6, p. 169], through the prospective of an evangelic mission: the little church in Africa so far away would be the temple both of safety and love for David. The romantic story of the two lovers, however, will be shadowed since the beginning by a sinful atmosphere, which will be diminished by David's convictions: "Pure, unprofane sex was no sin, a sanctification rather, almost an act of worship" [6, p. 171]. The doubt remains, however, and David's conscience is tormented by Kathy's words to which he tries to answer to reassure himself: "But it was a sin, David, and God will punish us… No, dearest, He knows. He will understand. And if you think it is just a little wrong, you know we will make up for it" [6, p. 171]. All David's doubts are solved by his belief in the bond of marriage: "It cannot be wrong my dear, when in only a few days, almost a matter of hours, Willie will marry us" [6, p. 171].

Once again, however, another woman will overturn his destiny: Frida. She will bring him in the obsessive tunnel of his *ego* "overpowered, dominated, possessed" [6, p. 205] by her strength which will drag him out of his doubts to a crossroad. Frida will be the instrument David will use to be free from all his obsessions. Her voice resounds into David's conscience in a metaphor that clearly presents all his anxieties: "When you are walking in the mountains and discover yourself upon the wrong road, do you continue and fall in the crevasse? No. When you have asked directions of someone who knows better, you turn and go back. That is what you will do" [6, p. 204]. David will fully trust in Frida, giving up his future with Kathy, but he will repent, later, for being unfaithful to her "God, what a horrible situation. Weak, rage flooded him, followed by a spasm of self-disgust. Tears came burning to his eyes at the thought of his disloyalty to Kathy" [6, p. 217].

David will try once again not giving up and will find the way to expiate his *guilt*, but Kathy's death will stifle any hope for a possible purification. Kathy's dead eyes will be the mirror of his conscience in which he will see his *ego* completely destroyed, without life: "The instant of illumination when he stared into those dead

eyes had shattered his self-constructed image. The hollow shell had broken, there was nothing left…nothing. In destroying her, he had destroyed himself" [6, p. 222]. David will spend the last night of his life enjoying the marvellous scenery of the moon and the shadows on the lake, recalling his past. Wrapped in an extraordinary quiet atmosphere, feelings he had never had before, he abandons himself to a monologue in which the following words resound "restitution, complete vindication, the court of last appeal-absolving all guilt, restoring his ideal self [6, p. 223].

Cronin transferred reality *as it is* in his novels, which does not mean as it appears in its surface. He tried to penetrate into the deep untouchable part of it and portrayed it on sublime natural scenery. He illustrated the novelist's task as follows in one of his article: "The function of the novelist is to tell the truth, to represent life honestly; not as it should be, but as it is. By this, I do not mean a simple photograph of life... The artist… often achieves facts which are incongruous and contradictory" [8, p. 112].

Ambiguity is part of Cronin's narrative genius.

Desmonde: the final confession

Cronin was a lifelong writer and always present in his novels with his interrogatives, doubts, hopes. After publishing *"Hatter's castle"* he did not practice as a doctor anymore, but he chose a doctor as a main character of many of his novels and even a Doctor named A.J. Cronin in *"Desmonde"*. This last novel published in 1975, in his old age, lets us understand how the two figures *doctor and writer* are inevitably inseparable. *"Desmonde"* can be read as Dr Cronin's final confession.

A brief excursus of Archibald's life is presented from his hard years studies to a successful career as doctor and writer. Desmonde says to his friend Archibald: "You put yourself through school and university on a shoestring. You've no money, so have to find work as a medical assistant in a ghastly mining district in Wales. It's a hard work… You go to London, take the hardest of all medical degrees, then your MD, your D.Ph… in three years you're making seven thousand a year. You then sell out, take off for Scotland to write a novel and, now, here you are, your heavenly pictures and furniture… your Rolls Royce" [2, p. 258].

The author through *"Desmonde"* opens the door of his house to the reader where we find Mary, his wife and a dear companion of moments of troubles and joy. Mary is the woman who had accompanied him in his first experiences as writer, when he felt intolerant, agitated, nervous: "I have none of that grace and facility of composition which I admire so much in others. No sooner am I seated at my desk than I want to get up again, to wander about the room, look at the view, eat apples, suck toffee, smoke" [8, p. 106]. Mary and his children had an important role in his life and he was very grateful to them: "What a God's blessing it was for a man to have a home and a wife and sons who loved him" [2, p. 295]. She will be his great love even in her old age with serious health problems: "You are a darling, darling. And I love you with all my heart. I kissed her gently. Her lips were soft, passive, tender as a child's. [2, p. 279]. How much tenderness comes out of such an idyllic picture of a beloved fragile woman who cannot react to affective stimuli! Unfortunately, she lives in her own world and cannot greet her husband who is leaving: "Before I had reached the door she had closed her eyes" [2, p. 279].

In the last pages of the novel, Mary will be presented as an old woman who cannot recognize her sons and husband anymore. She will be admitted in a nursing home, while Cronin and Nan will live on their own under the same roof. Nan had been part of Cronin family for many years as a housekeeper and then as a secretary. Alain Davies, in his author's biography, talks about Mary's illness: "Early in the following year, 1970, Cronin arranged for his wife's admission to Pierrefonds, a nursing home in Montreal recommended by Patrick, his Doctor son" [9]. Cronin, the writer who had attracted the attention of so many readers all over the world with charming stories, reports in *"Desmonde"* the drama of his own life and confesses openly his love for Nan: "We looked at one another. I knew that I loved her and that she loved me. I had the overwhelming desire to take her in my arms – Goodbye, dear Maister, Come back soon She smiled faintly. She had seen love in my eyes – goodbye, dear darling Nan – I touched her check lightly with my lips. Then I went upstairs to my room" [2, p. 280]. In a few lines, the author reveals the secret of a pure, silent, repressed love.

In *"The Judas Tree"*, Willie, Kathy's brother, a missionary says to David "Human beings should not judge one another" [6, p. 174]. After ten years, in the end, Cronin was ready to write his confession and was not afraid to hide his secret love anymore. Cronin, after years of torment for sharing his love between two women together with a wearing sense of guilt for a sinful love, makes his own choice: living with Nan.

Father Seeber reports in a few words the end of a long suffered love story: "And you two dear people, now you are quite alone here" [2, p. 333]. The Father, wants to be sure, moreover, that his friend Archibald, still keeps his faith in God, so asks: "You've been to church this morning?... – Naturally Father… – Good, so you are still keeping faith. The castle is not fallen" [2, p. 333]. The "crevasse" [6, p. 204] in *"Judas Tree" becomes* the "castle", but Dr Cronin does not let his *ego* collapse as it happens for David Moray. The story ends with Father's wishes for the couple: "Be good, dear girl, and you will both continue to be happy" [2, p. 340].

The author writes the novel using the pronoun "*I*", a clear awareness of his *ego* after a long, hard search of himself and of a God present in the world: "Through the centuries, countless human beings have shaped their lives, with true nobility and shining example, upon God. He has brought courage to the weak, strength to the weary, hope to those lost in the shadow of despair. He is everywhere, above and around on the ocean and in the sky. He is in each one of us, if we will only seek him" [5, p. 316].

Desmond represents the final step of a long-suffering way towards liberation.

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