

Performing the Self in Joseph Conrad's "Il Conde"

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Abstract Conrad's short story "Il Conde" portrays an elderly aristocrat whose preoccupation with conventions and rituals indicates that he has reduced his identity to performing a social role. The assault of a robber shatters his stance of dignified reserve and undermines his assumption that he has succeeded in constructing a stable, invulnerable persona of a sophisticated gentleman which cannot be challenged in the confrontation with others. Goffman's concept of the performed self elucidates the protagonist's response to the traumatic experience and his frantic attempts to sustain his idealized persona. Goffman construes the self as the product of interaction, a socially constructed image rather than a substantive immutable entity. This self-image relies on the coherence of personal front, i.e. appearance and manner as well as the presence of the audience who observe and interpret the performance that an individual gives while interacting with others. Hence, the tactics that the Count employs to cope with the shock can be viewed as an attempt to defend his self-image by restoring correspondence between appearance and manner that the robber's disrespectful act of violence has subverted.

Key words Goffman; performed self; interaction; self-image; personal front

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Introduction

Conrad published "Il Conde" in *A Set of Six* (1908), a collection of short stories which, as he declared in his letter of January 26, 1908 to Algernon Methuen, were nothing more than a diversion for the reading public: "They are just stories in which I've tried my best to be *simply entertaining*" (Conrad, *The Collected Letters* 30). Contrary to what Conrad implies, the skilful reworking of the political and moral themes central to his great masterpieces, *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, proves the considerable literary potential of the volume. Hence, Conrad's wry comment betokens a somewhat self-defeating endeavour to advertise the collection as an undemanding pastime and to deny any deeper significance to be grasped in the tales. As Najder claims, this rather unfair commentary as well as the light tone that Conrad adopted suggest that he primarily aimed to disarm inevitable criticism (389). Likewise, Meyer contests Conrad's unfavourable opinion. Arguing that the writer underestimated *A Set of Six*, Meyer observes that it was not unusual of Conrad to offer a surprisingly erroneous assessment of his own output and "Il Conde," which has not ceased to intrigue the readers, is a case in point. Once again Conrad proves blind to the merits of his own text, especially the psychological intricacies that the story thrives on (Meyer 197). The titles, which feature the protagonist's name ("Gaspar Ruiz") or attributes and nicknames defining their position in society ("Il Conde," "An Anarchist," "The Informer"),¹ indicate that these stories, in contrast to what Conrad wanted to impinge on the readers' and the critics' minds, cannot be reduced to "light holiday literature" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 5), but most assuredly deserve to be read as incisive character studies. For quite a long time "Il Conde" did not enjoy much success with the critics who dismissed it as a "slight work" (Hagopian 35) and did not spare biting comments on the stereotypical depiction of the characters and the conventional plot (Graver 144). Still the story managed to provoke quite a variety of ingenious interpretations ranging from psychological insights into the protagonist's oversensitivity, shallowness and an

1 With the exception of "The Brute" bearing the title which refers to the murderous and supposedly haunted ship evincing a malicious personality and "The Duel." Interestingly, Ridley Scott, who chose to make his directorial debut with an adaptation of the latter story, modified "The Duel" into "The Duellists," thus shifting the focus of the title from the theme to the characters.

immature refusal to cope with humiliation (Graver 143; Billy 204, 207)¹ or the thematic analysis of existential insecurity intrinsic to human fate (Dolan 107) to the study of the underlying mythic scenarios² and the explication of the Count's puzzling response to the assault in terms of his covert homosexuality.³ Despite the initially disparaging evaluation of "Il Conde" and the assertions that it fails to go beyond "a straightforward piece of work" (Graver 144), it gradually won appreciation as a "deceptively simple narrative" (Billy 203) and a "superb short story" (Monod 122) which offers an array of interpretive possibilities. Conrad in "Il Conde" undoubtedly succeeds in converting a trifle anecdote into a fine examination of the protagonist's attitude which is a faint echo of Jim's search to save his lofty vision of himself and to evade any disturbing self-scrutiny. The protagonist of the story, the Count, referred to as Il Conde, is an elderly aristocrat keen on observing social proprieties and cultivating his life in concordance with the principles of gentlemanly sophistication. There is no mention of his true name or the country of

1 Meyer identifies the key psychological motif of the story as the destruction of the paternal authority by the son. On these grounds he argues that the story warrants a comparison with *The Secret Agent*, its immediate predecessor, and, therefore, was conceived of as "its antidote" (Meyer 196). In *The Secret Agent* Verloc, who plays a paternal figure to Stevie, is responsible for his death in a blow-up, whereas in "Il Conde" it is a young brutish man who assaults an elderly aristocrat so that ensuing humiliation prompts the latter's death (Meyer 196–197).

2 Wills detects what he calls two central allegories which organize the imagery and symbolism of the story, i.e. "the Fall or Expulsion from Eden allegory" and "the Ivory Tower myth of the *fin de siècle*" (22, 25).

3 Trying to grasp the ambivalence of the Count's portrayal and account for his dramatically exaggerated reaction to the assault critics postulate his covert homosexuality which he is apparently desperate to keep secret. The critics who initiated this line of interpretation were Douglas Hughes and Theo Steinmann. Keith Carabine reinforces their claims arguing that what gives credence to the interpretation of the protagonist as homosexual are Conrad's letters to Count Zygmunt Szembek, allegedly Il Conde's prototype (57). Conrad made acquaintance with Szembek on Capri and found one of his anecdotes intriguing enough to use it as the fabric of the new tale. In his analysis of the letters Carabine deciphers the clues which indicate that Conrad was most probably aware of Szembek's homosexuality (59–61). Jeremy Hawthorn concurs with this interpretation of the story and points out that only the assumption of the Count's homosexuality shows the seemingly innocent details in a new light and renders them meaningful (28). Hawthorn distinguishes between the insightful reading from a "knowing" perspective and the traditional innocent reading that most critics and readers of Conrad have practised so far taking the story at its face value and overlooking the homosexual plot since it seemed at odds with the writer's reputation (17, 25–28). In turn, Sylvère Monod challenges the exegesis that foregrounds the homosexual theme as the central one and argues that much illuminating as it is, it still does not offer "the whole truth" about the text which is so unequivocal and rich in ambiguities (118).

origin, except for a hint of his affiliation with one of the renowned noble families in central Europe. He spends most of his time in Italy whose propitious climate relieves his rheumatism and prevents an irreparable health deterioration but without any guarantee of a full recovery. The central incident of the story involves the Count being robbed in the Villa Nazionale park in Naples with the musical concert taking place in the background.

"Il Conde" offers a study, on a smaller scale, of a character whose identity relies solely on the role that he performs in society and any disruption or gesture contesting this position is tantamount to the loss of self. In this respect Goffman's concept of the performed self, also referred to as "the character one performs," "self-as-character" or "a performed character" (Goffman 252), might illuminate the strategies that the protagonist uses to handle social exchange and to construct his image of an honourable gentleman, especially his careful self-presentation before others as well as a retreat from self-inspection in favour of a rigorous obedience to conventions. In his analysis of how individuals function in society and position themselves in relation to others, Goffman delineates the project of defining the self not in terms of an autonomous substance but as an image which is a result of individuals' interaction and their efforts to create an impression on the observers (Smith 101, 108). He construes the self as "a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue [...] is whether it will be credited or discredited" (Goffman 253). Thus, Goffman comes up with the model which relies on interaction and performance as key factors for the constitution of the self. Within this model, interaction amounts to a theatrical performance whose participants are preoccupied with re-enacting their roles in front of the audience so as to produce an appropriate impression (xi, 4, 15–16). Goffman makes an important reservation which renders his conception of the self in terms of performance free from any critical claim that cynicism and manipulation are intrinsic to role-playing, namely he contends that in fact two contrasting attitudes among those involved are equally plausible – the ones who whole-heartedly identify themselves with their role and the ones who cynically engage in role-playing to mislead others (19). According to Goffman the performed self is „some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him" (252). Goffman also specifies that an individual exercises the function both of the performed self, "a product of a scene" (252), and a performer, "a harried fabricator of impressions" (253), who initiates interaction and tries to control the whole procedure of staging one's self as a character. Among the factors contributing to the identification of the self with the performed character, the

principal ones are personal front including appearance and manner¹ as well as the audience who interpret the way the individuals present themselves in the interaction (Goffman 253).

The Protagonist's Idealized Self-presentation

As Goffman argues, correspondence between appearance and manner is crucial for rendering self-presentation convincing to the observers (24–25). The Count takes great care to project an idealized image of a sophisticated gentleman and his insistence on being “correct, well ordered and conventional” (“Il Conde” 270) establishes him as a monolithic character whose performance in the interaction is entirely reliable. The description of the Count’s attire which is “just as these things should be” (270) or the comment that he was “very correct in his dress” (270) betray a concern about the impression that he makes on others and a desire to comply with standards of appropriate dress. The Count’s visit at the National Museum confirms both his aspiration to show himself as a man of great refinement and his tendency to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of life. The museum houses the artefacts of cultural significance excavated in Herculaneum and Pompeii which transform the flux of life into consummate works of art and efface the vestiges of the cataclysmic volcano eruption, a show of nature’s power to destroy, by encouraging the contemplation of the ancient legacy. Surrounded by beautiful bronzes the Count admires the statue of Resting Hermes which embodies his ideal of harmony and instils a nostalgia for a contemplative leisurely life. The Count also ensures the coherence of his personal front by keeping his comments within the bounds of the dominant discourse. Hence, he never ventures any original interpretation that might evoke controversy and refrains from exploring what lies hidden beneath the surface. His meditation on the sculpture of Resting Hermes prompts enunciations which do not go beyond clichés, “the right things” and “[n]othing profound” (“Il Conde” 269). Likewise, he can boast no particularly comprehensive knowledge of the Roman history or art. As the narrator remarks, “the only personal opinion” (271) that he articulated refers to the Romans’ predisposition to rheumatism, which is rather a trite and uninventive statement of some obvious fact and which could hardly provoke any objections. What is more, the language that the Count uses is not marred by any stylistic idiosyncrasies that might set him apart as an outsider; he speaks “no jargon of a dilettante or the connoisseur” (269). The bland meaningless adjective “nice” (274), which the narrator uses to describe the Count, encapsulates

1 Goffman uses the term “personal front” to refer to appearance which indicates one’s social status and manner which informs about the role the individual assumes in the interaction (24).

his attitude of shunning any controversy and critical judgements.¹

Moreover, the Count keeps the material aspect of his life in proportion with his restrained behaviour and unobtrusive activities. He avoids exceeding the limits not to risk ruining his fragile health and enjoys living in "a small villa" ("Il Conde" 271) or in the hotel which is "good, but not extravagantly up to date" (269); he also confines himself to possessing no more than "a few books" and pursues "moderate delights" which involve "mak[ing] a little music" or "a little amusement" (271). At the same time, he disapproves of being "extremely rich" which "would have appeared to him improper, *outré* – too blatant altogether" (272). Thus, in order to maintain coherence among the elements of personal front, such as appearance and manner (Goffman 23–24) that make up the image he wishes to project, he abstains from parading the signs of his status and indulging in luxuries, which might raise deprecatory comments. The narrator juxtaposes peacefulness and idyllic serenity that the Count enjoys in Naples against "movement, animation, opera" ("Il Conde" 271), hallmarks of the town renowned for its beauty which he seems to ignore. The discourse interspersed with these markers of his moderation portrays the Count as a man whose "nature was too kindly for strife" (272) and who is unwilling to face "startling events" (270) or to change the role that he has identified himself with. The phrase describing his family life as an alternation of "joys and sorrows" (272), an inevitable accompaniment of "marriages, births, deaths" which are "regulated by the course of Nature" and belong to "the prescribed usages of good society," demonstrates his distance to unsettling experience and an intention to counteract a possibly disruptive effect of these emotions by turning them into fossilized rituals. Likewise, Il Conde is gripped with a fear of extreme emotional impact while admiring the ancient "collection of bronzes" (269) in the museum. Overwhelmed by the visual expressiveness of the busts which represent Roman emperors, he confesses that "their faces were too vigorous, too pronounced for him" (270) implying that the countenance of these sculptures marked by the drive towards power and conquest clashes with his personal ideal of moderation and refinement.

Making Self-presentation Coherent

The anonymous first-person narrator, who meets the Count in Naples, fulfils the function of the audience interpreting his self-presentation and testifying to its

1 Dolan views the Count as a representation of childlike innocence which is, however, shattered by ugly reality (108).

sincerity. Assuming the role of a witness and a listener¹ he conveys Il Conde's story as an attempt to soften the blow to his self-image of an elite member who, by definition, should command respect and remain invulnerable to offence or to humiliating challenges of his status. By enlisting the narrator's support and sympathy for the victim as well as his condemnation of the oppressor, the Count hopes to recover recognition and re-establish his image of a polite yet reserved aristocrat whose sanctity of the self cannot be undermined. On seeing the Count soon after the incident, the narrator whose comments were saturated with signals of unflinching admiration for the Count, notices that the elderly aristocrat is not fully capable of sustaining the impression of refinement that he has made so far. He goes on to enumerate the signs of Il Conde's breakdown such as a drooping posture, haggard appearance and the use of the expression "abominable adventure" (274) which refers to the incident and which the narrator finds "sufficiently startling in that man of moderate feelings and toned-down vocabulary" (274–275). Nevertheless, the narrator disregards the dissonant impressions that subvert his lofty interpretation of Il Conde. He demonstrates his loyalty by qualifying the vocabulary that he employs to describe the aristocratic acquaintance and reflecting on the impropriety of using "a strong word" such as "wildly" which implies coarseness or disrespect and which, as he admits, seems at odds with the Count's "correct appearance" (274). Finally, the narrator declares that noticeable incongruities in the Count's demeanour and appearance cannot detract from the reputation which he has established on their previous encounters and which he equates with some immutable inner essence: "I confess I eyed him stealthily, wondering what he had been up to. In a moment, however, my unworthy suspicions vanished. There was a fundamental refinement of nature about the man which made me dismiss all idea of some more or less disreputable scrape" (275). This declaration of trust proves that the Count

1 In the critical debate the role of the narrator and his attitude towards the Count gives rise to contradictory interpretations. Schwarz denounces the narrator as "another of Conrad's imperceptive speakers," "narrow and limited" (188) who admires the Count and "fears having his world punctured by unknown terrors" (189–190). See also Hughes and Monod who fully concur with Schwarz on the narrator's lack of insight (Hughes 17, 19; Monod 123) as well as Steinmann who analyses how both the narrator and the Count suppress the embarrassing truth and distort the presentation of the incident (83). However, other critics refute the assumption that the narrator idolizes the Count and accepts his perspective without any reservations. Billy maintains that the narrator does not altogether refrain from pointing out the Count's faults (209). Hagopian insists that the narrator's irony "undercut[s] the tragic seriousness of the Count's [...] adventure" (33). Hawthorn questions the narrator's innocence and suggests that he is more perceptive about the Count's homosexual identity than meets the eye (32–33).

has succeeded in winning the narrator over to his vision of what happened and to his reconstruction of the incident which he perceives as a subversion of his self-image and which disrupts the consistency of how he presents himself to others. The narrator's use of the religiously tinged word "desecrate" to describe the impact of the assault indicates that he shares the Count's perspective as well as understands how much the Count has invested in his self-image: "His tranquillity had been wantonly desecrated. His lifelong, kindly nicety of outlook had been defaced" (284). Positioning "deface" and "desecrate" in close proximity reinforces the impression that the robbery undermines the very foundation of the Count's life, i.e. his identification with the mask which he is parading in front of others in order to avert the dismal prospect of confronting inner void behind the elegant appearances.

Although the account of the robbery incident is not free from inconsistencies that mark the protagonist's carefully constructed self-presentation, the narrator seeks to sustain *Il Conde's* coherent image of a sophisticated nobleman by downplaying his failure to stand up to the test of courage and to assert the status that he claims. Therefore, he endorses the Count's reluctance to confront the assailant¹ and takes at face value his preposterous excuse that in case he cried for help, the man might have perfidiously accused him of the attack. The Count justifies his submissive comportment claiming that as a foreigner he would stand no chance of extricating himself from legal charges. In his commentary the narrator endeavours to restore a continuity between the Count's image of a refined aristocrat and his reactions during the robbery which might raise doubts about his declared commitment to the virtues of honour and dignity. Hence, he treats what seems an unmanly timidity as evidence of the Count's laudable tendency "to shrink from scandal, much more than from mere death" ("*Il Conde*" 281) and the virtue of self-control: "the reason why he refrained gave me a good opinion of his mental self-possession" (281). The narrator also discerns a streak of willpower in the protagonist's punctilious concern with the accuracy of his account which enables him to put a rein on his emotions and makes him "systematically minute in his narrative, simply in order [...] not to let his excitement get the better of him" (275). The Count takes care to ensure

1 A question arises to what extent the blame for the assault lies with the Count who recklessly ignored the risk and whether it is legitimate to claim that he brought his own downfall on himself. Dolan describes *Il Conde* as an innocent victim shocked by an unexpected disruption of his serene vision (111). However, other critics are much more suspicious and detect flaws in this idealized picture. Graver believes that the Count himself authors his own undoing „driven to self-destruction by excessive delicacy" (142). Billy attributes the responsibility for the assault to the Count whose imprudence and a „willful entry into the world of hazard" provoked the danger (208).

that the narrator who has lent a favourable ear to his initial plea for understanding, accepts the tale without any reservations. In order to make his story logical and persuasive Il Conde insists on including “[e]very small fact and event of that evening” (276) and thus on creating a meaningful whole out of many puzzle pieces. He is said to attribute almost “mystic significance” (276) to all the details, which blackmails the listener into the state of reverent, uncritical reception and turns the story into a revelation of unquestionable truth. The expression introducing the story, “He enlarged upon” (281), illuminates the Count’s narrative strategy of giving his listener the vivid picture of what happened. He also merges his contradictory impressions into unity so as to conceal any aporias or lacunas that might render the account of the incident not entirely reliable. Therefore, even though he continues to harbour some doubts, Il Conde hastens to identify the attacker in the park with the man whom he joined at a restaurant table a short while before the incident and finally with the *Cavaliere* in the café Umberto.¹ Throughout the whole narrative the Count drops hesitant comments wondering whether his identification of the young men who caught his attention on a few different occasions was correct: “I seemed even to recognize him. [...] But I could not tell” (“Il Conde” 280). Confused by the ubiquity of the common type that these men represent, he seems unable to pinpoint the exact identity of the robber: “but there were so many there of that type that he could not be certain” (278). Safely ensconced at the café table, the Count realizes that the sanctuary where he expected to rally after the trauma of the robbery is full of other guests who bear a striking resemblance to the assailant and whose presence once again inspires “the fear [...] of being everlastingly haunted by the vision of that young man” (286). Having voiced his anxiety, the Count immediately sheds his irresolute manner in a curt declaration: “it was he, no doubt at all” (286) which stands in stark contrast to his previous evasive statements and which seems a deliberate act of fortifying himself against any uncertainty rather than a genuine belief. Thus, by convincing himself that there is none but one shadow figure accountable for all the acts of violence and persecution, the protagonist can weave possibly distinct incidents and disparate plot strands into a text which is free of gaps and which by virtue of its simplicity and coherence easily makes its way to the audience.

Dramatizing the Story of the Self

As Goffman remarks, in front of the audience the individual tries to dramatize his experience so as to capture the listeners’ attention (19, 20). To make the story

1 Hughes argues that the Count is mistaken about identifying the robber with the Cavaliere (23).

more vivid to the narrator and thus to increase its dramaturgical effect, the Count combines the verbal and the non-verbal modes and resorts to gesturing in order to re-enact the incident: "[he] acted the whole thing in pantomime" ("Il Conde" 282). In this way he manages to turn the narrative situation into a kind of spectacle in which he assumes the central role of both a storyteller and a performer in front of the narrator and who controls the self-image that he wishes to project. Moreover, to heighten the dramaturgy of the story the Count constructs a radical dichotomy of a noble, innocent victim and a fierce, vile criminal. In his account reported by the narrator, Il Conde builds up a contrast between his gentility and self-mastery and the robber who not only violates the rules of decorum but also embodies the unknown and the incomprehensible. The Count stumbles upon the robber in the empty, dark periphery of the Villa Nazionale park which stands in opposition to the illuminated centre with crowds of concert-goers circling around. Thus, the robber is associated with the realm where light fades away into darkness and where a dense wall of trees demarcate the space of unbridled nature. In this place a rational design that underlies the elegant configuration of the centre and accounts for confining nature to geometrically regular "grass plots" and "flower-beds" loses its power to integrate and structure in favour of disorderly abundance. Undifferentiated blackness and chaotic arabesques of interlacing twigs covered with "masses of inky foliage" (276) anticipate the Count's experience of stepping beyond the safe enclosure of civilised forms. Il Conde portrays the attacker's appearance in a highly exaggerated, almost grotesque way and draws attention to "the abominably savage way in which that young man rolled his glistening eyes and gnashed his white teeth" (281). This description produces the effect of defamiliarization and foregrounds the *Cavaliere*¹ as a figure of the Other who cannot be integrated into the Count's idyllic vision. The opposition of the Count and the robber is enhanced by the use of "abominable" which signals that the latter embodies negation and destructiveness whose incomprehensible nature cannot be rendered but in terms of extremely strong emotions such as repulsion. Comparisons to an animal further contribute to defamiliarizing the *Cavaliere*: the Count discerns his animal-like gestures and the manner of speaking which involves hissing "with the greatest ferocity" ("Il Conde" 280). References to madness implicit in the phrases "very ferocious" (280) and "an infuriated lunatic" (281) locate the assailant outside the domain of conventions and moderation that the Count cherishes so much. The menace that the *Cavaliere* exudes is conveyed by an implicit comparison of his eyes and teeth to a knife which

1 Billy calls the *Cavaliere* „an exponent of life and death” suggesting that he represents puzzling yet inevitable oppositions that make up the totality of human experience (204–205).

accentuates his destructive bent: “A long narrow blade. It gleamed. And his eyes gleamed. His white teeth, too” (280). In his tale, the Count tends to depersonalize the attacker by referring to him as “that creature” (280), which renders him nonhuman. Yet, the *Cavaliere*’s dog-like snarl is immediately followed by “an ordinary voice” (282). This non-sequitur which disrupts the smooth transition from the implication of the youth’s savagery to an objective and neutral assessment of his conduct affords a momentary glimpse into the Count’s strategy of manipulating his discourse so as to turn his experience into an archetypal clash of good and evil and to use the dramatic potential of this formula in order to elicit his listener’s interest and sympathy.¹

By interspersing his account of the robbery with the interludes which describe the musical performance, *Il Conde* sets the stage for the hyperbolized representation of the incident in a highly compelling story and, hence, adds to the dramatic potential of his experience. He succeeds in giving his account an aesthetically pleasing structure which captivates the listeners with its contrasts and parallels making up an intricate pattern and resolving in the grand finale.² In the Count’s narrative, the robbery runs parallel to the successive movements of the music piece which punctuate the key moments of the assault. Thus, he associates the robber’s brutality with loud music and violent sounds connoting destruction such as “crash” (“*Il Conde*” 280) and the “repeated bangs of the big drum” (282) which accompany the young man’s display of grotesquely terrifying facial grimaces. Accordingly, the contrasting moment of release from danger when the Count realizes that the knife is no longer pressed against his body correlates with music that, in an instance of good timing, mellows into “[g]reat waves of harmony” (283). Music also provides a closure in the form of “the complicated finale” whose definitive character is underlined by “a tremendous crash” (283) signalling the disappearance

1 The question whether there is any affinity between the Count and the *Cavaliere* haunts critics and remains unresolved. Gillon classifies the Count among those Conradian characters who, like Jim, are sensitive to some implicit kinship with villains, to „hidden plague spots” that they share (130). Billy also notices the similarity between the Count and the *Cavaliere* who both represent oppositions underlying the Roman world, i.e. aggressive and greedy imperialism of Rome (the *Cavaliere*) and its decadence (the Count) (206). However, Hagopian dismisses the idea that the *Cavaliere*, a member of the Camorra, represents the Count’s “secret sharer,” his “black alter ego” (34).

2 Commenting on the parallel description of music and the robbery Hughes compares *Il Conde* to a film director who tries to integrate the musical score with the film. It gives the scene the flavour of operatic extravagance and, thus, questions *Il Conde*’s veracity (Hughes 21). According to Hagopian, music enhances irony underlying the depiction of the incident and effaces any hint of its tragic overtone (33).

of the robber. The appeal of the musical fabric arises from combining contradictory aural elements, delicate and pacifying "sweet sounds" with deafening, distressing, explosive sounds such as "bursts of brassy roar, sudden clashes of metal, and grave, vibrating thuds" (277). Even the metallic tones produced by the brass instruments which foreshadow the robber's use of the knife to terrorize his victim eventually give rise to "a piece of elaborate music" whose "harmonious phrases" (277) enhance the dramatic contrast between an alarming outbreak of savagery which seems to hold sway in the midst of civilisation and the aesthetically refined backdrop that music provides.

In the Café Umberto where the Count tries to recover from the shock, he catches a glimpse of a man strikingly similar to the robber in the park. Intrigued by the similarity, he beckons Pasquale, an old cigar peddler, to make inquiries. Pasquale identifies the man as the *Cavaliere*, a university student who comes from a wealthy family and reputedly works for a Camorra, which, far from exposing him to social ostracism, earns him widespread respect even from the professors. Noticing that the Count pays a gold coin, which supposedly escaped his attention during the robbery, the *Cavaliere*, indignant at being cheated, looks in the mirror to adjust his tie and at the same time whispers insults and threats. Shocked by this unexpected attack and humiliation, the Count decides to leave Italy forever, although he realizes that the return to his homeland to suffer its unfavourable climate condemns him to a complete, irreversible loss of health and its most likely outcome—death.

Once again *Il Conde* is trying to sustain the drama of his encounter with the assailant by reiterating the story of radical dichotomy, a clash of innocence and ignominy, fine sentiments and ruthlessness. Hence, he draws attention to the *Cavaliere*'s will to spite which emanates from his "vicious glance out of the corners of the [...] eyes" ("*Il Conde*" 287) and discerns "the most insulting venom of contempt" (287–288) in his voice. The reference to the *Cavaliere*'s "peculiar expression of cruel discontent to be seen only in the busts of some Roman emperors" (286) echoes his earlier commentary on the sculptures in the museum and offers the context for reading the young man's violence through the prism of the Roman imperial tradition. Pasquale's information seems to tie in with the Count's vision of the *Cavaliere* as the embodiment of savagery that belongs to the centuries-long legacy of violence eroding civilization from within. However, the neat demarcation between the civilized and the uncivilized which enables the Count to continue his strategy of defining and presenting himself, breaks down when the narrator dismantles this coherent construal of the *Cavaliere* and claims that the old cigar seller is "of course, an accomplished liar" (287). Pasquale's creditability

is undermined by a series of unflattering, degrading epithets, “the shabby old fellow,” “an engaging scoundrel,” the “unshaven ruffian,” “[t]he old pedlar” (286), “the old vagabond” (287), which emphasize his dubious and low status of a petty, harmless cheat who knows how to please his customers by demonstrating servility and “deferential recognition combining oddly with the cynical [...] expression of his eyes” (286). Similarly, the *Cavaliere*’s metamorphosis the moment he leaves the café questions the Count’s attempt to consign his antagonist to the realm of the diabolical: “The fiendishness of his expression vanished like lightning, and he lounged out of the cafe with a moody, impassive face” (288). A surprisingly rapid change from fiendishness to melancholy subverts the representation of the *Cavaliere* as an epitome of terrifying menace and shows how the Count constructs his version so as to establish himself as an object of victimization in front of his listener.

At the same time, the Count does not give the slightest impression that the *Cavaliere*’s virulent abuse and a manifestation of contemptuous irreverence cancelling all the constants in his life have motivated him to seek self-knowledge. He seems unwilling to revise his assumptions about who he is and what has become of him in the new context which has derailed his stable and sheltered life. On the contrary the Count does not show any signs of realizing his propensity for hedonistic lifestyle or any determination to renounce his ostensibly shallow existence which before the incident amounted to taking care of his health and ensuring “freedom from physical pain” (“Il Conde” 273) to “make the waiting as easy as possible” (273). His refusal to pursue self-knowledge is suggested by the interior of the Café Umberto with its pillars which are “set all round with long looking-glasses” (285). The mirrors, which provide the foil for the confrontation with the *Cavaliere*, reinforce the symbolism of self-consciousness and set the scene for consolidating identity through self-knowledge. Yet the Count, seated beneath the looking-glass, does not take heed of it, while the *Cavaliere* feigns a glance at his reflection merely to camouflage his verbal attack. Under these circumstances the mirror becomes a source of distraction and generates impressions which distort the observers’ perception. The Count surrounded by the looking-glasses whose multiplicity produces counter reflections and proliferates intersecting perspectives omits to look at himself from a different angle. Instead, he does his utmost to restore coherence to the self-image that he has developed and recoils from redefining it in any way.

Conclusion

In the final act of his idealized self-presentation, the Count stages his departure

as a ritual suicide and, thus, skilfully turns his decision to escape out of sheer apprehension into a tragic dilemma and a heroic feat of repudiating savagery at the cost of his life. The narrator contributes to this dramatization by emphasizing that the protagonist runs the grave risk of ruining his health and facing death in the unfavourable climate of his homeland. To fend off the suspicion that the Count leaves Naples out of "timidity" and to maintain his idealizing tone the narrator invokes the concept of honourable suicide, comparing him to a "Japanese gentleman, outraged in his exaggerated sense of honour" and his departure to the "preparations for Hara-kiri" ("Il Conde" 288). Moreover, as if intent to disperse the atmosphere of desolation, the narrator unexpectedly breaks into a slightly jocular tone suggesting that the departure is not a spontaneous move of a desperate man but a deliberate effort to consolidate his image of a gentleman. With an undeniable touch of irony the narrator inscribes the Count's decision to leave Italy within the scenario outlined in the famous saying "*Vedi Napoli e poi mori*" (289) whose stereotypical message effaces the expectations of tragedy that the fateful departure might entail. It also encodes the protagonist's experience in the universally comprehensible terms of the proverbial wisdom which enable the narrator to construe him as a sophisticated representative of Western culture rather than a vanquished and ineffectual member of declining nobility. The triple repetition of the adage in one short paragraph indicates how much the narrator seeks to divert any suspicion of a cowardly escape and to overshadow it with a gesture of appreciating the widely acclaimed symbol of beauty and culture. In the concluding lines of the story, the narrator recalls the last glimpse of Il Conde and his "stony immobility, behind the lighted pane of glass" (289) which evokes the image of a dead man exposed in a glassy coffin (Billy 207) and anticipates the protagonist's inevitable demise. Yet, this is also the last opportunity for the Count to make his appearance before the audience and present himself as eventually invulnerable to any offence. While most of the Conradian characters struggle to attain self-knowledge, even if they hardly ever succeed, the Count weaves a complex web of misleading details or preposterous self-excuses to live up to the persona of a cultured, dignified gentleman who enjoys projecting the stance of benign reserve. Accordingly, he adamantly resists an uncomfortable conclusion that there is no stable identification beyond an image that he has created in the course of interaction and refrains from a confrontation with inner vacuity. In this context the subtitle of the story, "A Pathetic Tale," seems double-edged raising the question of what establishes Il Conde as an object of pity: the shock that he has suffered or his inability to abandon illusions about who he is and to admit that he has reduced his identity to the performed self. In "Il Conde" Conrad, who

excels in addressing the issues of fragmented identity, this time turns his attention to examining the ego who maintains a coherent personal front at the expense of renouncing any self-redefinition even when faced with experience which subverts his mode of envisaging himself.

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