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CONRAD'S 'SECRET GARDEN'

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Abstract: The corpus serving for this essay on Conrad's place among the most important British writers of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century is *Heart of Darkness*.

Joseph Conrad's major themes and artistic qualities are approached from two convergent perspectives generated by discourse and authority respectively. The major aim of the essay is to offer a late twentieth century perspective of Conrad's search for truth about myth and faith, the possibility or impossibility of the artistic representation of reality. It was the intention of the author to convince his readers that tradition and modernism, or rather post-modernism and post-colonialism seem to be the key-words when reassessing Conrad's oeuvre.

Conrad's interpretation of contrast between light and darkness in *Heart of Darkness* sums up and revises many of the questions formulated in different ways by the writers and philosophers belonging to the Victorian and modern period. The pattern of perpetual progression – and regression – shaping determines a dual discourse that is reminiscent of that employed by the agnostics. Yet *Heart of Darkness* famously attempts to interpret the ills of the so-called civilised world through powerful criticism of imperialism, denouncing it as propagator of darkness under the mask of the emissary of light and progress.

The central themes underlying the novella are then centered around imminent destruction and its official version as development, and through the fictionally supported strategy of 'intellectual coma,' attempt to revive the myths acknowledging with certainty the existence of God, without ignoring the fear regarding the collapse of this myth. Myth and reality journey together to the heart of the universe to be reconciled or destroyed, because in Conrad's perception the annihilation of God's authority over the universe is not the source of its liberation, but an enormous loss. Man is not endowed with the moral strength to master the responsibility that fell back onto him in a world characterised by the disappearance of the Almighty Father. This universe, Conrad tells us, is indifferent and amoral as man has lost his privileged position in the biblical and the natural scheme and progress contradicts all its promises. There are novels in which Conrad suggests that one can, even if only for a moment, reinstate the transcendental authority of the moral order, but in most of his novels, novellas and short stories he seems to suggest that the secularisation of Western culture makes man's attempt to interpret the world around him impossible. Still, Conrad insists on the impossibility of discarding the traditional interpretation and explores man's various attempts at recreating the power of myth in a universe he feels is morally incoherent. Nowhere in Conrad's works is this duality, the compulsory presence of socio-historical reality and the character's insistence on the necessity of altering it, so clearly envisaged as in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow refuses the idealisation of the appointed task at the very beginning of the story when he tells his aunt that his role is not that of an emissary of light, a lower sort of apostle. Although he reminds her that the company is run for profit, his narration is characterised by strong Biblical overtones. His urge to explore the heart of darkness seems as inexplicable as his refusal to give up the duality of his discourse when sharing his experience of the journey with us. The paradox is generated by Conrad's insistence on the idea that myth can be reinstated, even if only for a moment. Marlow is not going to experience the proximity of God in his attempt to interpret the prehistoric world he visits, and the Biblical terms obsessing him will always be strongly contrasted by a reality he cannot transcend either. He denies authority over that world on as

many occasions as the possibility arises, but the attempt itself is sufficient to trap him. He falls victim to a modernist axiom: the modern man is the victim of a universe violated in the name of social and moral advancement. The impossibility of mastering the modern world and returning to an initial state of innocence is again – as on so any occasions – expressive of Conrad's temperamental scepticism. Similar relevance is conferred in the book to the 'homesickness' and the failures of the victim of the consciousness of Imperialist Britain.

Conrad is aware of the necessity of what Northrop Frye calls the mythological universe[1] in his attempt to support the narrative survey of the socio-historical dilemmas formulated in his novels and short stories. His novels are not restricted to his own personal, or his narrator's encounters with the, for him, paradoxical value-judgements and truth value of the early twentieth century. Conrad insists on the presence of the mythological universe in a world that is deconstructing its own mythological status. The Thames is an interminable waterway linking the dark-aired city with the sea "holding our hearts together through long periods of separation,"[2] and it informs us of the possibility of transcending time, space and divine meanings. The Congo is the medium for a heroic attempt to reinterpret the meanings of this mythical universe by imposing the old metaphor on its misinterpretations. "The tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth"[3] under the overcast sky reveals the impossibility of interpretation in the mythological universe established by the narrative. Christian mythology seems to fail at this point. The attempt to bring back the harmony based on its teachings and wisdom lead us even deeper into the "heart of an immense darkness."[4] These three stations are telling of a conceptual unity supporting the imaginative unity of the Conradian text. Marlow, meditating on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of his lie, of any benevolent lie, does not kneel down in front of an altar, but sits apart "in the pose of a meditating Buddha,"[5] suggesting that if Christian mythology is not enough, other mythological expeditions are possible and desirable. Conrad's treatment of the Christian myth,

[1] Frye, Northrop: *The Great Code*, Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982
[2] Conrad, Joseph: *Heart of Darkness*, London: Bantam Books, 1989, 3-4
[3] *Heart of Darkness*, 132
[4] *Heart of Darkness*, 132
[5] *Heart of Darkness*, 132

however, is given a different interpretation through the centrality of his insistence on the attempt to re-establish, even if only for a moment, the harmony of man and God. The Conradian insistence on being suspended in this Biblical idyllic status in *Lord Jim* took Jim East. The similarities and differences between the trials of the two books can easily be established and might prove quite relevant.

The myth of innocence recreated by Jim is interpreted mainly by Jim, who maintains his status as the son of the British Empire. Kurtz identifies with the position of a pagan god of his own creation and thus the idyllic environment ceases to be idyllic and refuses to provide him with the awareness of the myth that he is trying to recreate. It is Marlow who attempts to impose Christian value judgements on the world dominated by Kurtz, but the Christian myth is incompatible with the pagan legend, although the central metaphor of that idolatry comes to dominate the twentieth century man, the unquestionable protagonist of the novella. Ivory generates power and mystifies its quality as dead matter. The myth of the Congo assumes the quality of a structure within a structure: it has, just like the book taken as a whole, a total structure in that it starts and ends as a meditation on myth and power, enclosing the demonstration of how imperialism turns against itself and its idols. The truth about the creation of Kurtz's world is revealed, as is the Apocalypse of that world, and this inquiry never ceases to be suspended between the two meditations set in the civilised world as they serve as its beginning and end. Through analogy, transfer of symbols and metaphors the two worlds and their respective mythologies overlap, creating new meanings to both levels. The Biblical environment cannot be equated with the possibility of a new act of creation and as a consequence the hope of the alienated twentieth century man to reinforce his faith in a universe governed by Christian myth and get reconciled with his own status in this century is undermined. The world envisaged by the book does not succumb to its interpretation of itself as a living hell because it comes to be dominated by the coherence of its socio-historical and mythical dimensions, further perfected by the dissonant quality of its use of mythological and linguistic metaphors.

As we have already mentioned, in reference to his mission in the service of the company Marlow, dismisses the idea of his being a lower kind of apostle, but paradoxically he adopts all through his journey a Biblical discourse.

His mythical discourse becomes clearly the expression of progression and regression, of the erotic and the thanatic quality. Progression is used here to express the hero's attempt to interpret the 'civilising mission' of the company using constructive religious discourse: "pilgrims", "apostles". This discourse in itself comes to be employed within a thanatic context, meaning the death of that discourse: the concrete noun objects are defined through portentous and vague qualifications: the pilgrims are faithless, the apostles are false, and we become participants in a "weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares."[6] Progression is not the expression of the erotic, but of thanatos, the desire to die, to be swallowed up by the uncertainty defining the expedition as the rival discourse deconstructs the initial meaning of progression, the process intended to clarify meanings having mythical dimensions. Regression into the 'primitive' world is, on the other hand, simultaneously governed by Eros, the desire to chart the mythical parallels that might create order in and love of what is assessed by virtue of prejudice as 'prehistoric', that is, pre-Christian, chaos. Marlow is dominated by the desire to experience this chaos. The fact that he does not idealise his appointed task contrasts his insistence on his status of the person chosen for this mission. Marlow repeatedly states that he is not one of them, that is he is isolated among those people and he has no point of contact with them.[7] The Europeans he so insistently separates himself from become the agents of the decaying West, and Marlow alone is granted the right to set out in search of God. Considering his standing, his search can be defined as an attempt to reintegrate the modern man into a state he seems to have lost forever. His pilgrimage in spite of its objective, physical progression remains essentially static, because its real destination is, and remains, a spiritual one. The snake that charmed him,[8] becomes a recurring motif and even the river Congo comes to be perceived as "an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea ...."[9] The religious terminology and the biblical allusion to the snake, together with the loss of the "blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. ... [which] had become a place of

[6] *Heart of Darkness*, 63
[7] Heart of Darkness, 61
[8] *Heart of Darkness*, 53
[9] *Heart of Darkness*, 52

darkness"[10] seem to disclose the heart of the matter. The heart of light, the Garden of Eden becomes the heart of darkness that is hell. No wonder Marlow remarks "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of the continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth."[11] In spite of this comprehensive picture, Marlow insists on revisiting the Garden of Eden, which he only dreamt of in his childhood. The whispers he can hear from the secret garden tempt him to open the gate, and, as if in a spiritual coma, he can hear those voices although the garden is filled with the breath of death and it offers a sublimes view of misery and greed. The meaning of the words dies, and the religious overtones are persistently subverted by the rival discourse already noted: the 'merry dance of death and trade"[12] becomes the spiritual destination formulated by this discourse. Adjectives gain more power, conferring a mystical quality to concrete imagery unfolding through the journey and practically blocking interpretation as the "implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention."[13] F. R. Leavis is mistaken when he writes that Conrad tries :

> to impose on his readers and on himself ... a "significance" that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce. ... [an] insistence [that] betrays the absence, the willed "intensity," the nullity. He is intent on making a *virtue out of not knowing what he means.*[14]

Conrad is actually making a virtue of showing that no meaning can be attached to a world suspended between belief and disbelief. Through the two clearly distinguishable discourses Conrad shows the impossibility of the modern man's dream to reinstate the Biblical world parallel to his insistence on the attempt to return to that primary state of wholeness. The search for the moral meanings, and truth of human existence through progression and regression, through the thanatic and the erotic desire are revealed as non-definable. The metaphysical paradox is complemented by the physical paradox and

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[10] *Heart of Darkness*, 52
[11] *Heart of Darkness*, 60
[12] *Heart of Darkness*, 62
[13] *Heart of Darkness*, 92-93
[14] Leavis, F. R. : *The Great Tradition*, London: Chato & Windus, 1979, 180

the infinite negativity is further generated by the positivity of the repeatedly formulated presence of the Christian myth. At the textual level the adjectival epithets kill the instant meaning of the concrete nouns, but at the same time contribute to the extension of the overall mystical quality of the search for truth, throwing it into the obscure world of the past. As we have already stated, the destination of the pilgrimage itself is suspended between the two kinds of discourse. The deconstructive discourse undermines the initial metaphysical terms Marlow uses. The impossibility to apply metaphysical discourse to a quest that is declaredly of religious quality in the context of the *Heart of Darkness* is in itself purporter of the meaning of the book convincingly formulated by the title of the novella: the meaning searched for has dissolved in the heart of darkness. Marlow himself is misled by the false deity reigning over the world, although that world is partly of his own creation. He discovers that Kurtz is rather a Cain than the Adam he had hoped to find. The man in the Garden of Eden is not Adam, but a shaman idol characterised by the infinite negativity already mentioned. This also means that the Garden created by God to host Adam and Eve is the realm of "many powers of darkness."[15] Karl Miller's interpretation of Kurtz as Marlow's 'secret sharer' and 'adversary self' seems to stand the test of the text, but he attaches too far-reaching meanings to Marlow's lie to Kurtz's intended.[16]Kurtz, the double, becomes the projection of the loss of the noble ideals searched for in that particular geographical and atemporal context. Identification with his 'social' double dictates Marlow the terms of nightmare. Once civilisation comes to be identified with savagery through the parallel identification of Marlow with Kurtz, the negation of the negation seems to be the only solution out of the motionless nightmare dominating that world. The horror faced by Kurtz is Marlow's victory over his dark double, the act being identical to the resurrected painting's horrified cry of joy seeing dead Dorian Gray's nightmarish body. No wonder Marlow does not give up his attempt to transcend reality and reach its metaphysical meanings. It is only that he does not adopt the posture of a Christ figure and his position is reminiscent of a meditating Buddha.

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[15] *Heart of Darkness*, 116

[16] Miller, Karl: *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985

II

Britain's status as the greatest imperial power of the world brought enormous benefits to the mother country, but it also created a set of disturbing dilemmas. The colonies, those remote countries, following certain anthropological expertise, came to be declared the cradle of human civilisation. Any journey to Africa could then be interpreted as a journey back into the past. There was also the idea of the white man's 'superiority' over the tribes of Africa. The idea that as a result of development the present should be superior to the past is not paradoxical in itself. However, Conrad seems to suggest at the beginning of the story that if one travels from this amoral present into the past there are at least three possibilities the traveller into the past can choose from: it can offer him a glimpse into the source of that amoral status by contrasting it to the moral one; the traveller can choose to abandon the amoral world and live in the moral one; or he can return to the amoral world with the ambition to save the world he started from.

All three alternatives fail, because the 'civilised' man is faced with an altered version of his past.

Marlow, the son of the good old continent wants to undertake an enterprise which is even more difficult, if not impossible. Henry James's Americans were at a loss when they had to amend the system of values dictated by their home environment in an equally 'civilised' world. Conrad's European cannot cope with the system of values – be they moral, ethical, social or ideological – even in his own country. But the endeavour is the projection of a historical fact, it is part of the problems inclusive of Europe's, and implicitly, Britain's colonial expansion, generating an overwhelming anxiety for the late Victorian mind. Conrad insists on the mythical implications of the 'civilised' man's journey to the 'primitive' world and he fully explores the dangers awaiting his characters. In *Heart of Darkness*, the 'prehistoric' world becomes an expression of a double sense of dislocation in the Congo. Kurtz is the white man who 'went native', but he cannot resist the 'idol' of the white man which is ivory and all it stands for. The basic theme underlying the novella might gain new dimensions, but it remains essentially the same: the collapse of the myths which had postulated the existence of God, the transcendental authority of the moral order, and the privileged position of man

within the natural and social scheme which has turned him into victim of his own desires and consciousness.

Conrad's image of Africa is determined by Western imagination in *Heart of Darkness*. This allows for its interpretation as a voyage into the unknown, incomprehensible depths of the human self, the already mentioned Biblical dimensions implied. As Goonetilleke puts it, Marlow's sensation that instead of reaching the centre of the African continent, they were approaching the centre of the earth marks, a fantastic intuition on Conrad's part in the light of the current Noah's Arc theory stating that:

> Humans evolved recently, probably less than 200,000 years ago, in sub-Saharan Africa and then migrated 100,000 years later to take over the world [...] Humanity's ancestral home was Africa – for gene analysis shows African people have a longer evolutionary history than other races and are probably the fountainhead of mankind.[17]

As we have already mentioned in Conrad's time, the 'primitive' occupied an ambiguous place as both the domain of contemporary 'savages' as well as a reminder of the past of Europe itself. Thus the Conradian hero is searching back into the remote past for an image of himself and the Victorian society he comes from. This is why Marlow, the participant omniscient narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, has to face the clashing of past and present, individual and society, the 'civilised' world and the 'primitive' world. But the 'prehistoric' world Marlow faces is unintelligible for him.

Kurtz, the character purporter of symbolic meanings of the 'civilised' man, has to perish because he is not able to maintain his cultural identity when trying to subdue the mystery of the 'prehistoric' world. The cross-cultural contacts prove dangerous to both the 'civilised' and the 'primitive'. The already mentioned false confidence of the Victorian era, namely that the British were at the top of the world because they were the most enlightened, progressive, civilised race in history, is also challenged by Conrad in the *Heart of Darkness*, although the colony visited is the Belgian Congo.

[17] Robin McKie, 63

Through Marlow, Conrad adopts a central observer, a first person narrator in the Jamesian mode. The perspective is intended to support the British, and the universal implications of imperialism and its dehumanising effects on the representatives of both the 'civilised' and the 'primitive' world. If on one level *Heart of Darkness* is a serious commentary on imperialism, on another level it is an exciting story providing a comprehensive, believable, yet unsettled exploration of the human soul.

Marlow's tone sounds honest, because he quite often reminds us of his limits in understanding and interpreting the world he set to explore. He lies though in the course of the novel (when he intimidates the brickmaker, to Kurtz, to the Russian, and to Kurtz's fiancée), but he is trying to be as honest as possible when relating the story of the white man in dark Africa. It also should be noted that Marlow is an Englishman who finds a job with a Belgian imperial company in Africa providing the contemplation of the problems of racism, colonialism and nation extended to international, universal dimensions. The Thames becomes the symbol of this universal quality having strong British implications when at the opening of the novella, Marlow, the omniscient participant narrator, refers to the river crossing London by saying that:

The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of the day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth.[18]

The tranquil dignity at the decline of the day could easily be associated with the state of the British Empire as interpreted by many of the Victorians. The spatial extension suggested by the above lines is joined by an extension in time from present to past, as if anticipating the meanings of the story that follows. Marlow puts the imperialism of the British in line with that of the Romans, and he formulates quite a serious criticism of Roman colonialism and colonialism in general:

[18] *Heart of Darkness*, 8

They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – it is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means that taking away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.[19]

Still he finds justification for British imperialism in its efficiency and its idea, certainly exposing awareness of the unconscious hypocrisy he betrayed in *Lord Jim*. When Marlow says that it is good to see the vast amount of red on the map (red stands for the British colonies), there is a touch of nationalism in his statement. But his loyalty to the British Empire has also elements of a kind of positive discrimination based on historical facts, namely that British Imperialism had become so experienced that it was able to rectify at least some of the worst features of its previous stages ill-famed for some of its practices like slave-trade. Marlow is sent to the Belgian Congo, the population of which dropped drastically during the European rule. The Belgians, the French, the Portuguese and the Spanish were extremely aggressive towards the native populations in their colonies. Clearly, Marlow's national blindness is part of Conrad's themes in his fiction.

Conrad's presentation of the imperial theme begins in London and is continued in Brussels, culminating finally in the Congo. Marlow speaks of London as a place that has been one of the dark places of the world, but the imperial theme is projected against a European context (even Kurtz is of mixed parentage), since he intends to ask the question whether the white man is man enough to stand the tests the Romans had to stand. The answer will never be formulated because the novella remains open-ended. Marlow's experience of Africa interpreted at this level is inconclusive.

In Brussels, the headquarters of the Belgian Empire, Marlow is still confident:

[19] *Heart of Darkness*, 9

It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital -you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle.[20]

But clearly, a lower sort of apostle hasn't got the power to bring light into the darkness of the Congo, and this revelation makes him feel in a very short time a kind of imposter. When Marlow leaves Brussels for the Congo, he is witness to the real face of imperialism:

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. there wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts [...] We gave her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a-day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overrated catacomb ...[21]

There is an air of alienation and frightening absurdity surrounding the man-of-war and the colonies. In *Heart of Darkness*, realities outside Marlow are more important than his own reactions since he proves a deficient 'narrative filter'. Marlow, the governing narrative force, is hesitant because he is not sure that he can impart his impressions; what's more there are frequent instances when he doubts the validity of his own understanding. He is characterised by a kind of compulsive detachment, the role of which is to protect him against falling victim to the world he is trying to interpret. The distance is that between 'civilisation' and the 'primitive' world, and Marlow's is also the detachment of the present when investigating its own past. The different perspectives are used by Conrad to illustrate the complexity of the matter. Thus the realities outside Marlow become more important, and in some sense refuse the authority of the narrator over their existence (At times Marlow is refused the capacity of shaping the plot of the novella.). This explains why Marlow quite often finds it very difficult to translate what he sees. His detachment determined some critics to label the book as racist

[20] *Heart of Darkness*, 21
[21] *Heart of Darkness*, 21

and culturally imperialist, but *Heart of Darkness* suggests more of a sense of psychological discontinuity generated by the above mentioned hardships of the 'civilised' man when trying to understand the 'prehistoric' man, than racial prejudice. These problems are openly stated by Marlow in the book. He renegotiates these difficulties with his listeners within the text, just as Conrad attempts to translate an altered version of his experiences in Africa for his audience through the novella. Marlow tells his listeners that he wants to tell them what he saw. The sights which Marlow perceives are not easily imparted; thus, the language in which experiences are related is notoriously inexact. Nevertheless, the sense of sight, of clarity of vision, is an important if compromised value of the novella and it clearly negates the idea of the superiority of the 'civilised' world over the 'primitive' world. Marlow is after all the 'agent' of civilisation unable to comprehensively interpret the world he visits. Sight, the ability to see things, is obsessively repeated in the novella. The Harlequin's highest praise for Kurtz is, after all, that "he made me see things – things."[22] At the beginning of the second part of the novella, Marlow says: "As for me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time."[23]

As we have already stated, Marlow is aware of the tremendous difficulties of relating the visual truth to its deeper meanings and to his listeners and he cries out in frustration: "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?"[24] Marlow's exasperation is expressive of a palpable sense of dislocation on his side in the Congo. The reader who expects the mistiness to clear as Marlow progresses towards the heart of darkness and towards the revelation promised at the beginning of the journey is faced with a thickening fog in which meaning seems to be swallowed. As he looks out from the steamboat, shrouded in mist, he clearly formulates this dislocation:

She (the steamer) had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just

[22] *Heart of Darkness*, 55
[23] *Heart of Darkness*, 34
[24] *Heart of Darkness*, 30

nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.[25]

The failure of even the empirical perception of the dark, alien and unknown continent is clearly stated by these lines. Marlow in consequence does not comment on the outer realities but his description rises to a dramatic tone. Avoiding the interference of his inner state, he controls his compassion so that there is no trace of sentimentality, although the plight of the black labourers is clearly formulated:

Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of controlled collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or pestilence ...[26]

The narrative restraint intensifies the horror of the scene where people are dying slowly, the cause being the pernicious effect of the 'civilising' process. Marlow's language is symptomatic of his predicament: his adjectives are not meant to define, his noun-objects are mainly abstract. His destination comes to be dissolved into the heart of darkness as his journey becomes a spiritual attempt, rather than an objective search for the station where Kurtz is dying. The discourse seems to submerge the initial terms of Marlow's quest and becomes expression of an anti-message. The difference between moral fictional attempt (Marlow's attempt to discover the truth about Kurtz) and amoral reality contribute to the central theme of the story.

The structure of *Heart of Darkness* is provided by Marlow's journey to and from the heart of Africa. Since the unifying centre of this linear structure is Marlow, his related experience seems to be of utmost relevance when trying to comprehend the truth about imperialism.

Marlow describes the Eldorado Exploring Expedition indignantly, and he is also critical of the key imperial agencies, the public

[25] *Heart of Darkness*, 41
[26] *Heart of Darkness*, 27

companies and the local authorities. The central station is a nest of 'pilgrims' who are only interested in one idol and that is ivory:

There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it of course. It was unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account – but as to effectually lifting a little finger – oh, no."[27]

Ivory becomes a leitmotif; it is to the Congo what silver is to Costaguana in *Nostromo*. It is the actual raw wealth, but it also has a symbolic application. Ivory is dead matter which is still shiny, expressing the paradox of Western civilisation in that it is certainly more often worshipped and it affects the situation in the Congo more than the 'civilised' man's by now lost faith in the Almighty. The object of Marlow's 'pilgrimage' is Kurtz, who is put on a kind of pedestal by those referring to him, and during the three-month stay at the Central Station Marlow becomes a kind of disciple to a deity of his own making. Kurtz becomes the anticipation of spiritual comfort, but Marlow realises that the Adam he had hoped to find is, in fact, a Cain.[28]

Kurtz abandons his faith and 'civilisation' although his greed for power and material wealth stems from recent developments of that world's distorted sense of what is right and what is wrong. He may have been successful in the ivory trade, but he becomes a captive of the Congo. He is the victim of the psychological and cultural anxieties caused by his attempt to cross the shadow-line into a more 'primitive' culture. Marlow's admission that he had been robbed of belief is also a verdict on the civilisation of which Kurtz has been representative. It is a situation symptomatic of Conrad, since as we have already mentioned, Conrad remained aware all his life of the plight of the perpetual border-dweller, and he classified himself as 'homo duplex'. The psychological implications allow for the

[27] *Heart of Darkness*, 39
[28] Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, 100

interpretation of Marlow's search for Kurtz as creating a kind of double of his own self, whereas Kurtz becomes a kind of double of Marlow. The frequent ambiguity of the personal pronouns when used in reference to himself and Kurtz is probably not accidental. Kurtz is trying to identify with the 'primitive' world. He is a border-dweller, a kind of madman whose madness is the result of mismanaged assimilation resulting in awkward cultural displacement. He gives up his identity trying to adopt a new one, but his sense of the acquired identity is the result of the reactions he managed to produce in the 'savages' whom he grows to threaten and rule. But these reactions are misleading and certainly fully contribute to the sense of displacement and disorientation in the case of Kurtz. Conrad in many instances depicts this alienation that leads to dislocation, as when Marlow states that:

There was nothing either above or below him – and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the Earth.[29]

It is clear that the reference does not concern the land of the Congo only. This image formulates the culmination of fears that displacement could lead to the loss of the self. Because Africa in *Heart of Darkness* is not simply a continent the map of which was geographically discovered, but, as Marlow often admits, it is the mysterious land where the lack of knowledge and genuine interest of the 'civilised pilgrims' proved insufficient for their survival. At the beginning of the novella Marlow sets out on a journey in search of the lost vitality of the West, the essential wholeness man has lost in the course of its material progress, the distinctly human godlike stature the late Victorians were not certain about anymore. His attempt is then the attempt to reintegrate the 'symbolic' and the 'real,' the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' Marlow himself is not fully aware of his motives determining his journey, but in his account we always feel an intense anticipation of Biblical significances: "I [...] could not shake off the idea [...] The snake had charmed me [...] I felt somehow I must get there..."[30] The limits of understanding Africa

[29] *Heart of Darkness*, 65
[30] *Heart of Darkness*, 53

and the people populating it seem to persist. Marlow feels the impossibility of appropriating Africa to his Victorian perceptions:

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness [...] We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet [...] The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us, who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled.[31]

Marlow admires the 'prehistoric' man:

They had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there.[32]

And Marlow's mission in this 'prehistoric' land is to find Kurtz and bring him back from the heart of darkness. Marlow admires Kurtz as well, in agreement with nearly all the characters, who present him as a great man.

The presentation of Kurtz occupies a few pages and he speaks very little, but he is discussed before and afterwards. Kurtz came to the Congo equipped with moral ideas and this places him in the eyes of Marlow above the other Europeans whose only purpose is:

To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land [...] with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.[33]

Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is sincere, but it is empty rhetoric, and in the postscript he suggests that all the 'brutes' should be exterminated. His humanitarian ideals when confronted with the heart of darkness prove futile and degenerate. Marlow's expectations prove to be false: all that remains of the Eden of his childhood is the serpent, immense and with his head in the sea. Marlow is given the awareness of the

[31] *Heart of Darkness*, 37
[32] *Heart of Darkness*, 17
[33] *Heart of Darkness*, 50

cruel farce which is the reality of the journey, the 'merry dance of death and trade' in which he takes part. Conrad seems to suggest that this is the only thing that can happen to the humanitarian pretences of imperialism. Marlow observes that Kurtz lost his authority over his own self and became a captive of the Congo. Kurtz is unable to resist the lure of the alien; life in the wilderness makes him physically ill twice and finally both his intellectual and physical integrity is undermined. He gives up his European identity and becomes a captive of his disturbed imagination in the dark continent. Kurtz shows no trace of the lofty ideals he declared when arriving to his post. Having shed all his formerly declared high ideals Kurtz betrays, exploits and terrorises the natives. He even corrupts them by employing African villagers to fight their fellow men exclusively for his benefit. The 'civilised' savage proves to be worse than the plain 'barbarian' he set to 'civilise.' In spite of his extremely short active presence, the character of Kurtz has preoccupied many of the readers of the novella. Critics have been trying to state the source of Kurtz's character and they identified it as being derived from Marlow's *Doctor Faustus*, the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (Hades), Dante's *Inferno* and the legend of Lucifer respectively. Kurtz's personality and fate most certainly stand for the ills of imperialism, but in the context of the other negative characters representative of colonialism, racism and malevolent greed he surely gains a new dimension. The Manager plots against Kurtz, but he is very cautious and even his evil is negative, weak and mean. The brickmaker is a spy, whom Marlow considers a 'papiermache' through whom one could poke one's finger without finding anything else but a 'little loose dirt'. These people cannot attain the stature of man while Kurtz is in possession of ideals and, in spite of his madness, he is man enough to face the darkness generated by imperialism when he revisits prehistoric places and times, he is man enough to be damned. His final cry: "The horror! The horror!" is interpreted by Marlow as a moral victory and a rejection of 'going native'; nevertheless, 'civilisation' is shown as suffering an overwhelming moral defeat. Marlow is trying to avoid being affected by his experience in Africa and maintains his honesty and humanity. Detached as he is, his mind still needs soothing after the nightmare he entered and finally managed to escape. After the

Congo journey he remarks: "It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing."[34] Against this socio-historical background, Kurtz's story is a journey into the depths of man's unconscious, revealed against the darkness generated by colonialism. The public theme and the personal theme are linked, and it is the public theme that brings out the personal theme and leads to its development. Just as in *Lord Jim*, the public theme is that of imperialism, and the personal theme is that of man confronted with the realities of this world and his own self.

Commonwealth literary criticism often accuses Conrad of racism, asserting that *Heart of Darkness* distorts truth and cultural reality about Africa. Chinua Achebe launches a serious attack against Conrad when he writes:

> Conrad was a bloody racist [...] And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanisation, which depersonalises a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No it cannot.[35]

Felix Mnthali argues much in the same way:

> Conrad attacks Europe's scramble for Africa [...] This attack is all the same neutralised by Conrad's acceptance of on of the cornerstones of modern imperialism, namely, racism.[36]

Conrad himself admitted that he had no sufficient knowledge of Africa, and to avoid 'responsibility' for not portraying the natives of the continent and their traditions with the exactness of an anthropologist he uses Marlow in the novel as a mask for his limited knowledge and insight. Marlow's African journey begins and ends in Europe, and the final image of Brussels is pitched at a lower key than those of Africa. Marlow's reactions to the civilised world are similar to those of Swift's Gulliver returning to England:

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome

[34] *Heart of Darkness*, 121
[35] Chinua Achebe, 788
[36] Felix Mnthali, 93

beer, to dream their insignificant silly little dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew.[37]

Conrad states the necessity of "solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts" [38] as essential for an artist, and in the introduction to *Almayer's Folly* he refutes the criticism he has received for writing on 'decivilised' people:

And there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away [...] I am content to sympathise with common mortals, no matter where they live; in houses or in tents, in the streets under a fog, or in the forests behind the dark line of dismal mangroves that fringe the vast solitude of the sea. For their land – like ours – lies under the inscrutable eyes of the Most High.[39]

Sincere, straightforward and convincing. There are other examples to support the idea that racism is far from Conrad's intentions. In *A Personal Record*, for example, he writes:

An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood – a matter of calm and deep conviction both lasting and consistent.[40]

The sense of mystery in *Heart of Darkness* certainly cannot be equated with covert racism, since the mystery is the shadow of the prehistoric times Europeans like Kurtz and Marlow are willing to face in Africa. Kurtz tries to surrender for the sake of understanding both past and present, but he becomes the victim of such a daring attempt. Marlow formulates this idea explicitly:

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[37] *Heart of Darkness*, 120–1
[38] *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, xii
[39] *Almayer's Folly*, viii
[40] *A Personal Record*, vii

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?[41]

Marlow cannot find the answer to this dilemma, but experiences the temptation of such a perspective: Kurtz had stepped over the edge "while I [Marlow] had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot."[42] The Harlequin expresses awareness of a similar attraction to identify with this destructive mystery, when he states:

I went a little farther, ... then still a little farther – till I had gone so far I don't know how I'll ever get back.[43]

The Russian is a pastiche, he doesn't have the power to totally immerse himself into the myth of Africa. But many of Conrad's characters jump into the unknown. Remember Marlow's words referring to Jim's jumps. His first jump was the result of a similar attraction to the forces of evil in 'civilisation', his second jump conferred onto him the white man's burden, but his inability to immerse himself definitely into the adoptive culture caused his ultimate failure. Kurtz 'goes native' and surrenders to the world he finds in the Congo and it is this that brings about his destruction. He is led by a definite feeling of superiority and pretends to act under the 'white man's burden'. The Congo is a mysterious land and has a destructive magic for the 'civilised' man, so Marlow cannot fulfil his task and bring Kurtz to Europe. After meeting the European woman who worshipped Kurtz, Marlow ends his story in the pose of a meditating Buddha, as if suggesting further meditation on the topic to the reader and the Thames is seen by him as leading to the heart of darkness generated by Western imperialism, the death of which is foreshadowed by Kurtz's self-destructive attitude in the Congo. Marlow himself recovers to finish his self-appointed task 'to dream the nightmare out to the end.'

The imperialist discourse in itself proved a failure. As we have already noted, the misreadings stemming from the assumption that

[41] *Heart of Darkness*, 68
[42] *Heart of Darkness*, 69
[43] *Heart of Darkness*, 54

the metaphysical aspects and their meanings can be ignored created the premises of Conrad's being called a racist.

It is true that one has the sensation that the two sections of this paper were speaking about two definitely different stories. Both analyses are possible but in themselves tend to ignore the truth about the book, and certainly cannot formulate the complex thematic implications of the novella. Therefore the third section of this paper will follow Conrad's implied stage directions. When Marlow adopts the posture of a Buddha he suggests further meditation on all the issues problematized in the reverse mode, an interpretation where reality cannot be separated, but should be interpreted in their interrelations. Since perception and clarity and mystery are approached through two visibly governing discourses alternatively assuming progressive and regressive qualities, identifying the third discourse container of the two governing ones seems to offer a most comprehensive perspective.

III

The end of the novella clearly shows that we have read a work of self-reflexive introspection referring back to Marlow's insistence on the idea that he wants his listeners to see. The attempt is reminiscent of Kant's theory asserting that the outside world can only be understood if filtered through the interpretation of the individual's introspection. Marlow's uncertainty suggests the difficulties he faces when trying to define his own concept of self in relation to the world around him. To gain the dimensions of the representative 'particular' he has to extend the meanings of the immediate world around him to the dimensions of the universal. Objective reality cannot be changed. This means that the two lies we have mentioned are the openly formulated echoes of a deeper, more severe, hidden lie. The agent purporter of these lies as already noted belongs to the realm of discourse. The rhetoric of imperialism has already been shown in its rival relation to the rhetoric of metaphysics, but if we are right in sensing the imminent will to lie, there must be a third discourse realised through a virtually invisible rhetoric. We could define this discourse as pseudo-mythical realism. The function of this discourse is to chart the mental landscape of the protagonist suspended between the mythical and realistic discourses without obeying to any

of them and yet not dominating them. The strategy in itself is an enormous lie, since the protagonist's meditation persists from the opening lines to the last line, because the central theme is not altered, it remains intact. The function of this relatively sophisticated network of discourses is to maintain the hero's right to interpret the end of the search for self as a beginning for an identical search. The terminology used here does not belong to Conrad's time, since it is extensively based on modernist and postmodernist views. Marlow's interpretation of the Company and Kurtz reminds us of what the narrator of the *Nigger of the Narcissus* suggested: to be conscious is to be over-civilised, to dominate through lie.

This is why his critique is conducted in the very terms of what it sets out to condemn. He ends, therefore, by participating in the violence of its conceptual imposition.[44]

The horror generated by this lie becomes visible for Marlow only when mirrored by Kurtz's despair. The two discourses have already created two different, but overlapping narratives characterised in turns by realism and mythology. The attempt to support the realistic discourse with the mythological one ended in corruption of both discourses, decomposing interpretation and even perception. To dominate the chaos resulting from this strategy, Conrad shifts from ethics to aesthetics, a shift which passes unnoticed at the level of the two parallel narratives, but imposes itself as the only governing principle through the reformulated consistency in the relationship of the protagonist and the material he is *re-telling* us. Marlow becomes conscious of his privileged position as the narrator retrospectively telling a story. Marlow's aesthetic consciousness has the power to redeem only if he negates that the dark power he tried to dominate through his perverse insistence on its mythological interpretation fell back on him. This explains the presence of the third discourse, which can only be interpreted when reversing the logic of the two already identified ones. Deconstruction of the two grand narratives does not come as a surprise to us since, as we have already noticed, both the mythological and the realistic discourses contained the antagonistic

[44] Waugh, Patricia: *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992, 90

quality generated by the progressive and regressive elements also identified as the erotic and the thanatic wish propelling the narrative. Most of the symbolic material through the novella remains Marlow's exclusive dominion. He is not willing to share it with anybody else. The existence of this third discourse can be supported through Conrad's perception of the role of the artist. Marlow wants to be a mythical hero who creates his world to the power of his word, but he is reduced to the status of the teller of the story. The idea of the protagonist becoming a discourse is repeatedly expressed in the novella. Marlow interprets Kurtz as discourse[45], and is himself seen as a discourse by the frame narrator.[46] Daphna Erdinast Vulcan's explanation reaches a similar conclusion, when she writes:

He subverts the illusion of authority which is associated with the teller's voice, and pre-empts the notion of 'a clue' which the frame narrator anticipates of him, just as he had anticipated the darkness to be illuminated by Kurt's voice. The metaphysical vacuum, the denial of transcendental authority or 'voice', sets the scene for a modified view of the artist: no longer a mythical being, an omnipotent creator of the world, he is now seen in the Orphic role, as a hero who descends into hell, armed with a voice to enchant the furies for a while, and returns empty-handed to tell his tale.[47]

But the two explicit discourses governing *Heart of Darkness* cannot create the meaning of the novella by themselves. Their very logic also seems to suggest the existence and even the importance of the third discourse. As light and darkness generate contrast, so do the two discourses create the third one. The third discourse looks back on 'hell' and 'heaven,' considering neither of them able to dominate the other. It is true that the heart of light is as intangible and threatening through its absence as is the heart of darkness, but the novella as a totality renews the validity they lose if interpreted separately. After all, we are face to face with an early fictional formula for a paradox convincingly interpreted by both the ancient and the modern mind.

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[45] *Heart of Darkness*, 113, 115

[46] *Heart of Darkness*, 83

[47] Erdinast-Vulcan, Daphna: *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 108

T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" convincingly reinstate the love of God as the very meaning of life and to support his search for divine love, Eliot insists on a similar interpretation of time, space and morality, emphasising the validity of the Heraclitean 'river of stream' and continuous flux.

> Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
> And the end and the beginning were always there
> Before the beginning and after the end.
> And all is always now.
> (T. S. Eliot: East Coker)

The meaning of the two discourses can be only interpreted through their retroactive assessment, and in this reassessment we have to accept Marlow's help. There are 'mouse-traps,' that is, moments which dramatise the required strategy of interpretation in the novella itself. For example when Marlow realises that the man he thought to be divine is a monster, he has to search back and reinterpret both discourses. When he realises that the idol he has created has the power to deconstruct him, Marlow disclaims authority over him, but later he revises his attitude both intellectually and practically. The third discourse offers a vision of past in present with the definite ambition to contain future. It is essentially modernist in that it discloses the knowledge that we cannot know the truth about heaven and hell or ourselves, and warns us about the dangers of ignoring our limitations. However, the progressive and regressive quality it assumes tells us that we still need to believe that we can know.

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