

Individual self actualization and Human Predicament in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*

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"Droll thing life is -- that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself -- that comes too late -- a crop of inextinguishable regrets."

– **The Heart of Darkness**

The idea that an individual's self-development as an important pursuit is a comparatively recent one in human history; and the idea that the arts are vehicles of self expression or can serve the purpose of self-development is still more recent. Jacob Burckhardt summarizes the development of individuality as follows :

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness - that which was turned within as that which was turned without - lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation - only through some general category. In Italy the veil first melted into air; an objective treatment of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man become a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such.¹

Pre-industrial societies have little notion of a person as a separate entity. The idea that man might exist as an individual apart from the family, or that he might have personal problems which he did not want to share with his family had not occurred to a society which was still governed by the principle of conformity. The ethos of individualism which is central to the contemporary society was still in an embryonic state. Its growth was hastened by the Reformation. Although Luther was an ascetic who attacked wealth and luxury, he was also an individualist who preached the supremacy of the individual conscience. The growth of cities further loosened the less intimate social relations, and, whilst the individual gained personal freedom by being emancipated from the intimate ties which characterize smaller societies, he became vulnerable to the alienation which results from no longer conforming to any traditional code. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it was not until 1674 that the word self took on its modern meaning of “a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness.” According to Peter Abbs the word “individual” originally denoted indivisible; he writes :

The gradual inversion of meaning for the word “individual”, moving from the indivisible and collective to the divisible and distinctive, carries quietly within itself the historical development of self consciousness, testifies to that complex dynamic of change which separated the person from his world making him self-conscious and self-aware, that change in the structure of feeling which during the Renaissance shifted from a sense of unconscious fusion with the world towards a state of conscious individuation²

Because of this “state of conscious individuation”, art has become an individual statement and a means whereby the artist can pursue his own self-realization. Out of this, autobiographies developed and grew to dominate the field of literature. The word autobiography was not introduced till 1809 in the Oxford English Dictionary. Over the centuries autobiography changed from being a narrative of the soul’s relation with God-St. Augustine providing the model in his Confessions - to an enterprise far more like that of psycho-analysis. In recounting the circumstances of his life from childhood onward, the autobiographer sought to define the influences which had shaped his character, to portray the relationships which had most affected him, to reveal the motives which had impelled him. In other words, the autobiographer became a writer who was attempting to make a coherent narrative out of his life, and, in the process of doing so, hoping perhaps to discover its meaning. And any enterprises which promises to make sense of the chaotic aspects of an individual’s life will continue to appeal to people on that

ground only. The case with autobiography seems to be that the less a person feels himself to be embedded in a family and social nexus, the more he feels that he has to make his mark in individual fashion.

In this novel the protagonist is alienated from his surrounding environment and because of the differences in the cultural, religious, and social background reacts in his own way. He is estranged because he was unable to cope with the conditions of his respective experience. Marlow could not accept the way in which Europe dealt with the Congo experience. Because of this he was alienated from the rest of the Europeans there and committed himself to the only person who threw all pretenses aside and let loose his true self.

Conrad's choice of the title of his novella was not arbitrary. His choice registers the manifold layers of meaning that the story while progressing tries to unfold. It addresses itself simultaneously to Europe's exploitation of Africa, the primeval human situation, an archaic aspect of the mind's structure and a condition of moral baseness. Because of this the book has been variously read and interpreted as an attack on imperialism, a parable about the construction of ethical values, a mythic descent into the primal under-world, a night journey into the unconscious self and a spiritual voyage towards transcendent knowledge. What the present analysis tries to explore is how the book can be read as an unorthodox apologia for the West's coarse penetration into the estranging world of Africa.

Conrad's critique of colonialism is apparent from the first paragraph. Marlow, the narrator, is sitting on the deck of the ship *Nellie*, anchored in the Thames. Physically, the ship is immobilized by the tide and the crew is isolated from all else. Since Marlow's audience are faithful servants of the powerful maritime civilization, it is not surprising, therefore, that as they talk among themselves waiting for the tide to turn they glorify England's history. As they contemplate the waterway "leading to the uttermost ends of the earth"⁴, they discover analogous qualities in England's imperial past. The selfless mariners are now "the mystery of the unknown earth" and the cause they serve is the "torch" or "sacred fire" of their inherited civilization .

When Marlow responds to their grandiose prospect, his is a profound disturbing response : "light came out of this river since... you say knight? ... But darkness was here yesterday"⁵. For their vision of heroic England bearing the torch into unknown lands, he substitutes an earlier picture: England itself an unknown territory, receiving the

attention of a Roman invader. Dismayed and demoralized by the surrounding wilderness, the invader loses his zest. The image Marlow gives of ancient Britain as the victim rather than the victor of colonialism deconstructs the image of the initial narrator and undermines the general mode of thought and discourse. History for the initial narrator was the unfolding of a “gigantic tale”⁶ which suggests the secure progress of sequential time. For Marlow this historical time is only a moment; Britain was a colony only yesterday, time is both an eternity and an instant : “nineteen hundred years ago the other day”, “we live in a flicker - may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling.”⁷

So Marlow’s opening to his Congo narration is a radical gesture of historical deconstruction in which he clarifies the oppositions that structure the colonial discourse. The passage forcefully points out that the power to name and categorize depends on the conquerors “the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexions or slightly flatter noses than ourselves”⁸. It also raises all the questions which the tale will explore. One of these questions is that of man’s fidelity to the general tradition of civilization. The invaders of Africa in their journey into the jungle and their descent into man’s history, a return to his primordial origins, are kept apart from the regulating rules of their society. They are left wholly to their own devices. The consequences of abstracting men from their native contexts are made clear in a famous example, Marlow is sailing down the coast of West Africa: “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”⁹. Why Marlow feels there is a touch of insanity about those proceedings is because what in a different setting and surrounding should be a recognizable human action presents itself now as an arbitrary one. There is no one and nothing, to shell at. There is only the empty coast and the silent virgin forest. This is why the phrase “to fire a canon” loses all connotations, the death-dealing shell becomes a “tiny-projectile”, the target to be destroyed a “continent”. In other words we are made to witness an action claims to be intentional, but no longer can be regarded as such. What this incident brilliantly demonstrates is that the intelligibility of what men do depends upon the context in which they do it. The first lesson Marlow learns about Africa is that what applies to situations in Europe does not apply to situations in Africa. In the steam boat, Marlow is to take the place of Fresleven, a Dane, who Marlow learns later, has been killed in a fight with the natives. The reason of his death emphasizes the theme of futility and the mental change men undergo in Africa.

Thinking himself to have been wronged in a transaction involving two black hens, Fresleven the “gentlest, quietest creature”¹¹ felt the need to assert himself. The result is that he is speared to death by the chief’s son. Another example is the railway which is being built and in which Marlow can find no sense at all. The activity of the engineers is meaningless blasting; familiar artifices are transformed into strange beasts, a boiler is “wallowing in the grass”, a truck lies “on its back with its wheels in the air.”¹²

Not only do the displaced actions and objects signify defiantly displaced concepts but also undergo a substantial change. The term “enemy” is applied to bewildered and helpless victims, the word “criminals” to dying shadows, and the concept of “law” to those to whom it comes “like bursting shells, ... an incomprehensible mystery out of the sea”¹³. Such words as “worker”, “rebel”, “custom house”, “seat of government”, which are products of the European social system do not have any meaning and no application at all in the darkness of the African continent. Death itself loses its significance in Africa. The insignificant cause of Fresleven’s death is most disturbing. Here the only absolute experience in man’s life becomes a triviality. This disorientation about reality becomes a familiar aspect of the African experience for it demonstrates that the sense of reality is not absolutely founded, but the product of a long process of cultural assimilation. The only incident that brings Marlow into “a momentary contact with reality”¹⁴ is when he sees a boat paddled by intensely vital blacks and it reassures him of his belonging to “a world of straight forward facts”¹⁵. Yet this assurance is immediately disrupted by the sight of the war-ship firing aimlessly at the wilderness.

As we have mentioned earlier, one of the readings of Heart of Darkness is that it is a night journey into the unconscious self and a spiritual voyage towards transcendent knowledge. It is a search for reality, for the real truth about man and to find this out we have to look into his origins. What Marlow finds out is that civilization is something merely imposed on man’s essential nature - that his primitive instincts are only kept at bay due to the influence of culture and what Kurtz in the end discovers for himself is what Marlow has already grasped: that the ideal of European life forms no part of man’s essential self that at the heart the European citizen in spite of all his education remains a denizen of darkness. Yet this is not the only truth Kurtz finds out. He discovers at his death bed that this truth is a horrible one, that is to say, that the values it tries to deny survive the denial in the sense that they keep on floating up once the checks of society are no longer applicable. This leads to one important conclusion about the real truth of

man: that it is not sufficient to know where a man comes from to identify him, we also have to know where to he is going. In other words, the essential nature is not found merely by uncovering the past but also by defining the future. Kurtz as a person was judged as a good man in Europe but while tracing his future Marlow discovered that Kurtz has found himself a seat among the devils on earth. This does not mean that civilization should be dismissed as a defective actuality, it should rather be sustained and be regarded as a destination to be pursued.

Considered as a test, Marlow's venture into the African jungle can be compared to the ocean voyages he has accomplished. In its scale, power, aloofness and mysteriousness the virgin forest bears a certain resemblance to the sea. The darkness into which Marlow ventures has a heart which can be found within his own breast: "I confounded the beat of the drum with the beating of my heart"¹⁶. This is what differentiates him from his fellow Europeans in Africa. He can recognize the unreality of the notions they have arbitrarily imported into the country which proves his capacity to acknowledge the reality of the alien continent: "Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows"¹⁷. Knowing what he is, he can accurately measure the gap that separates the Europeans in their steamer from the black men in their boat. He does not pretend that the latter are anything but unfamiliar to him. Because he accepts dissimilarity, he is able to affirm a common humanity. Conscious of the fact of cultural relativity he can contrast the vitality of the "black fellows" with the flabbiness of the invaders. The blacks are real because they want "no excuse for being there."¹⁸ They belong to this environment and their environment belongs to them.

This sense of reality that Marlow possesses is so complete that he does not feel the need of erecting it into an absolute. He does not reject what is alien to him as unreal, abnormal or absurd. As he navigates up the river, he hears the throb of jungle drums. His response is striking: "perhaps on some quiet night", he recalls, "the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild-and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country."¹⁹

A more searching illustration is his discovery of the cannibalism of his native stokers. What would have horrified all the so called civilized Europeans in London and Brussels becomes on the Congo river an unremarkable topic of conversation. Marlow's

response to the stoker's headman request "catch im-give im to us" is typical : "I would no doubt have been properly horrified had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry: that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past."²⁰ Knowing who he is and where he is, he is not frightened by the fact of their cannibalism. In fact, out of this incident he discovers a quality in them, their restraint, that places them above the moralists who condemn them. In spite of their "lingering starvation"²¹ they did not even try out grow them in number and strength. To Marlow their restraint is "one of those human secrets that baffle probability."²² Impressed them is their primitive honour. To Marlow, Africa and all it contains may seem strange, mysterious and even un-intelligible, but it is not unreal. And for that very reason he retains, displaced as he is, a sense of his own reality. This is what the other so called pilgrims fail to realize. Their inability to understand the values which they are supposed to represent leads them to regard foreign ways as nothing more than illegitimate deviation from their own. And this has a far reaching effect, the fact that the society that sustains them is not only different from, but also stronger than the tribal communities they encounter abolishes every external check and makes it possible for them to treat the Africans as if they were exploitable raw material, though of considerably less intrinsic value than the ivory they seek. For all these reasons they were unreal for Marlow not merely from the fact of geographical and cultural dislocation, but from their failure to recognize it.

Civilization defined as the sublimation of primitive energies is only a word when it undergoes the test of the jungle. In "the blinding sunshine of that land" Marlow finds that the whites, far from retaining possession of civilized norms, have themselves become possessed by "a flabby", pretending week-eyed devil of rapacious and pitiless fellow."²³ Sundered as they are from the advanced communities of Europe where every external control is abolished - not only the steady presence of butcher and policeman but also the regulating effects of good health and a temperate climate, they abandon every trace of the restraint on which civilization is founded.

This idea can be concretized if we examine Marlow's relationships and comments on the white people he meets. The basic characters with whom he deals are the manager at the Central Station and Kurtz. With the first Marlow experience moral cynicism and with the latter idealistic self-deception. For Kurtz every station should be "a center of trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing"²⁴. While the general

atmosphere about the Manager has “no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe”²⁵. No wonder Marlow finds himself drawn towards the man who seems to be “equipped with moral ideas of some sort.”²⁶ In complete contrast to the manager who reveals himself at once as the very type of the exploiter, Kurtz seems to be a person of exceptional talents and culture. Indeed he appears to be the very embodiment of European civilization: “All Europe contributed to the making of Mr. Kurtz,”²⁷ says Marlow. His unelaborated advocacy of European values, however, turns out to be even more disturbing than the manager’s uncomplicated denial of them.

For Marlow the manager “had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even... He had no learning or intelligence... He originated nothing, he could keep the routine going... that’s all.”²⁸ This contemptuous summing-up of the manager’s qualities seems to deny the declared purpose behind the whites being in Africa which is, in the words of Marlow’s aunt, to wean “those ignorant millions from their horrid ways.”²⁹ Out of this arises Marlow’s dilemma: to work for a man for whom the ideal of service has no meaning at all. And the question: can labour in the service of a vicious end retain its redemptive character becomes so persistent. The answer comes when Marlow meets the only single case of integrity in work, that of the chief accountant of the lower station whose meticulous book-keeping and stunning correctness strike Marlow. Yet this competence in work is achieved at the cost of an inhuman detachment. He is capable of ignoring the monotonous groans of a dying man, the immobility of the broken slaves thrown out like refuse into the “grove of death.”³⁰ And while he continues to make “correct entries of perfectly correct transactions,”³¹ in the company ledger he remains oblivious of the appalling consequences of exploitation that are being enacted outside his door.

This case gives Marlow the answer he seeks. What he finds out is that work is capable of helping him retain his sanity in the surrounding disintegration. The fact that he has to repair his steamer helps him to retain some sort of hold on his identity : “No, I don’t like work”, he confesses “... no man does but I like what is in the work - the chance to find yourself. Your own reality-for yourself, not for others-what no other man can ever know.”³² What distinguishes Marlow from the manager is his refusal to give support to the exploitation of the primitive, and what differentiates him from Kurtz is his refusal to surrender to the primitive. A man cannot shed his inheritance of civilization without punishment, because the primitive, like, innocence, once outgrown or lost cannot be

recovered. Kurtz has stripped himself of all the cultural values he took so proudly to Africa. But by doing that he has not regained the reality possessed by his primitive ancestors. Instead he has, in Marlow's words: "taken a high seat among the devils of the land."³³

When Marlow chose work to help him sustain his sanity he retained also his reality. As he was navigating down the Congo River towards the heart of Africa his feelings towards the jungle underwent a substantial change. He admits to responding to the spectacle of unchained nature. The sight and sound of savage dancing, awakens in him the sense of his "remote kinship with that wild and passionate uproar."³⁴ He responds to the "truth stripped of its cloak of time,"³⁵ that is a truth which antedates the truth that civilization has brought about, and which is therefore timeless or paramount: but this identification with the primitive does not eradicate the role of civilization for Marlow. For him a man "must meet that truth with his own true stuff-with his own inborn strength... I hear, I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good and evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced."³⁶ In this view, civilization is thought of not merely as a given but as something achieved, something deliberately constructed and upheld in defiance of an elemental nature.

Another character who stands the test of the jungle but not the test of Kurtz is the Russian sailor. When Marlow meets him he quickly discovers that he has become a kind of neophyte, and he asks him what Kurtz's talk is really like: "it was in general. It made me see things"³⁷ the Russian answers. This reply indicates that the young man's enthusiasm is completely uncritical. Reflecting back on it, Marlow concludes: "He had not meditated over it."³⁸ The problem is that the Russian has no idea of what has become clear to Marlow that in his reverence for his master he has crawled "like the veriest savage of them all."³⁹ This encounter helps us see that what finally damns Kurtz is not the shrunken heads around his house, nor even the ferocity of his raids, but what these indicate: the appalling fact that he has taken upon himself the role of god. And as a god he practices his excellent faculty of speech which in itself is a fatally ambivalent power, an instrument of truth or deceit. This gift of speech gives Kurtz ascendancy over the blacks which the manager, with all his rifles, cannot even remotely approach. Even Marlow himself feels all of a sudden that what he is looking for is a conversation with Kurtz, no more no less.

Marlow's special insistence on the virtue of honesty makes proper sense when contrasted with Kurtz's self-deception and his turning the gift of speech from a "stream of light" into a "flow of darkness."⁴⁰ When Marlow declares that "you know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me", he adds: "there is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget."⁴¹ He places himself as the opposite of Kurtz. In fact Kurtz from this angle of discussion is a living incarnation of everything Marlow claims to hate. His condition of dishonesty supports the view that lying is related to death, not only because his self-deception is the immediate cause of his collapse, but also because it destroys his moral identity. Still Marlow finds himself drawn in spite of himself to his side which is even a greater shock to him than working for the manager. What he is facing is "a choice of nightmares."⁴²

On the night Kurtz leaves his cabin in order to rejoin his men around the fire, Marlow's loyalty to the choice of his nightmare is called for. This incident reveals the kind of relationship that is established between the two men. Marlow refuses to warn the guards about Kurtz's disappearance : "I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone", he explains : "... and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with anyone the peculiar blackness of that experience."⁴³ All this time Marlow has considered Kurtz as a potential ally; the essential difference between them is not that Kurtz has been exposed to a different kind of temptation, but that, for all his gifts he has proved incapable of restraint and thus of fidelity to the values he has professed. What finally counted with him is the gratification of his desires. Even his advocacy of civilizing the primitives of Africa remained an expression of vanity. Thus what Marlow is pursuing is his antithesis and when he overtakes him crawling towards the fire of the camp, he discovers to his horror that there is nothing in him to which he can appeal. Kurtz has "kicked himself loose of the earth,"⁴⁴ he has lost contact with everything outside himself. Marlow is left with one last possibility : to "invoke him-himself,"⁴⁵ as one would invoke a god. In the absence of any reason or morality in Kurtz, Marlow is obliged to appeal directly to that aspect of his self-love which makes him recoil from the primitive. He tries to remind Kurtz of the "immense plans" and the success that is bound to be waiting for him on his return to Europe, which "in assured in any case."⁴⁶ Marlow here is after Kurtz's salvation not survival: "Soul! If anybody have ever struggled with a soul, I am the man... believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear-concentrated,

it is true, upon himself with terrible intensity, yet clear."⁴⁷ He is trying to invoke Kurtz's faith in his humanitarian mission which out of his self-deception has receded to the depths of his mind. In order to save humanity, Marlow has to overcome the mocking image that Kurtz represents. For him, to prevent Kurtz from returning to the jungle is an affirmation of the reality of the civilized against that of the primitive. His success in bringing Kurtz back to his cabin, therefore, is some sort of spiritual victory.

Now, Kurtz is on his death-bed, and his last cry, or in fact whisper, of "the horror" is the cry of a nineteenth century, Faust who has discovered that his soul is lost irretrievably for nothing in return. His death is presented not only as a cause of horror but also as a moment of insight. For Kurtz, it is the moment at which his whole life passes just like a stream in his mind and he discovers in a rending flash that his life was a "darkness". Yet there is no doubt that Kurtz has achieved self-knowledge of himself and of mankind in general. His verdict against himself is also a verdict against human life. Looking back on Kurtz's death, Marlow concludes that the reason he can now affirm and not merely speculate that Kurtz indeed was a remarkable man is that "he had something to say,"⁴⁸ that this final appalled state "was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in darkness."⁴⁹ And what was it that Kurtz had to say? "He had summed up - he had judged - the horror."⁵⁰ Problematic as Kurtz's cry is, there are two things that can be said about it. The first is that it records some sort of "ultimate truth" about man; the second is that it implies that this truth is morally abhorrent.

Yet this is not the only death that Marlow encounters face to face in the African jungle. There is the earliest killing of the careless steersman during the attack on the steamer while approaching the Inner Station. The parallel is quite explicit. As a man working with the white invaders, the steersman is also culturally disoriented. He "had no restraint, no restraint-just like Kurtz - a tree swayed by the wind."⁵¹ Even though he does not say anything as he dies, yet he casts on Marlow a profound look "like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment."⁵² The moment of death, it would seem has a meaning that is relevant to all mankind. So that what the dying Kurtz perceives may not only be true of himself as an individual; it may also be significant for humanity at large.

Though this encounter with death, Marlow gains valuable knowledge about himself, about the nature of evil and the world. This knowledge isolates him from the

world around and brings about a change in his behaviour and character. He has survived the test in the jungle after fighting his battle with death. Through this battle, he seems to have lived through Kurtz's extremity, except that Kurtz stepped over the edge while he, Marlow, was permitted to come back to the world of the living. He realizes that it was perhaps the reality of death which enabled both dying men to acquire a kind of transcendent knowledge: "perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible."⁵³ A complete knowledge of truth, it seems, comes only after death. In that instantaneous moment that divides life from death lies all the difference. Because of this, Marlow's knowledge remains partial while Kurtz's is supreme.

Kurtz mouths his last words as a message to himself and, through Marlow, to the world. What he perceives within himself is not so much evil but a void - a world much like the jungle he sees without. In a letter to Cunningham Graham, Conrad used the image of a vast knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption and all the illusions, ... and nothing matters."⁵⁴ Therefore, Kurtz's final realization, even if it is too late for redemption in this life, is itself a victory of some sort. It lends dignity to his destiny. To Marlow, Kurtz regains in part the moral universe from which he has fallen. His final cry Marlow describes as possessing "a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper" and as an "expression of some sort of belief ... an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions."⁵⁵ Marlow discovers that the human spirit is indeed stronger than the powers of darkness.

Marlow is home now with all the change that is caused in him by the test of the jungle. He is no longer well accommodated in Europe since he has become fully aware of the reality of the men around him who act so confidently because they live by a wholly untested assumption of security and superiority. They are blind to the lurking evil inside each and every one of them which is awaiting the chance to surface up once the restriction of society and civilization are no longer present. Because of the knowledge Marlow acquires he seems well he is abruptly halted by an unexpected event - his interview with Kurtz's Intended.

The Intended, who has been mourning since Kurtz's death more than a year ago, as if he has already died, reminds Marlow of than a year ago, as if he has already died, reminds Marlow of Kurtz's death: "I saw her and him in the same instant of time - his death and her sorrow - I saw her sorrow in the very moment of his death... I saw them

together.”⁵⁶ So deep is her grief that Marlow experiences a moment of panic and wishes he had not come there: “I asked myself what I was doing there, with a sensation of panic in my heart as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold.”⁵⁷ She pleads with Marlow to tell her Kurtz’s final words. And here Marlow is confronted with a choice : he can tell the truth and thus preserve his commitment to his principles in life, or he can tell a lie and save the Intended’s illusions. Her mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering earn her the right to be told the truth. Yet the truth which Marlow will tell is going to destroy the basis of her trust in Kurtz and the universe around her. The knot which Marlow faces has only one solution which is to tell her a lie: by making her believe that Kurtz has been faithful till the end to her and to what she represents. In telling a lie Marlow has participated in death: “there is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world.”⁵⁸ But Marlow could not have told her the truth for that “would have been too dark too dark altogether.”⁵⁹ Had she known the truth she would have found herself on a level with Marlow under the shadow of Kurtz’s legacy. Marlow’s lie, arguably itself an act of darkness, is also a means of keeping back the darkness.

Marlow’s lie has been so much criticized that Conrad himself found it necessary to defend it and give it its own proper dimensions. In a letter to William Blackwood three years after he had penned the last page, Conrad stresses the importance of the interview scene:

... in the light of the final incident the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into its place... acquire its value and its significance. This is my method based on deliberate conviction... in the last pages of “Heart of Darkness” where the interview of the man and the girl locks in - as it were - the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the centre of Africa.⁶⁰

It telling a lie Marlow takes Kurtz’s side and choose the human. He feels the need to protect those who don’t know the forbidden, secret knowledge that lies hidden beneath the surface appearance of existence. Kurtz’s realization of the evil in his own being makes Marlow aware of the potential evil that lurks inside every man. In telling a lie both Marlow and the Intended endure. The epigraph which Conrad chose for his Youth volume confirms this:

... but the Dwarf answered :



“No ... something human is dearer to me than the wealth of all the world”⁶¹

As Marlow sits apart, after finishing the tale, we know that something has ended not only Marlow’s narration but something of life. Kurtz will live on, in Marlow and many others.

Conrad’s work dramatizes the conflict that exists between the conditions of practical life and moral constitution of man himself. Those men who have the vitality to go and seek adventure are not initially men of caution or tact. They go on in life believing that chance and success are their allies. They approach life as an adventure that will lead them to a promised goal of happiness, wealth and authority. Disillusionment occurs when man’s enemy leaps from unknown coverts: sometimes from the hiding places that fate or accident has prepared but more often and seriously, like the beast in the jungle, from the unknown depths of our secret natures, our ignorance, our subconscious or unconscious selves.

For Conrad these facts about man are not specific to one man Kurtz only, but to all of Europe: “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.”⁶² In a single phrase Conrad was able to transmit his dread of the ineffectuality of an entire culture. He seems to challenge the concept of civilization and underestimate the notion of culture. He seems to be worried about the fate of Western man. All his worries are concretized in the character of Kurtz, the embodiment of moral dissolution, symptomatic of decadence. In a letter to his friend R.B. Cunningham in 1989, Conrad himself generalizes: “what makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it.”⁶³ Everything in the novel renders a poetic of decadence. The first few pages simulate in masterly fashion the slow motions of the sinking sun. Conrad presents a most fitting natural correlative of decline, conveying both the beauty and he tedious prolongation of such a fall:

The day was ending - in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light;... And at last,... the sun sank low, ... as if about to go out suddenly, stricken by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.⁶⁴

The aging condition of the British empire is stressed in reference to the old Thomas river and the abiding memories of conquest it harbours. The image of the Thames river “stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway”

(1989:27) prepares us for the stream of consciousness that will lead the narrator on his physical and metaphysical journey to the Congo River.

The poetics of decadence is further stressed by the description of Kurtz's facial expression: "that ivory face the expression of somber pride, or ruthless power, of carvel terror - of an intense and hopeless despair."⁶⁵ It is to be remembered that Conrad makes of Kurtz a cultural prodigy, gifted in art, music, rhetoric and poetry, so that in his deteriorated condition he becomes a product of Western civilization. The final image of the waning Kurtz, wrapped in a sheet, could be said to reflect the moral decay of his European society. The imprint on his face is the frightful pallor of the ivory which he has rapaciously pursued in his acts of avarice and brutality. In contrast to the lethal forms, around him, his is a greater darkness of blank vacuity.

According to Conrad's views what annihilates the normal destiny of such a man as Kurtz is the waning stage in which he is to perform his acts of vigour in a system which has lost its validity because of the falsification of motives. Within such a decaying structure, imperialism, heroic acts as Kurtz performs are turned into weakness. Here is a character who in terms of conventional code of the hero should be a positive force. But cast in an atmosphere of the deterioration of that code, his strength turns into weakness. What Conrad demonstrates most convincingly in personal as well as national context is that individual weaknesses are accentuated once bonds with society are severed in a universe which has severed its bonds with man. As a result Kurtz has nothing to say but "the horror! the horror!"⁶⁶ Impressive and even terrifying as they are, they represent Kurtz's final recognition of the reality of his experience in the heart of darkness, they are his comment on the human condition: "a judgment upon the adventures of his soul upon this earth"⁶⁷ With this act of recognition Kurtz reaches the end of his tragic experience while Marlow's and of all those who happen to listen to his tale about the Congo river start.

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