

## THE LESSER NIGHTMARE

### MARLOW'S LIE IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Late in Conrad's story *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow expresses the belief that "some knowledge of yourself" is the only reward life offers (p. 62).<sup>1</sup> Thus the story implies that the self-knowledge Kurtz gains—his revelation of man's deficiency—is both a reward and a penalty, although obviously a vision of horror is no reward in the usual sense of the word. Furthermore, Marlow believes that this one reward which life offers is unique for each individual, that self-knowledge is a solitary knowledge which "no other man can ever know" (p. 25). Contrary to this belief, Marlow soon finds himself participating in Kurtz's self-revelation; and, sharing as he does in another man's experience, he is liable in some way to share the reward—and the penalty, the burden of the reward. His reward is to see and know, but not to die in terror; his penalty seems to come at the end of the story when, in telling Kurtz's Intended that the last word Kurtz spoke was her name, he sacrifices his integrity by lying.

Two paradoxes, then, seem fundamental to the story. First, a man participates in another man's self-revelation and both men profit by it. Second, the "profit" is an ironic one—that is, the original insight (Kurtz's) is both a reward of life and a terrible penalty for it, and the further insight (Marlow's), engendered by the first, is at the same time

<sup>1</sup> Citations from *Heart of Darkness* are to the "fully collated" version in *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and the Critics*, ed. Bruce Harkness (San Francisco, 1960). Harkness includes selections from the studies by Walter F. Wright, Thomas Moser, and W. Y. Tindall which are cited below. I should like at this point to acknowledge my indebtedness to my colleagues, especially David M. Bevington, Robert N. Ganz, Donald L. Mull, and Robert E. Scholes, for their most helpful suggestions regarding this paper.

illuminating and apparently corrupting. These two paradoxes resolve themselves into one paradoxical action: a lie which establishes a condition of truth. This paradox, too, can be resolved in several ways.<sup>2</sup> The resolution I suggest here depends first of all on seeing the experience described in the story as a peculiarly twentieth-century kind of Faustian experience.

That Kurtz's experience is Faustian is quite clear. His "universal genius" (p. 23), his godlike power over the natives, his "forbidden knowledge" gained in the wilderness of the self—all suggest a parallel with Faust. More specifically, the wilderness of the jungle, Marlow says, had "sealed [Kurtz's] soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (pp. 42-43). Once initiated, Kurtz takes to calling everything his own: "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my— everything belong to him." And yet, Marlow says, "The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own." After establishing that Kurtz is "no fool," Marlow implies just who it is Kurtz does belong to: "I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil" (p. 43). Finally, after describing Kurtz's state of mind to be one of "exalted and incredible degradation," Marlow says, in language typical of descriptions of traditional Faustian characters, "the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (p. 59).

At the moment of self-revelation, however, Kurtz's Faustian experience initiates and begins to give way to an extension of that experience which is to be carried through and fulfilled by Marlow. It is to that extension that the story subordinates Kurtz's Faustian nature. Thus *Heart of Darkness* is not just a story in which a soul is sold and lost; the combined experience of Kurtz and Marlow represents a considerable departure from the "traditional" (that is, medieval and Renaissance) Faustian experience. But neither is this story one in which a soul is saved by outwitting the devil or by overcoming his evil with the powers of light. This characteristic of the romantic Fausts is, of course,

<sup>2</sup> A strong alternative interpretation of the story is Walter F. Wright's in *Romance and Tragedy in Joseph Conrad* (Lincoln, 1949). Wright says that since goodness and faith are as real as evil and despair, if Marlow had told the truth "he would have acknowledged . . . that goodness and faith were the unrealities," whereas Conrad wants us to believe "that not one, but both of these are reality" (p. 159). This remark appears to summarize neatly my contention in this paper: but it does so without showing the relevance of what Wright calls Conrad's "study of the nature of truth" in the final scene either to the rest of the story or to the peculiarly "modern" ethical nature of that truth.

also a considerable departure from the traditional Faustian experience. Goethe and Lessing made the inordinate pursuit of knowledge into the pursuit of wisdom, an ennobling human activity, the motive for the transformation being an identification with Faust, a desire to see Faust as Everyman, and the result being that Faust was not damned in the end, but saved.

Conrad's motive also seems to be redemption, even though he does follow the earlier tradition in that in his story the pursuit of forbidden knowledge remains an evil pursuit which does not ultimately ennoble man, but degrades him. Conrad departs from tradition in another way. Whereas Goethe and Lessing saved Faust by altering the story's assumptions, Conrad maintains the original assumptions (that there are such things in the world as forbidden knowledge and power), but alters the outcome of the experience by extending its effects. Once it is granted that the experience can be projected vicariously beyond the limits of one individual's soul to another's, it must be agreed that the benefits and penalties of the experience might project even further. Thus, through Marlow, the saving virtue brought to light by the experience he shares with Kurtz can be, and is, extended to their whole civilization—which includes, through Marlow's narration, his audience on the yawl and us, the readers. An important question arises, however, concerning the form of the extension: what, exactly, must the saving virtue be that results from their experience?

It is, of course, restraint, a virtue so simple and fundamental to humanity that the cannibal workmen on the riverboat under the pressure of extreme hunger incredibly and inexplicably exhibit it (p. 36). It is exactly the virtue which Kurtz lacks, but which in Marlow is reinforced by vicarious revelation of "The Horror" until it becomes the most important, conscious, and compelling force in his character.

Restraint expresses itself, however, in a most peculiar way. Marlow confesses early in the story that "there is" for him "a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies" which makes him "miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do." And yet in the end, Marlow lies. The fact of the lie, it would seem, is absolutely crucial to the meaning of the story. Conrad himself, in a letter to his publisher, William Blackwood, soon after the story was finished, described the last pages of *Heart of Darkness* as

the interview of the man and the girl [which] locks in—as it were—

the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa.<sup>3</sup>

It is this scene, however, which so often seems to miss being understood. In his book *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*, for example, Thomas Moser severely criticizes Marlow's apparent self-betrayal. He contends that "Marlow's lie certainly weakens the [final] scene; he has made truth seem too important throughout the novel to persuade the reader now to accept falsehood as salvation." One of the justifications Moser offers for the "weakness" is that "the scene can be read . . . as an indictment of this woman, safe and ignorant in her complacent, Belgian bourgeois existence; she does not *deserve* to hear the truth." Furthermore, Moser insists that Marlow reaffirms his fellowship with Kurtz by lying and that thus he too accepts damnation.<sup>4</sup>

Marlow has certainly made a kind of truth seem extremely important throughout the story. Despite this, however, the lie weakens neither the final scene nor the story. It is not that the woman does not deserve to hear the truth, but rather that she does deserve not to hear the truth. In the course of the story, Marlow's lie is inevitable once his anger—frustrations and indignation caused by the girl's persistent illusions—"subsided before a feeling of infinite pity" (p. 68). This pity is Marlow's compassion for the fragility of the woman's illusions and the conventional "surface truth" upon which they are founded—for the fragility of the civilization, that is, however corrupt and hollow, the best of which the girl represents. Of course she is safe, complacent, and bourgeois. But she is also a "soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal," her "pure brow" is "illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love," and the "halo" she seems surrounded with, however "ashy," is still a halo (pp. 63, 66-67). To alleviate this woman's immediate grief is the first purpose of the lie. But more importantly, Marlow lies to relieve the suffering that she does not know she suffers. However hollow or dead the civilization she stands for may be, however ashy her halo, Marlow comes to believe in the last scene of the story that Kurtz's

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Backgrounds and Criticisms*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1960), p. 124, from *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David Meldrum*, ed. William Blackburn (Durham, N.C., 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 79-81.

Intended is nevertheless worthy, does nevertheless deserve not to have to face the truth about Kurtz.

This conviction shows how thoroughly Marlow, in spite of himself, has become identified with Kurtz. The girl represents all the best of Kurtz's ideals—all the best of what he had "intended" for the world as well as for himself. She is the medium through which the world has seen and will see what was best in him. Since by lying Marlow protects those intentions, he thereby reaffirms his fellowship with Kurtz. But he does not thereby accept damnation; on the contrary, he rejects it. Since Kurtz has taken a step that few are willing or able to take, offering himself up to be "rent"—"For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent"—his final revelation of truth, which Marlow calls "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats" (p. 63), achieves for him at last a kind of wholeness—and after achieving this, he dies. Marlow achieves the same wholeness through self-revelation, but vicariously—and he does not die but, significantly, lives on to act upon what he has learned.

To make such an affirmation, Marlow has been thoroughly prepared. Earlier, he sided with Kurtz and was excluded from the society of pilgrims because of it. He found himself being "lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares" (p. 55). In the corruption of the "pilgrims," who represent the worst of that safe, complacent, bourgeois civilization, Marlow has found something with a stronger "flavour of mortality," something more rotten to bite into than a lie. And after having himself experienced "all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity" (p. 63) vicariously through Kurtz, when the choice comes again, he determines to choose the lesser nightmare.<sup>5</sup>

The choice comes again when he faces Kurtz's Intended. He chooses to lie (or rather finds himself compelled to lie) because at the last

<sup>5</sup> W. Y. Tindall notes that "forced to choose between 'nightmares,' that of the rapacious Belgians and that of Kurtz, Marlow chooses the latter," because Kurtz's last words seem to Marlow to be a "moral victory." Tindall does not, however, explain the choice, nor does he see its parallel in Marlow's final act. Marlow's lie is also far more positive an act than Tindall sees it to be when he says that Marlow tells "a white lie to keep the Intended in the dark by preserving her light." This interpretation gives both Marlow and Conrad less than they are due, since it depends on a defense of Kurtz by Marlow "out of loyalty to what is perhaps his own mistaken idea of light." Marlow's lie should not be seen to be the "defense of darkness" by a weakened man, but a defense of humanity by a newly strengthened one. See W. Y. Tindall, *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad* (Minneapolis, 1959), p. 279.

moment only by lying can he fulfill the "destiny in life" which he was earlier so afraid of missing. To fulfill his destiny he must act positively, because to act negatively would be to "accept damnation" passively. Marlow's positive act, then, is to place himself as an artificial barrier between the degraded and the exalted, between the degraded and the ideal (or what passes for the ideal), that is, between Kurtz and his Intended. By the end of the story, Marlow alone bears that responsibility. All that falls between these contraries is Marlow and his lie. When the lily grows on the dunghill, only illusion, appearance, artifice, that is, only the lie, keeps us from seeing the dung. Marlow's destiny is to maintain that separation just because he has seen that, in reality, no separation exists.

It may still be difficult to see how we can be persuaded "to accept falsehood as salvation," because, as Moser says, there is an insistence on truth throughout this story. Marlow, however, makes a careful distinction between "surface truth" and "inner truth." As a result, it might be expected that the story's resolution would not be in terms of mere verbal truth. Furthermore, there are distinct signs of Marlow's disillusionment with words. Words first lead him to Kurtz: "I . . . became aware," he says, "that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz." But in the days after the rescue, he begins to hear "more than enough" of Kurtz's talk. He becomes less and less enamored of words as the verbose Kurtz talks, contradicts, effuses, and rambles, until "the memory of that time" lingers with him "like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense" (pp. 41-42). After this, Marlow is only mildly astonished at the ease with which he can himself use words as the occasion demands. "It seemed to me," he says, after he lies to the girl, "that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened." He discovers that "the heavens do not fall for such a trifle" (p. 69).

Marlow has discovered, then, a larger standard of truth, a standard according to which the lie, the ethically repulsive, dishonorable act, turns out to be a kind of honorable restraint. By lying, he affirms the artificiality of restraint at the same time as he affirms the necessity of restraint in maintaining the part of civilization worth saving. Unlike Kurtz, whose mission fails as his excessive aspiration fails, Marlow, by not denying that both the light and the dark exist, but by affirming that they must be carefully distinguished, represents his, the girl's, and

all society's only salvation. The story's meaning, it finally appears, is a function not of the "surface truth" of a mere articulated falsehood, but of a man's seeing beyond a conventional "principle" to a necessity which demands of him a singularly unconventional act, an "unsound" act, the time for which, however, is all too ripe.

Thus, with the act which fulfills his own destiny, Marlow renders Kurtz "that justice which was his due" (p. 69). He would have accomplished neither had he not lied. Marlow has learned that when the heart speaks truest, it may speak not of light and harmony but of darkness and chaos. In his book on Thomas Mann, Erich Heller suggests something similar to this in a paraphrase of Adrian Leverkühn's conversation with the Devil in the novel *Doctor Faustus*:

For four hundred years . . . all great music rested on the assumption that there could be harmony and peace between a universally established convention and the subjective concerns of the individual, that "soul" and "order" were profoundly at one, and that it was therefore possible for the human passions truly and freely to express themselves within prescribed formulae. But this "play" is over; the "law" no longer recognizes itself in the "mirror" of human inwardness, and the human heart refuses to be persuaded that there is an "universal order of things" with which it can live at peace; if it were to speak its true mind, its speech would not be of eternal harmonies but of chaos.<sup>6</sup>

Marlow is made aware of this chaos, the "inner truth" which the fragile beauty of Kurtz's Intended cannot be expected to bear, and he compulsively maintains the appearance of harmony.

Thus the paradox of the lie which establishes a condition of truth is resolved. By denying superficial "integrity," and by putting himself at the service of a passion to maintain, however tenuously, man's humanity, Marlow at last manifests the unexpectedly, wholly unideally devious forms that man's "innate strength" or "capacity for faithfulness" may take. Marlow's lie establishes a condition of truth, but of a special kind of truth, a special form of what Heller has called "a beautiful illusion": "The present state of our consciousness . . . as of our knowledge and sense of truth, ever more commandingly suggests . . . that art as 'a beautiful illusion' has simply become a 'fraud and a lie,' and the more a fraud and a lie, the more beautiful it is" (p. 261).

<sup>6</sup> Erich Heller, *Thomas Mann, The Ironic German* (Cleveland, 1961), p. 261.

Analogously, Conrad's hero, after his journey into the dark regions of the mind, after his insight, after participating vicariously in a kind of Faustian experience, chooses to mock truth. Preferring artifice to veracity, he establishes an ethic of his own according to which man, having been made aware of the truth, discovers also the necessity to cloak and conceal it for the sake of humanity. The traditional Faustian experience, which itself reaches "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations," is thus pushed even further by an act which is godlike, by a creative act which ignores conventional principles and establishes its own. With one gesture, Marlow both proclaims his own values and acts according to them, just as in every creative act the artist, like the god, establishes a context of values for his work, a new "order" within which the work can be said to be "true."<sup>7</sup>

*Heart of Darkness* concerns both the discovery and the act. The difficulty in reading the story arises because Conrad, to represent his theme honestly, had to make it an integral part of the work: he had to make the story itself in a sense "equal to, / Not true." That is why its resolution rests on artifice, why its culmination is a lie, and why contradiction and paradox seem to push their fingers into every corner of its frame. Kurtz's vision is horrifying, but at the same time it is "not extraordinary in any way," unheroic, and therefore hideously "disappointing"; Marlow finds life a "mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose," yet his word for it is "droll"; and even the story's narrator pretends to see Marlow's tale in its entirety to be a kind of fraud: he pretends to see it, that is, as just another one of somebody else's "inconclusive experiences."

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<sup>7</sup> Tindall points out that Marlow suggests the artist in still another way. Marlow, "more than an amateur philosopher," may be a kind of artist if as a teller of stories he represents "the artist at work" (pp. 284-85).