

## ***Heart of Darkness: White Lies***

Joseph Conrad's slender volume *Heart of Darkness*, published serially in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, has probably received more critical attention per page than any other prose work. Layer after layer has been examined and analysed, and continually they seem to lead on to increasingly abstract strata. Critics have demonstrated how Marlow, fundamentally unreliable and partial in his capacity of first-person narrator, becomes involved in the action and is gradually changed by the events he describes. Using time-shifts and varying vantage points, he takes the puzzled readers as well as the listeners on board the *Nellie* along the borderlines of consciousness and reality. Like the narrator, we are allowed to "peep over the edge" into the dark abyss, as it were, but still the novel teases like a dream, contradictory and intriguing. According to E. M. Forster, among others, Conrad's obscurity mediates a kind of double vision caused by discrepancies between his nearer and his further vision: "What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer" (Forster, 134-5). The novel, concluding with Marlow's lie to the Intended, is expressive of a sense of utter disillusionment, in stark contrast with nineteenth-century historians' optimistic view of humanity continually moving towards full understanding. In Conrad's book, paradoxically, ultimate truth is expressed through a lie. In keeping with the ambience of *fin de siècle*, on psychological, social and religious reading levels the storyline heads towards "the end" in the sense of ultimate darkness, a condition of meaninglessness and nihilism, negating all civilized values.

Part of the puzzlement which has been felt about this story has come about as a result of dividing it into a series of interrelated layers, and the fact that in the first half of the book there is a predominant emphasis on the picture of colonialism, whereas in the second half we find a concentration on the implied author's notions of existential unease and metaphysical evil. Whether critics prefer predominantly psychological, archetypal or political interpretations, they broadly agree that the novel is strangely "modern" in outlook and obviously resists simple readings. Clearly, it explores characteristic Conradian themes such as the concept of "evil" and the hazardous predicament of social isolation. It is true that Conrad has been criticized for being vague and unclear, but it has also been argued that the notion of evil can never be fully defined, and that the book becomes "powerful precisely to the extent that it is *not* precise"; its mistiness is part of the structure and Kurtz's unspeakable rites must necessarily "remain *unspoken*" (Murfin, 101, and Cox, 56). Consequently, when discussing the notion of "white lies" in the context of Conrad's novel this discussion will offer no new varieties of psychological or religious interpretation. Instead it will focus on aspects of *fin de siècle* in the author's political, social and private background. Besides internationally well-known Conrad criticism I will also draw from historical source material contained in the Swedish writer cum journalist Sven Lindqvist's part documentary part autobiographical book *Utrota varenda jävel* ("Exterminate all the brutes").

Rightly or wrongly, recent criticism has maintained that Joseph Conrad should be regarded primarily as a political novelist. Certainly all his major novels – at least on one reading level – concern themselves with man as a social being, involved in events and situations of a political character. We should keep in mind that Conrad's political, philosophical and moral outlook remained essentially Slavic or Central European, not Anglo-Saxon. His themes, in other contexts too, concern the connection between knowledge and doubt in a manner reminiscent of Dostoevsky or Kafka, Thomas Mann or Camus, all writers of short fictions dealing with mental dissolution, or of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer or, later, Wittgenstein, preoccupied with the relationship between will power and moral and social responsibility. Certainly he did not share G. B. Shaw's optimistic "life-force" credo regarding Darwinian

evolution. Instead, to judge from his letters and diaries, he saw society as "basically criminal," crime as "a necessary condition of organized living," and man as an "evil animal." Kurtz and Marlow both illustrate how the horror of man's life is perpetuated by lying and continuous deception. As Thomas Brook argues, "Conrad's art approaches the truth . . . not by stating it but reminding us of the lie that accompanies every effort to name the truth" (Brook, 241).

As a political novel *Heart of Darkness* offers a description of the clash between European and non-European cultures, embodied in the encounter between self and "other," an "analysis of the deterioration of the white man's *morale*, when he is let loose from European restraint, and planted down in the tropics as an emissary of light and armed to the teeth, to make trade profits out of the subject races" (Garnett, quoted in Sherry, ed. 132-33). We know that Conrad himself left the Congo shocked by the exploitation of the natives; his experiences there had a lasting effect on his imagination and left him with a basic uncertainty about his own identity. Some of the parallels between *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's Congo adventure are so obvious that it often becomes tempting to think of the novel as thinly disguised autobiography.

Against this background it seems strange that the novel was not begun for almost a decade following the author's departure from Africa. A natural question would be what biographical or topical event after his return to Europe could have occasioned the work. We might also ask why Conrad had kept this material for seven years. Finally, why did he interrupt his honeymoon in Brittany in July 1896 to compose "An Outpost of Progress," generally considered a pre-study for *Heart of Darkness*, and written seven years before the Congo debate flourished in 1903? The gap between December 1889, when Conrad visited the Congo, and December 1898, when he started writing *Heart of Darkness* is intriguing. Do we have the right to assume that Conrad himself in vain tried to erase his memories of the Congo experience during these years, just as Marlow after his return to Europe wanted to forget Kurtz, "to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate" (245)? Why did Conrad bring his painful memories to the surface to describe the relationship between Europe's noble ideals, embodied by Kurtz, and the lie that Marlow resorts to after his experience of the horror at the heart of darkness?

With Conrad, inquiry into the biographical origin of a work is not only misconceived and irrelevant but also reductive. And certainly, equating Marlow with the author is not justified. Yet Conrad always claimed that narrative has a function similar to that of history, and that it is actually even closer to truth:

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting -- on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. (NLL, 17)

On the personal level, it is true, he was intensely concerned that the life which provided the literary material should not be identified with the mind that explored it, emphasizing that it was not the experience in itself that mattered, but "the experience as understood by the mind and rendered significant by the art" (Berthoud, 4). Thus it is ironic that the same writer who describes *Heart of Darkness* in the prefatory Author's Note (1917) for the Heinemann edition of 1921, as no less "authentic" than *Youth*, merely his own Congo experience "pushed a little (and only a little) beyond the actual facts of the case" in the same text appears to be deeply sceptical about biographical criticism and repudiates all attempts to reduce his work to its biographical origins. In a derogatory tone he dismisses "curious men . . . prying into all sorts of places (where they have no business) and come out of them with all kinds of spoil." Referring to these inconsistencies and contradictions on the part of the writer, the following discussion will indicate the interrelationship of some personal, historical and topical issues which can contribute to our reading of *Heart of Darkness* and our understanding of its author.

The novel invites historical criticism from the outset by deliberate historical parallels such as the mention of the famous ships, "the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests -- and that never returned" (137). There is also a topical connection, because the men of Sir John Franklin's expedition in search of the North-West Passage were talked of again at the end of the 19th century, not merely because they failed to return, but on the basis of recurrent Eskimo accounts

that some of the explorers appeared to have prolonged their lives by cannibalism. This scandalous story rose to the surface from time to time, for instance in the 1880s. Further, it would have interested Conrad, who elsewhere has described his fascination with the early explorers, particularly those of the arctic, and with books like Leopold McClintock's *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas*, which sent him off "on the romantic explorations of [his] inner self" (LE, 16-17). It also gives indirect support to the unknown reviewer of *Heart of Darkness* who claimed that above all this is a story of cannibalism.

The historical element is seen again when Conrad has Marlow draw the parallel between the Roman colonization of Britain and the introduction of European civilization to Africa, and then has his protagonist cum narrator speculate about how the Romans felt when they first arrived among the British "savages" (139). Conrad might have been inspired by a famous speech by a contemporary celebrity, Henry Morton Stanley, who made the same comparison (Sherry, 120); this very person, as will be further discussed, was the man who may have inspired the portrait of Kurtz.

Stanley Falls, corresponding to the Inner Station in the novel, was also the white spot - the unknown and unexplored area - on the map that Conrad had pointed out as early as 1868 as a goal of his adult life (PR, 13). Yet it was not the stories of African adventures but the readings of the arctic explorations that had caused him to equate blankness with the unknown, and explorers of the white wilderness with true heroism, thrilled by "the blankest of blank spaces on the earth's figured surface" (PR, 41). The Congo experience was to give him new insight into human nature where the usual pattern was completely reversed: whiteness and light may turn out to be blackness and darkness, and blackness and darkness may in fact be relatively pure. His letters from the Congo indicate that the experience very nearly robbed him of all taste for life in general and humankind in particular: "Everything here is repellent to me. . . Men and things, but above all men" (NLL, 1: 59). His loss of illusions initiated his theme of 'white lies' and his paradox of ultimate truth presented as a lie.

"Extermination," the very word used by Kurtz in his notorious report, was an idea that was frequently discussed among scientists, philosophers and writers at the time. To Conrad's contemporaries, European expansion was seen as a biological necessity. The notion that it was inhumane to prolong the natives' struggle for survival by external and artificial means was brought to the fore in the writings of Eduard von Hartman, whose *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1884) Conrad read in translation. Similar thoughts, sometimes referred to as social darwinism, were expressed by the leading philosopher of the time, Herbert Spencer, for instance in his *Social Statics* (1850). Discussing the rights of imperialism and civilization to further human happiness, Spencer actually uses the words 'exterminate' and 'brute' (see Lindqvist, 18-19).

Such theories were still current in 1897 when British imperialism reached its summit. Representatives of all subject peoples and territories, representing almost one fourth of the world, gathered in London to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's succession to the throne. At the time a magazine called *Cosmopolis* published untranslated contributions in German and French directed at a generally European, highly literate reading public. In the jubilee issue Queen Victoria was compared to Darius, Alexander and Augustus, none of whom could compete with her empire, though, which by then had more inhabitants than China. In this magazine international contributors joined the congratulatory choir. Colonial expansion was celebrated, and the importance of the sacred mission of bringing light and Christian belief to the dark places of the world was emphasized. This was the very magazine that Conrad chose for the publication of "An Outpost of Progress." To many readers the story, with its anti-colonial bias, must have formed a shocking contrast to the rest of the contents.

The Congo had become the personal property of Leopold II of Belgium, who controlled the country until he died in 1908. The inhabitants were more or less enslaved, and the young nation's monarch, of notoriously immoral standards, organized a meeting in Brussels to discuss his own plans for the Congo. On that occasion he used a rhetoric recalling that of Kurtz' in Conrad's novel: "to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not yet penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population" (Hennessy, 13). In 1891 the King had decreed that his representatives in the Congo had a monopoly on the so called "trade" with rubber and ivory; non-Belgian traders could be

summarily shot. The natives were forced to deliver without pay, and those who refused had their villages burnt down, often their hands cut off and their children killed.

At the time little attention was paid to the damning reports of atrocities from a handful of missionaries. One of the first to react against the appalling conditions in the Congo was Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, a radical politician and a director on the board of the Aborigines Protection Society. His article "Civilization in Africa" was printed in *Cosmopolis* in July 1896 – the same month as "An Outpost of Progress" – and it contains several parallels with Conrad's description of the effects of the climate, loneliness and distance from Europe on white people in Africa. According to Sven Lindqvist, Dilke's article can be read as a draft for Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress," a story that in turn was a draft for *Heart of Darkness* (Lindqvist, 40). Carlier, one of the main characters in "An Outpost of Progress," uttered the infamous dictum, "exterminate all the niggers," and two years later this would be echoed in Kurtz's, "exterminate all the brutes."

The name of Henry Morton Stanley looms large in the topical background of Conrad's novel. In October 1898, two months before Conrad started writing *Heart of Darkness*, the story about Stanley's African expedition to save Emin Pascha became a matter of discussion as George Schweizer's *Emin Pascha, His life and work, compiled from his journals, letters, scientific notes and from official documents* appeared and was reviewed. In Schweizer's book for the first time the story is told not from Stanley's point of view but of Emin's himself, who turned out to be not a noble pascha, but a Jew from Silesia, who like Kurtz did not particularly enjoy being "saved." Lindqvist makes the comment that in Stanley's version not only his own "Intended," Dolly, but in fact the whole white world had been told a lie (Lindqvist, 64-65).

The topicality makes it interesting to consider the obvious parallels between Marlow going up the Congo River in order to save Kurtz and Stanley's journey with the alleged noble aim to save Emin from the Dervish. Emin and Kurtz both led isolated lives in the interior of Africa, and neither wanted to be rescued and brought back to 'civilization' (Watt, 143). But it is also worth noticing that Conrad chose Stanley to provide Kurtz' features, not Emin. Kurtz too "desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere" (238). Already before Conrad's Congo adventure he must have noted Stanley's return to Europe from his three-year expedition which was a great popular event in the autumn of 1889. Actually, Stanley was expected to complete his mission and leave the Congo at the time when Conrad was in Brussels to be interviewed by the head of the Societé Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo about his journey. In April 1890 Stanley again became a front-page name when had finished his book *In Darkest Africa*. Brussels was dominated by festivities to his honour. The connection between Stanley and ivory was made more than evident: at his welcoming banquet King Leopold had the room decorated with the tusks of 400 elephants. In the midst of these celebrations in Belgium and England Conrad left for the Congo. It is a strange coincidence that the same day Conrad approached Stanleyville/the Inner Station, Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* was published. It was advertised and Sven Lindqvist also draws the parallel between Stanley's dealings with Lord Kitchener and the massive liquidation of the Dervish, an important event in 1898. Kitchener, too, was welcomed by Queen Victoria; just like Stanley he was awarded a honorary doctorate at Cambridge, and he was celebrated for having opened up the Nile Valley "to the civilizing influences of commercial enterprise." The battle of Omdurman, where 11,000 Sudanese soldiers were killed and few of the 16,000 wounded survived (whereas the British lost only 48), coincided with Conrad's decision to interrupt his writing about other issues to devote his time wholly to the matter of Africa. Illustrations in the British press showed the humiliating procedures of capitulation, for instance the king of Ashante and his mother crawling on all fours to kiss the boots of British officers. Marlow's reaction at the report of the crawling chieftains and Kurtz's "unspeakable rites," wherein the natives worship him as a god, are brought to mind. It is probable that both Conrad's presentation of imperialist ideology and its contrast, Kipling's view of "the white man's burden," were inspired by Kitchener and Omdurman. As Lindqvist argues, the mission was equal to that of Kurtz: "Exterminate all the brutes." In the context of these topical events and the double perspective of *Heart of Darkness*, it is interesting to consider the apparent necessity for Europe's high culture to cover up the brutal consequences of its most noble aims (Lindqvist, 96-98). Thomas Brook uses Michel Foucault's term "counter-memory" to define the process of

a memory that disrupts the narrative of enlightened progress that official European culture tried to tell about its history. . . . Official memory of light and counter-memory of darkness are in Conrad's narrative inextricably connected even though the official memory's ascendancy depends upon the lies that repress the counter-memory. (Brook, 240)

Already in his second novel, *An Outcast on the Islands* (1896), Conrad had written about the European colonists in the terms of "the invisible whites" referring to the natives' impression that they were able to kill without even being present (*OI*, 205). Their weapons invested them with "remote superiority" whose effects could be seen in "the dark mangroves of the muddy creeks . . . full of sighs of the dying men who were stricken down before they could see their enemy" (51). Similar thoughts had earlier been expressed in H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897), a pessimistic story of future colonialism and conquest where invisibility is used to kill out of pure selfishness. This book was one of the last that Conrad read before starting on *Heart of Darkness* (Lindqvist, 110). In a letter to Aniela Zagorska he speaks of his admiration for Wells's "individualistic judgement" and recommends the novel for translation into Polish (Christmas 1898, *CL*, 2: 138).

In December 1898 the annual meeting of the Royal Statistical Society was opened with a speech by its chairman Leonard Courtney on "An experiment in commercial expansion," referring to the efforts of Leopold II to personally control an area as large as Europe with possibly 325 million inhabitants. His speech, summarized in Conrad's favourite periodical the *Saturday Review*, mentions a certain Captain Rom who decorated his garden with the skulls of 21 natives. On 17th December, 1898 Conrad could read about this macabre incident. The day after he started writing *Heart of Darkness*, wherein the skulls on the palings outside Kurtz's house illustrate the ultimate consequences of his morbid motto (Lindqvist, 45).

In combination with these events we must take into account Conrad's own precarious mental situation, partly a consequence of the Congo experience: In 1878 he suffered from depression, had a series of nervous breakdowns, and even attempted suicide (see *CL*, xxi). In letters from the 1880s he complains of inexplicable periods of powerlessness. Later letters from the 1890s indicate lasting pessimism and nervous disorder, sometimes with a wording recalling *Heart of Darkness*: "*Comme tout est noir, noir*" (1895, *CL*, 1: 201); "I suspect that I am getting through a severe mental illness" (1896, *CL*, 1: 287); "I ask myself whether I am breaking up mentally. I am afraid of it" (1896, *CL*, 1: 296); "I am worried and stupidly nervous about imaginary things" (1896, *CL*, 1: 313). In a letter from 1897 he speaks of the universe as a "knitting machine" which "knits us in and . . . knits us out" (*CL*, 1: 425); the Fates in the shape of the knitting women at the Brussels office are easily brought to mind.

A year later Conrad argues in a letter to his friend Cunninghame Graham that existence seems incomprehensible: "Half the words we use have no meaning whatever. . . Faith is a myth, a divorce between man and 'reality'" (*CL*, 2, 17), and in another letter to Edward Garnett from that period his despair is even more obvious: "I feel suicidal" (*CL*, 2: 83). Against this background it is understandable that the fallibility of words and the abuse and failure of language become central themes in *Heart of Darkness*. According to Marlow, "it is impossible to convey the life sensation of any given epoch of one's existence - that which makes its truth, its meaning - its subtle and penetrating essence . . . We live as we dream - alone" (172). Kurtz, a man hollow to the core, offers a parody of hollow white rhetoric *Œ vox et praeterea nihil* - a combination of eloquence and mean ambition, an illustration of demagogic leadership equating progress with genocide. Marlow's thinks of him as a "voice," and the lasting impact of their brief encounter is largely due to the fact that Kurtz is not a hypocrite. He is not significantly worse than the others. He has killed for his pleasure, it is true, but those he killed are no more dead than all the other victims of European civilization. What scares Marlow is rather his own reaction: he reluctantly has to consider Kurtz's way of life as an alternative to his own, and also to realize that everything he used to set store by in Europe has ceased to make sense in Africa. Language itself becomes absurd because it cannot possibly cover this "reality" (cf. Cox, 50). The inadequacy of language prevents us from penetrating into "the heart of darkness": like Marlow, we must rely on imagery and metaphors; the mistiness, the "haze," which Marlow speaks about in the beginning is an unavoidable necessity. Thus the term

"enemy" is applied to bewildered and helpless victims, the word "criminals" to moribund shadows, "pilgrims" to greedy scoundrels. Such words as "worker," "rebel," and "custom-house," presuppose the entire social apparatus and stability of European life. In this grotesque context death becomes a commonplace triviality (Berthoud, 14).

What strategies, then, remain for the survival of humanitarian principles in this predicament? What can save us from moral degradation and Kurtz's state of final self-deception? A few foregrounded key words point at possible tactics. "What saves us is efficiency," says Marlow (140). Another commendable quality is "restraint" (195, 221), not going ashore "for a howl and a dance" (187), and the somewhat cowardly concentration on "surface reality," represented by the Accountant, or giving up one's self to assume a sort of "patchwork" identity like the Harlekin. Conrad's own view can be gleaned from letters and diaries, constantly emphasizing human decency and the work ethic.

An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour or 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: - matters of calm and deep conviction both lasting and consistent, and removed as far as possible from that humanitarianism which seems to be merely a matter of crazy nerves or a morbid conscience (*PR*, vii and xv)

In his preface to *A Personal Record* Conrad wrote: "Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity" (*PR*, "A Familiar Preface," xix). Personal commitment and community are also considered an answer to nihilism. "Resignation is not indifference," he writes. "I would not like to be left standing as a mere spectator on the bank of the great stream carrying onward so many lives. I would fain claim for myself the faculty of so much insight as can be expressed in a voice of sympathy and compassion" (*PR*, "A Familiar Preface," xv). What saves us in a corrupt society is sticking to "surface reality" or insulating ourselves, like the Accountant equipped with moral "blinkers" to avoid possible identification with suffering fellow-men. Elsewhere Conrad has given proof of his faith in the power of art to communicate some kind of meaning when language fails, although he himself "deliberately repressed the sensitive, imaginative side of his nature, and forced his mind into safer, more normal channels of thought" — and sometimes considered suicide the only adequate response to meaning-lessness (Cox, 4).

As noted earlier, Conrad's view of life remained Central European rather than British. The novel looks back on early European explorers, but it also indicates a timeless, characteristically European or generally Western perspective that implies the conception of the superior race which alone justified colonial activity of the type described in the book. "The End" that he indicates is even worse than contemporary colonialism: the ultimate horror is suggested by the identification of Marlow with Kurtz, his alter ego. The African experience in the heart of darkness, where black turns white, and white turns black, has not made Kurtz become more "primitive," but more "European" and more "civilized". It is worth noting that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (207), because in retrospective this information also indicates what demagogic leadership and mean ambition may cause "civilized" Europeans to do in the future, and the story becomes suggestive of some ultimate destruction of human culture. Not even the most gifted artist or writer can stop this. It is significant that while he was working on *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad, the pessimistic moralist, wrote in a letter to his friend Cunninghame Graham about the problems of insight, the shortcomings of ordinary men facing evil and the horror of "the end":

Know thyself. Understand that you are nothing, less than a shadow, more insignificant than a drop of water in the ocean, more fleeting than the illusion of a dream. (*CL*, 1: 423)

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