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HEART OF DARKNESS REVISITED
AN ANALYSIS AFTER HALF A CENTURY

I

1. I mean to attempt here what I call a dynamic analysis. I shall give a continuous commentary on the particular stages of the narrative, trying to consider the process of building up certain effects as well as the question of whether the implied promises have been kept; the nature of these effects will also have to be considered and thus, apart from problems of artistic consistency, there will occur problems of artistic depth and connection with the author's outlook upon reality, especially human reality.

As advantages of this type of criticism I consider first its comparatively exhaustive character (the analysis of only certain aspects must involve narrowing the range); second, its close touch with the actual action of a literary work of art — which means more than its notional "shadow" or philosophical skeleton as discerned in an X-ray photograph; third, its realistic approach to the capabilities of such readers as can take in only a certain number of elements and their combinations and spend only a limited amount of attention on the perception of a work (cf. E. E. Stoll's penetrating observations in his *From Shakespeare to Joyce*); and fourth, the taking into account of the sequence of effects and their mutual relations.

Whilst advancing these considerations, one should not overlook the unavoidable subjectivism. This must insinuate itself when

a critic decides on his own of the quality or the degree of the effects considered; what is more, the same critic, whilst trying to steer clear of arbitrary choice, must still choose, when he decides which parts of a literary work may be dealt with in a more summary fashion (he certainly cannot make his commentary as long as the work and even if he did, he might not do it justice).

In spite of these objections one may maintain that an analysis of this kind does assess approximately the proportions of the elements in their probable action on the reader. The fact of being satisfied with only approximate results should not appear specially discouraging: even in science, including applied science, one must make allowances in advance for various imperfections.

As to subjectivism, it is sufficiently controlled by the descriptive aspect of the method.

2. By the introduction of this method here we may hope to gain a more solid foundation on which to base our estimate of Conrad's achievements in the province of „long-short" stories as well as of the role played by his personality and outlook in this border genre between a travel book and a work of fiction.

3. A few words of reminder as to the origin of the story will suffice here. The analysis which follows is essentially independent of biographical or psychological data, though we must approach the story remembering more or less how it came to be and what it was to be about.

Late in 1898 Conrad was working hard to be ready with a story, ordered from him by Blackwood's Magazine [1]. He had chosen as a 'subject' reminiscences of his expedition as a 'freshwater sailor' in the Belgian Congo, eight years earlier. It is generally known that the expedition had been full of trying experiences for his body [2] as well as his heart. He had recently made it into a narrative, first communicated to Garnett in the late summer of 1898 [3].

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[1] J. D. Gordon, *Joseph Conrad, The Making of a Novelist*, Harvard 1941, p. 267.

[2] Op. cit., p. 24.

[3] Op. cit., p. 266.

To what extent the narrative had become a literary work of art, it will be the task of this paper to assess. The materials included an engagement in the service of a Belgian company, involving sailing up the Congo on a small steamer; the meeting with some unpleasant people on the way, first and foremost with a Mr Klein and the watching of certain brutal forms of colonial exploitation which (for the readers as well as for the author) must have been easily associated with the scandalous reputation acquired near the end of the nineteenth century by the Belgian company in question.

4. The method of conducting the reader at length into an inner room where the story proper is to be unfolded before him, used in *Lagoon*, is still continued in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad visibly though discreetly enjoys his position of cicerone in the passages, pretty long, which are to lead us to the right inner chamber. If you like, you may say the same thing in a different way, and detect the faintest smile of self-satisfaction on his face of a chemist (or alchemist?) as he pours before us one kind of coloured liquid after another into the test-tube, adds this and that variety of powder, preparing the final substance.

He appears extremely conscious of the conditioning of our frame of mind. In *Heart of Darkness* it seems that he also accounts for the gradual shedding of the various strata of his conditioning (a European's, a gentleman's) etc. before reaching a state in which he could gaze at last at the revelation of certain human essentials — not too exhilarating. We, too, shall be expected to do off one after another our accustomed ways of thing or reacting.

II

We shall be placed on the outermost of a system of concentric circles. We are in London, we are on board a yacht, on a peaceful and serene evening: the dark air above Gravesend is far away, distance makes it "secondary" in our perception and we are ready to settle down quietly for another yarn of Marlow's.

But if we are in London, we are also in the estuary of the Thames and we are told that in people's perception it appeared a waterway to distant lands and seas, made them aware of countries and races different from their own, actually of the empire as a conglomeration of many varieties of humanity.

At the moment, there is still sunlight in the air, but very soon Marlow observes that "this also... has been one of the dark places of the earth" and the reader must achieve in himself a turn-about: civilisation and its achievements are perhaps somewhat specious: there exists (all the time) such a thing as darkness. It reigned in the hearts of the Romans when they treated this very country, Britain, as territory for sheer exploitation and believed in "squeeze".

Although the writing here, as always in Conrad's yarns, has all the moodiness and versatility of his temperament (or that of the narrator), we do recognize certain leading points and something like a latent argument, and thus gather that he will now treat his listeners to a story about his experiences in the lands where darkness (at the beginning of the "civilisational" kind) is still actual: we are also encouraged to watch among other things whether "an unselfish belief in the idea" of one's mission or "burden" will prove real enough to counterbalance sheer "squeeze".[4]

The description of Marlow's reasons for deciding upon a trip into tropical darkness palpably introduces an autobiographical patch: Conrad's youthful hankering after the unknown, the unexplored places of the earth is here clearly enough reflected; at the same time it makes perfectly plausible (again, in its yarn-like way) Marlow's description of the preparatory stages of his expedition.

The first distinct hint of what Marlow may expect comes with the description of the end of his predecessor in the African post. A man driven to extremity by the climate and conditions

[4] Anyhow the voyage is to have something momentuous about it. It is not for nothing that Marlow will soon say: "...I felt as though instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the "earth."

loses his temper and strikes a negro. Contrary to all conventions and inhibitions a member of the tribe takes the risk, tries to kill the white god — and succeeds. And since then the white man's bones have lain bleaching in the sun to this day. What more could you wish by way of encouragement and preview of the things to come?

We next find a series of pictures whose general function is pretty transparent; we are made to share Marlow's disagreable thrill when he notices that "ordinary" Europeans who stay at home treat those who venture into those tropics like madmen. That is the attitude of the doctor employed by the Trading Company who measures Marlow's cranium, of the casual clerk and partly of the two knitting women: their placidity to a sensitive observer sets off even better the extravagance of the plan from which they remain, so palpably, thousands of miles away in mind and in body.

Marlow's aunt, who helped him to get the appointment, plays of course a different role, though the converging effect remains the same. She simple-mindedly believes that the company is spreading civilisation: and we need not wait for the fuller facts about the company to see her blindness, for Marlow tells us about it straight away.

The doubt about the form of these stages of the story (their construction admits of no doubt) is connected with the free-and-easy tone of Marlow's confidences. Evidently on the point of rather startling revelations, he remains detached, remains perhaps too much of a *causeur*. We feel less doubt at the sight of the literary qualities of this *causeur's* style although ordinarily one would not expect such perfection in a narrative ex abrupto. It is a convention one is ready to accept and we are past the theoretical apprehensions of a Wordsworth for whom e. g. a plain style implied an exclusive use of plain terms.

What follows is a description, excitingly suggestive, but of something slightly indefinite. The sentence at the end which obviously should give us a clue states that "the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me". Well, this very

sentence leaves us vague as well. One part of the feeling has certainly to do with the dangers and delusions of colonialism: the negroes that Marlow (while still sailing along the shores of Africa) occasionally sees paddling "...gave ...a momentary contact with reality... They wanted no excuse for being there..." The obvious implication is that the Europeans wanted such excuses, so there was something sham about their presence: truth was in some way violated. The bombardment of a negro village by a French gunboat had "...a touch of insanity". We may be sure already now that the contact with African reality will prove very different from what placid aunts, enthusiastic for the progress of civilisation, would have imagined. But Conrad is far from limiting himself to this kind of hint. There are interwoven pictures suggesting his accustomed vision of the world seen in a dream (sometimes grotesque: cf. the fact that places on the shore had "farcical names") which greatly changes the militant attitude of someone merely desirous of denouncing the evils of colonialism. At this point it is Conrad's artistic sensibility that seems to get in the way of artistic consistency (as his intellectual interests seem to do at other times). One wonders, besides, whether certain sentences do not reflect simply a jumble of traveller's impressions; in a way *Heart of Darkness is* a record of Joseph Conrad's actual voyage. In order not to make it a mere record, he was forced perhaps to stress the 'fiction' side, and he did so at the occasional great risk of appearing too detached, too freely 'artistic'.

Having reached the mouth of the river up which he was to sail, Marlow does not struggle any more with vague feelings. Stark horror besets him again and again. A Swedish captain whom he now meets tells him of a suicide due to a nervous breakdown in the tropical conditions. The Negro workers appear to be absolutely exploited and starving, the work itself purposeless; thus is revealed the action of the most pernicious of human passions, let loose in special conditions ("...the devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" as different from "the devil of greed"). No inconsistencies this time: the descriptions of the gaunt and listless negroes are completely startling and turn the reader's

feelings in one direction. Irony, where we find it, is no mere self-indulgent flicker, it completes the accusation of the degenerate Europeans in Africa or their system there. Even so, the accusation is only one aspect of what in more general terms might be called a searching record; even in his very decided expressions Conrad remains the writer who describes rather than launches an attack and who tries to keep the posture of the artist, presenting his readers with a well-composed narrative, on however vital and absorbing a subject. Clash with the posture of denunciation, hardly avoidable, here become especially perceptible. It is another thing that for practical purposes, the 'aesthetic' reader does not mind being told certain things almost from a pulpit, if they are so exciting and so fit in with the general trend.

The dark people are pathetic because they suffer in ignorance: the whites, who are shown next, because they are ignorant of the suffering around them. We are certainly meant soon to experience varieties of bewilderment, at the sight of some mystery. We are only on the edge of the darkness proper and we do not know yet what the mystery "is to be about". But what we primarily watch at this stage is the blindness of the exploiters; the agent who talks to Marlow now prepares him for his meeting with the chief agent, Mr. Kurtz; and though we do not know Kurtz yet, we are very diffident, for the praises we hear come from the mouth of a man obviously unable to perceive the human agony around him.

The clash between appearances and reality which was foreshadowed at the beginning of Marlow's yarn when he said, sunset air still luminous around him, "this also ...has been one of the dark places of the earth", will now face us again and again.

The next agent adds to our expectations of the still fabulous Mr. Kurtz; at the same time the feeling of distance between the plans, the hopes of people as blind as he himself and reality, is deepened. This reality constantly escapes people; and the journey to the heart of a wild continent helps us to see the fact; its wildness matters little by itself, rather by heightening the consciousness of an enigma in the world, the consciousness

of a darkness whose awful heart we have been half-promised to reach.

Meanwhile Marlow must wait for a trifling detail: the rivets. The delay, such a characteristically "silly thing" when measured against the background of more solemn and imposing affairs appears very "life-like". In the composition it seems useful to convey in one more way the sense of divorce from reality: men whose absorption in certain things has been shown (in their conversation) do nothing to remove such simple obstacles as these.

We are moving deeper inland and the accompaniment consists in the sinister and dramatic descriptions of the landscape and the people in chains. Whatever prompts the vision, we must admire its power: that is where Conrad proves a real writer (as he proved to the literary critics who were only beginning to notice him when the story was published). One sees working in him this all-important instrument, recording the significant aspects of things often hidden, often seeming trite to less acute or less humane travellers and observers.

But the obliqueness of Conrad's method may best be perceived from the interweaving of irony into pages of straightforward horror. It is possible that this obliqueness was a reflection of the richness of his personality, of which Ujejski writes. His heart was no less sensitive to human plight than his intellect to the comedy of this plight; so perhaps Conrad could not help using such a method, but it is not one that facilitates the perception of a narrative. We are shifted in our armchair from one angle to another, and though it might be said that all the toil falls to the share of the pushing author, we cannot but respond — we are meant to — and so may feel uncomfortable. There is ironical detachment when the agent (the Company's chief accountant) is commended for the neatness of his appearance in the middle of seediness, nonsense, demoralising laziness and decay. We bear still well in mind what we have just seen happening around and see the lack of proportion between the little virtue of self-discipline evident in the fact that the accountant is well-groomed and the gigantic cruelty of the exploitation of which he remains a tool.

There is more irony when he begs Marlow to report to the admired Mr. Kurtz "that everything here ... is very satisfactory".

And there is devastating, stony-eyed irony (a little wide of the mark, it is true) in the observation about the "body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead" made in connection with the upkeep of the roads. Marlow could not see any upkeep of them (and so no genuine care taken of the people and the country), unless that body were "considered as a permament improvement".

Heavier, factual recordings of the sequence of events of the voyage occasionally blur the effect of simple crescendo in the revealing of ever further stages of the mystery we are facing. We are thus once more on the border line between a report and a work of fiction (an impression which will recur later). Without deciding which will prevail, we may observe that given (theoretically) a work of fiction based on the account of a traveller, 'facts' are bound to be involved. Nay, sidelights on „colonial reality" quite near in tone to higher journalism may be involved too, and that is why we must accept such things as would otherwise appear too directly accusing in a work of art. At the same time, if they are well drawn, they are art and are not unconnected with the main artistic purpose. Thus it is on this borderline between description and denunciation that we face another shallow individual with "nothing inside him", so to speak, who yet may be efficient enough to keep the dismal machinery of nonsense and cruelty going; we feel our "uneasiness' (Conrad's own word for the impressions received later by Marlow's listeners: a break in the story, picturing the listeners, is devoted to this indication), we feel how this uneasiness increases.

It is true, at the same time, that it does not increase too fast or steadily. The thick web of little touches, the characterization of the men Marlow encounters, the reporting of their sayings, his misadventures (the sunk boat), the forebodings concerning Kurtz — all this is almost the opposite of "a story". We move slowly or at certain moments we almost cease to move. Our complaint is that we must fish out the really significant lines from such a thick tangle.

One of these lines comes in the picture of the workers strolling aimlesly in the sunshine. They are "unreal". Obviously this is one of the passages containing the keynote of the story. People's task in life (it will be the same in *Lord Jim*) seems to be viewed with reference to truth. If you have seen a certain core of things and try to adhere to it, you have fulfilled the task: you know (or you feel) the facts, you know (or you feel) what is expected from you, you are 'real', you will be all right in the end. Or you live by appearances, your existence is artificial, you have missed your proper aims, then sooner or later you will pay for it. Captain Brierly in *Lord Jim* paid in a specially spectacular way for his estrangement from reality and the chapter shows what great store Conrad set by this conviction.

The application of this to the colonial situation seems clear already at that stage of our progress inland; nature, we said, African nature in particular, is real, so are the people living there who "need no excuse". The sham begins with the invasion of those other people who come in search of what is only apparently valuable, and whose conduct is accordingly inspired by a mirage. Thus truth, in Conrad as in Langland, means simultaneously probity.

The factual information on the progress of Marlow's trip up the river breaks, from time to time, into such suggestions and connotations as those just mentioned; thus we know that the lack of rivets forced Marlow to wait three months. But the insistence upon the divorce between reality and the minds of certain people recurs in various ways and is the really important point. That those spreading progress may ignore reality we gather for instance from the deftly introduced echo of Kurtz's vision: in a picture which he once painted the symbolical woman carrying a lighted torch is blindfolded.

The second figure from the ranks of the Company's servants with whom Marlow converses is at least to the same extent as the manager absorbed in the inane. Fools, bowing in all conviction before the most bogus of deities (we may call it greed or selfadvancement), callous to human agony, keep preparing

us for what will follow and what appears likely to prove even more disastrous.

A check on the simple crescendo of such an expectation is imposed, however, as we have seen, by various things. Apart from the recurrence of miscellaneous descriptive touches it is again the irony (markedly theatrical) with which the confidences of the dismal and self-assured personages are instilled. It is even a possibly dangerous procedure, for it may defeat the author's own aim in the more sensitive readers — the doubt as to whether the crooks will not succeed in a way, or, strictly speaking, as to whether there is anything in the universe around, even the "real", unfalsified universe, previously contrasted with what was sham in some of its inhabitants, to support, to guarantee the efforts towards reality or truth. The stillness around the "jabbering", hollow agent might be a promise; but if it also could mean lack of understanding on the part of whatever is "hidden behind" the expectant forest then the "hollow men" would become less shocking. "I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there?" Do the words refer to Africa — or to something greater? If it is the latter, then the frame of reference which provided grounds for implied condemnation of the shallow and cruel people's conduct crumbles, for some readers.

Various special little accents are interspersed near the end of the first chapter. Marlow shows himself aware that he cannot convey satisfactorily to the readers his impressions of this voyage, so dreamlike. The listeners' impressions are not to that extent incommunicable: they centre round 'faint uneasiness'.

The silhouette and demeanour of the agent whom Marlow recalls as his interlocutor at this stage border on the grotesque. These are well-known Conradian devices, converging round something that might be summarised by Calderon's title: *La Vida es Sueño*. We had some of it already. It is the essential surprise at the appearance of things, very philosophical, some kind of feeling that one "comes from elsewhere" and does not fully make part of what one finds striking in the world (if one made fully a part of it, one could not be struck). But we shall not

consider here to what extent the communication of such feeling may constitute the aim of Conrad's writings. Our business is with the unfolding of the author's immediate plan in this narrative and from that point of view we feel that accents are purposeful enough (though certain points appear too much "rubbed in"). Generally speaking, we are still carried into a land of mystery, geographically as well as psychologically.

The dream is also comical, though in a bitter way. We find this in the contrast between the tiresome babbling of the agent, discussing ambitious plans and the impossibility, for Marlow, of obtaining such a simple device as rivets, without which he cannot sail on. The more fantastic, airy, useless the talking, the greater the need of finding something real to rely upon; thence the remark that even an inanimate object, the boat (I hope Conrad's shade may pardon me a passing blasphemous infidelity to his views on boats) appeared consolatory — it was genuine.

Things are made to serve the need of suggesting ambiance, quite unashamedly. In this Conrad seems a direct heir of the Romantics and differs very markedly from the stark objectivity of a Hemingway. Consider from this point of view the picture of the goods that have been brought by the boat. "Five ... instalments came, with their absurd air of disorderly flight..." We are told in so many words, what impression we are meant to receive.

The thing Marlow really needed (the rivets) has not come. So he waits, and can indulge in speculating what the announced mysterious and prominent agent will be like.

III

Two more marionettes belonging to the caste of the grim grotesque of this tropical exploratory undertaking talk under Marlow's window, believing themselves to be out of everybody's hearing. They talk once more of Mr Kurtz, heightening the expectation of him. The method of increasing the expectation is changed. Previously we had a presage of similar content from the mouth of the Company's accountant. Now an overheard

dialogue is reported, with the narrator's interwoven comments. The situation which involves involuntary eavesdropping whets the reader's curiosity sufficiently to counterweight the possible objection that he has heard too much of the extraordinary agent "up there" without meeting him. He also sees better than before that the man must indeed be extraordinary. The foil provided by the behaviour of the two speakers, ordinary to the point of meanness, declares this. At the same time we have a rounding off of the colonial picture in general: it is once more a series of people bent solely on 'making good' and other forms of self-affirmation. The dialogue is handled clearly and purposefully, not without ample comments and descriptive touches added by the author.

We are told about an incongruous 'find'. What is the impact of Marlow's finding in a derelict shed on the bank of the river up which he is now sailing a Sailor's Textbook? Before we answer this question, we must remember that seamanship for this particular speaker and his listeners is the very core of 'business' in life, as opposed to the 'airiness', irresponsibility and unrealiability of the shore people — cf. the attitude of some of the characters in *Chance*. With this in mind it is easy to see how this practical book contrasts with the desolateness and solitude around. It curiously enhances the extraordinary, almost fabulous impression which they make upon the travellers' minds: Marlow's surprise at his being lost in his new environment must become more apparent. "And what should I do in Illyria?". If it were fableland, a smiling princess might be found round the next bend of the exotic river ready to fall in love with the adventurer, or at least we might fear an ogre. Instead, we find a lost trace of 'normal' life ("something unmistakably real") and its very loneliness, its incongruity is an indirect way of suggesting how stranded Marlow is. However, the consciousness of dire wonders waiting for us is there and will be intensified in a while.

The expectation renewed, we are again sailing up the river. We are moving as if between curtains which will unveil part of the secret hidden behind their folds. In this sense the initial scheme which presaged a voyage nearer and nearer the

centre of a circle is kept up, though it is realised rather slowly. The unveiling of the secret is very complex because the secret is partly in ourselves (as will be very broadly hinted at in the lines devoted to the negroes seen on the river bank). This adds to the difficulty the writer is facing. How much simpler the task of a writer of exotic adventure stories who conducts his reader inside e. g. a Hindu temple: as soon as we peep behind the particular curtain, we have seen the captive heroine or the appalling rite and there is an end. Here the things must be harmonized: the "external events" must proceed their own course; the "inward revelation" must be completed on its own rights and the one must not violate the other — more, there must be mutual help. The difficulties of *Heart of Darkness* are in a sense those of an allegory.

One of the simpler means is the adding, in the romantic manner, of a special colouring to the „objective" landscape described. The African river and its surroundings are like a vision of the "beginning of the world". Why should the beginnings be more thrilling? Why should the later stages be more trite? What is it that is being worn off, that becomes stale or trite by change, by mere becoming, by age? Strictly the question is a metaphysical one, but the answer given in terms of art will have to refer to "some core of things" usually escaping man's perception.

This most general *nervus rerum* or their source is by turns appealing and terrifying. After attaining the right sort of attitude, after some kind of initiation, one might perhaps render the latter aspect less and less prominent, in any case rather prompting the ultimate union than otherwise; but as things are, especially against the background where very primitive specimens of human nature will be paraded (sensitive as they are to the numinous), the frightening in nature is rightly emphasized: "...this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stilness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect."

It is curious how slow Conrad makes the progress of the story by his anxiety about his readers' reactions. At this point,

for example, he seems to fear lest they should find his awe in face of Africa too "unbalanced" and introduces glimpses of negroes which are totally different in tone. The steam-boat (which is never absent from Marlow's thoughts) could with difficulty make her way up. "More than once she had to wade for a bit, with twenty cannibals splashing around and pushing". An amusing sight indeed, none too frequent in Conrad's writings. Not that we mind the jar: we know that the Fool in *King Lear* frequently enhances the pathos of the old man's sufferings.

Somewhat similar is the function of the mere movement onward. It might be implied or merely mentioned. We get instead various bits of information about the boat; we are made to see her small size and miserable state, we are made to share the practical anxieties of her master. It is something of bathos, it is, the yarn-like character of Conrad's stories which may or may not be the best device. We accept it here placidly enough.

In any case we do penetrate inland more and more. Africa the mysterious, the tremendous, the overawing, grows before us, as if overtopping the enormous trees bordering the river. The pilgrimage of man on his tiny floating box must appear somewhat ridiculous, yet we know Conrad well enough to be sure that he will also be aware of the small man's stubborn heroism.

With stubbornness man advances nearer the inmost mystery. The accompanying sights and sounds are from time to time more direct in increasing the expectation: what more standard stimuli than the beating of the drums and the shouting negroes on the bank? As to the former, we may safely say that much more could have been made of it by someone of Conrad's sensitivity, imagination, and style. Bush telegraph in Central Africa! What a wealth of associations!

But the negroes have another significance. Those crying, beckoning dark shapes will be once more used as symbols. Would it be flippant to say that their very nakedness here serves the aim? When Lear perceives that Edgar is not dressed (only wrapped in a blanket) he addresses him in a remarkable way, observing that clothes in their character of something

conventional and borrowed, hide the truth of man: "Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art. Off off, you lendings!" (III, IV).

In a similar way, the negroes passed by Marlow appear to him to stand for „truth stripped of its cloak of time".

This truth is dangerous (as are the negroes); we are shown it again (things are rubbed into us). The call of the great power working behind the leaping savages who have shown the emptiness of civilisation is perceptible to Marlow. It is a temptation and it may be worth bearing in mind that he himself experienced it. His escape from it, he hastens to inform his listeners, was not a moral victory, he just had to attend to his job.

Thus the scepticism of the narrator, not for the only time, saps the power of the artistic construction. If we are to undergo a shock at the sight of man's degeneration, our reaction must involve other feelings than the curiosity of a researcher. Yet Conrad seems expressly to rule out moral indignation, an essential ingredient of the reader's response to this kind of story, not necessarily identical with self-righteous sensationalism. Of course even what remains is haunting enough to provide one of the most striking specimens of human decay.

But the problem of "truth and appearances" continues to pester Conrad, otherwise he would not have left the irresistibly funny picture of "appearances personified", or "truth betrayed" if you like, in the shape of the negro hired and trained to serve, on board the boat, who was compared to a performing dog "walking on his hind legs".

In a number of ways, our brain is kept busy by the importance of getting under the surface of things, actually of getting rid of "sheer civilisation". The external action is on the whole slender, so we are glad to be told about something that actually happens, oven if it simply means finding a curious object.

We move on once more; once more we are reminded of Marlow's expectation of Kurtz, who should appear at the end of

a spell of sailing, but with the intervening warning that "the essentials of this affair" were hidden elsewhere than in the person of the much-talked-of agent. This must be slightly baffling for the reader, for the agent's name has been the only one given so far. But on the whole his patience in this respect has not been tried too much.

And the next stage is more dramatic — quite technically so. After a forced spending of the night on the river, only 8 miles from Kurtz himself, the strange foggy morning brings with it the frightening scrams from the invisible banks: "It seemed as though the mist itself had screamed" — a neat conspiracy of circumstances and impressions which serves to show the "standard" African mystery in action. The scared white men on board the steamer by producing rifles intensify the tension. But the calm reaction of the negroes on board deepens it here and "displaces" as it were. They are ready to eat their fellows on the shore, who are apparently attacking the boat. The "devil" which looms in this is more appalling and after all, since *Heart of Darkness* is a sort of exhibition of the devils inhabiting the human soul (cf. Conrad's words in Chapter I), it is an important element of its rhythm that a more uncanny specimen is produced. Eating human flesh! No less blood-curdling a possibility is in the air. But the tension subsides and thus the weaker phase of some kind of rhythm sets in when another, more familiar devil reappears. Marlow asks himself why, in the first place, his black subordinates should feel hunger and replies by insisting once more on the grinding of the exploited niggers' faces, giving details of their ridiculous payment etc.

There follows a dramatic musing, almost ironical in its detachment from such frightening circumstances, on why the negroes did not appease their hunger by consuming their white bosses. In reason, and considering the level and quality of their moral notions, there was nothing to stop them. Yet they refrained. Is not man a curious being?

This reflection reinforces the impression that *Heart of Darkness* is exploratory of the human spirit, that it is not just a travel book. It might be treated as part of the corresponding

technique that a while before there is a distinct patch of *bathos* when in the midst of those horrifying statements or suggestions Conrad makes Marlow note with cool and cruel sarcasm that his own aspect was "unappetizing" — and so he might have been spared by the cannibals.

It is also a part, though a minor one, of the darkness whose heart is to be reached that human conduct should be so unaccountable — those savages abstaning from doing the obvious for some disproportionate reason (not that the puzzle helps the story onwards).

But then the sailing has been stopped anyhow. Marlow cannot at the moment raise anchor. There is thick fog, paralyzing everything. Fear of an attack makes the manager tremble and Kurtz, apparently so close, appears again at a remove. Approach to him is barred.

In the course of the next pages it is easy to see how the happenings prevail over what they actually or possibly signalize. After many passages where our progress was so often checked by digressions, descriptions, dialogues, here is Conrad carrying us on with a swift succession of exciting events. The fog has been lifted, the boat splashes on, one has to steer cautiously near one bank (against a puzzlingly irregular current); the black helmsman displays to the full his unreliability, the white men below the deck their silly nervousness and just then pat, pat, pat small arrows rain on the steamer from the bushy banks. The helmsman's small capacity for action dwindles immediately to naught, and the captain has to do several things at once. His situation, so little enjoyable, increases the enjoyment of the reader who watches him steering the boat out of the vicinity of new snags (at the cost of drawing nearer the dangerous bank). The yelling from the bushes, the shots of the Winchesters and the smoke, all increase the unmistakable impression of swift action, miles away from the previous mood. And then the sudden wet and warm feeling about Marlow's feet and his realisation that the foolish helmsman has been pierced by a spear and is dying.

This belated realisation of what has happened, characteristic of tense moments of human existence, seems here consciously

used as a means of realism. A while ago, Marlow had first seen his poleman stop sounding the depth of the stream, before he had become aware of the little sticks falling on the deck, and had taken in the significance of it before he suddenly perceived "deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes, — the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour."

We must not fail to note here, however, in the very midst of rapidly advancing and apparently at last fully absorbing and necessary action, the accustomed accent of Conrad's deep bewilderment in the face of "life's tragic folly" (as he himself quoted from J. A. Symons); the bewilderment is latent (I think) in the contrast between the stupidity of the negro steersman, the pettiness of the attack (the arrows "...looked as though they wouldn't kill a cat"), and the sudden horror of human death occurring at this point. The contrast will become even more marked when, a while later, Marlow frightens away the howling negroes by simply using the steam whistle.

The contrast, as well as other aspects of the general human predicament, are now going to focus, in their own right, the readers' attention. In other words, it is not the happenings, it is once more reflection upon them and upon man that will now occupy the pages.

Marlow has reached such a point of nervous exhaustion and disappointment that he flings one of his shoes overboard. His disappointment was that he would not hear the voice of Kurtz. And he goes out of his way (or deviates from his narrative) to observe that Kurtz's voice was to prove the real point about him; there seemed little else left in the man! This one out of many anticipatory sayings is an instance of the change in method: we are no longer merely retracing the course of events, but are travelling in another sense. We are following Marlow as, moved, he unfolds his memories and circles anxiously round the centre of mystery.

In a while, he will be telling about flinging away his other shoe, answering the almost silent protest of a listener, alleging the unbelievable state of mind to which men are reduced in such

circumstances as he describes. His impatience is not so unbelievable — it might even seem justified by another point, the deception; that the baffled expectation of an unknown individual should be the factor, making a man so high-strung is again strange (it would be so much more understandable if he had thrown away his shoes because of the fresh tension, human death etc.); still, in such conditions even an apparently trifling deception may lead a man to an absurd outburst.

But the break in the narrative at this point has probably a special significance. Marlow's face, shown flame-lit in the surrounding gloom, "with dropped eyelids", not a little anticipatory of the comparison with Buddha to be found at the end of the story, is the face of all musing on the secret of human inwardness. At the same time, having been reminded of the narrator's person, we are conscious anew of the general frame of the story, for which the actual string of events is not primary.

The pulse of what we read is now the pulse of the heart-blood nourishing the brain of the seeker for the final recess in the labyrinth. That is why Conrad thought it possible to let Marlow open the discussion with his audience; they are still there, in the port of London, where they sat at the opening of the story, breathing European air, with all the background of regularized European civilisation about them and they cannot imagine the breaking of the surface of a human individual such as takes place in some conditions. Here we risk the surmise that our generation probably finds it easier, from this point of view, to follow the story.

In his account of the voyage, Marlow has now approached so close to the station where he was to meet Kurtz that he does not mind stating in advance what the listeners should strictly learn only later. (It is also the different objective and the different method, mentioned before).

He now speaks directly about the horrifying state, physical as well as mental, to which "wilderness" had brought its enterprising explorer; it had "...consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own". The veil has now poetically been lifted, we behold the fearful, putrifying nakedness of human disintegration,

though only for a while. The man is European in more than one sense, so this disintegration is a memento of general interest.

Marlow probably does not hope to convey a satifactory picture of the memorable phenomenon; he picks out certain points. The first of these is significant enough: the appalling agent was madly egocentric. In this sense the "destruction of moral balance" (if we may use the expression) would appear simple enough. But what has taken the place of ordinary service to people? Kurtz "had taken a high seat amongst the devil of the land — I mean literally."

This is one of several allusions to the man as having apparently imposed himself as a deity. As it is hinted in the story that the savages in this countryside were devil-worshippers, the creeps we get are pretty strong, although there is vagueness of notions and certain meandering and breaking of the narrative, or discourse, to weaken it.

What remains powerful is the jarring irony of the contrast of Kurtz, the man in total decay, cruelty and blindness, with the high purpose of the paper which he had written on the suppression of savage customs; also the contrast between him and the bland ignorance of his fiancée, left in Europe (at the moment only briefly touched).

There is more than irony when Marlow, in his informal, chatting manner, leads us to the remark which he had found on the margin of the lofty and eloquent paper on progress, enlightenment and humanitarianism: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' It has something dizzy about it, we suddenly feel that there is no ground under our feet: "no restraint", no *pièce de résistance* inside the

> Shape without form, shade without colour.
>
> . . .
>
> The stuffed men"

There mounts up as it were a wave of hideous music and we begin to recognize a note familiar to us, the people of the mid-twentieth century. Yet the wave subsides, the story proper is resumed. We wonder if such effects could not have been reserved till the actual meeting with the fearsome 'hero'.

Meanwhile the body of the pathetic victim of the tangle of life has to be disposed of and quickly, too. It is a fine dramatic foreshortening of the stage reached that Marlow decided to tip the corpse immediately into the river as the only radical means of preventing it from being eaten by the hungry negro crew. It is violence as crude as it is distant from the civilized ways of Victorian England, violence of feelings (forced upon Marlow) and of action (a second "thing" in the space of a few minutes has to be hastily flung everboard). And indeed, considering the general tone of Victorian England as well as the general tone of her literature we feel our breath stopped at the sight of this distance, covered by Conrad; what a revelation of human heart to have lived through! What a revelation to have left such an account of that heart!

Marlow prepares for landing and at that moment perceives a grotesque figure, almost capering on the bank. One may wonder whether the recurring of the ridiculous when it is not made the essential medium by an author (as in satire), is not slightly irritating. We are again delayed, our expectation of the final unveiling of the awful is frustrated. Of course, one may always reply that it is all the more "life-like", as in a way it is; but one wishes the author had used more of his privilege of giving his own *raccourci poétique* of life. Anyhow here is a curious specimen of humanity, as irresponsible and airy (we see from the first conversation) as we were accustomed to find in the traditional picture of the pre-revolution Russian.

Shirking all essential enquiries about the actual state of things among the negroes, he keeps exclaiming that the prominent Mr Kurtz "has enlarged his mind" (but, we ask ourselves, has he got a mind to enlarge?). It is an analogon to the recently reported 'hollowness' behind Kurtz's eloquence. The son of the archpriest from the government of Tambow is as enthusiastic as he appears disorderly, mystifying, nihilistic and childish. The little portrait *au vif* is a feat in itself and it fits in admirably with the surprise at the encounter itself. What should a Russian, of all nationalities, be doing in Central Africa and why he

should prove the owner of the mysterious book about seamanship (which Marlow returns to him)?

The sketch as already drawn is an admirable medium for throwing light on the personality that has now become pivotal in Marlow's mind. The more unbalanced talking we hear in praise of Kurtz from that kind of man, the better we know what to think.

IV

That the talk is unbalanced transpires even from the peculiar impression of "tattered" sentences, reported by Marlow. The technique characteristic of Conrad in more than one book or passage here serves this purpose: "Never mind. Plenty of time. I can manage".

The young man appears "indestructible" in his youth and his desire for sacrifice and we wonder that it has proved possible for the fantastic hochstapler whom we are to face to have conquered that sort of mind. For a moment a doubt arises whether Kurtz really was a hochstapler.

The gesticulating of the be-patched harlequin adds to the feeling of grotesque which in Conrad is not far from the fearful, and so just at this moment nature appears forbidding and "pitiless" (so there is no hope that the balance destroyed by cruel or abnormal people may be restored?).

A blind fanatic of this kind will be particularly reluctant to impart information detrimental to the object of his worship. If such information does come out, it will be all the more alarming for somebody whose soundness of judgment has remained unimpaired.

The curtain seems obstinately held drawn. Eventually its folds are torn apart and all the horrible sores of the beggarly impostor hidden behind it stare you in the face. This surely is one of the decisive steps towards the mouth of hell. So the enterprising agent raided the country for ivory, helped in his expeditions by those tribes whose adherence he had conquered;

"he could be very terrible" where ivory was concerned, even to his admiring associate.

Yet it would be too simple a picture of stages we are to pass in our awful pilgrimage to assume that we were to be shown an evil man who ruthlessly overcame obstacles in his rapacious way, ever more acquisitive, heaping up his loot.

As always, as with *Macbeth* or *L'Avare*, this kind of external victory means greater and greater inward defeat. A great sinner is a prey to passions. We read more than once that Kurtz became prey to the unnameable passions, running amok in the wilderness. To begin with, he could not tear himself away from the wilderness which had devoured his health.

All this had been dreadful enough and yet it suddenly proves only a spoken introduction to a visual revelation of a much more piercing kind. It is as if the maimed beggar we have been contemplating had made a sudden move and pulled aside a second, more inner curtain and a sudden silence fell on the audience. In the midst of the Russian's babbling, Marlow raises the binoculars and notices heads of vanquished negroes drying on the post of the fence round Kurtz's abode. This time we gulp and stare; this time there is no doubt that we reach the bottom — or perhaps perceive that there is no bottom — in human decay. The obviousness of the method employed, (the result of an atrocity shown in the field of vision of a pair of binoculars, disappearing when the glass is dropped) does not diminish the powerful effect.

One wonders whether something else does not diminish it: Conrad steps in directly with a commentary and almost states in so many words what he is about. He is showing that "Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him...". Without leaving yarn-like tone at this juncture of a more than ordinary bewilderment on the part of his listeners, Marlow says as much as can be said in human language about the terrifying mystery which eludes language: that decay means (as it must mean if we consider the term) something like the eating away of a man's inward substance. The reader is thus led to ask questions of a character obviously transcending the immediate appeal of art: what is this substance

and what is the nature of its relationship to the nourishing, the vivifying reality? How is the divorce of the two brought about? The believer's reply would almost go without saying; underneath the world there is a Personal Power that vivifieth and betrayal of Him must mean rottenness (betrayal, it is true, may be facilitated by certain conditions of life, such as wilderness brings about).

That some such musing is courted by the author there is no denying; nor do the critics deny that the struggle between appearances and reality is one of the chief fascinations of Conrad the writer. But it is also true that he refuses to give a name to the reality, and in this he seems faithful to his own programme in the celebrated preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. He is supposed to render justice to the visible world. What he can say is that the visible world is puzzling and not self-explanatory, and that much Conrad keeps saying.

Here he has done even more than he usually considers possible. Perhaps this is so because of the power of the personal shock which apparently underlay the writing of *Heart of Darkness*. After the purely visual method which revealed the result of a crime, there is almost a statement of the author's central purpose. Just a few changes would be needed to make it a declaration, "scientific" or philosophical in its precision. Only the language saves it in a way; it is colourful and dramatic and therefore unlike a scholar's or a philosopher's way of expression. If it were a declaration it would, theoretically, satisfy the enquirer as to "what cause it is in nature that makes these hard hearts", but in fact the very dryness and objectivity would make the reply insufficient. Conrad has therefore reached here the borderline between art and knowledge and probably cannot make another step forward.

But we feel somewhat uneasy: after a horrifying revelation it is nearing a disappointment to hear that the responsible individual was simply "hollow at the core"; we are inclined to associate evil with something (or somebody) more active, if not more perceptible. Of course, "a void that devours" may be even more appalling but for that there is required a doctrinal back-

ground and an artistic tonality different from Marlow's yarn-like atmosphere.

At this point we seem to be at one of the shortcomings of the tale; whilst still we are partly held spell-bound by its qualities.

It is in perfect accordance with the method adopted, with the presence of a foolish participant in the half-sketched tragedy, that we are next shown the reaction of the Russian admirer of Kurtz and listen to his stammering apologies on behalf of the enterprising agent. We are furious with the mad enthusiast for his lack of a decided, sound view of things in which white is white and black is black (and intellectual courage is intellectual courage). In other words, the revelation has been too much of a genuine revelation, of a disclosure of some important vital truth about man, for us to remain satisfied with the posture of a comfortable beholder, with the bitter satisfaction of a smile over the folly of mortals. We feel too much like smashing the totally woolly-headed babbler to suffer him quite so gladly.

The forest remains motionless and dark, thus providing an ominous background for mortal endeavour.

It is appropriate that there should now emerge from it the long-expected protagonist. His appearance has about it at the same time something festive and ordinary. He is carried by negroes and has almost the look of a dismal deity moving in procession; Marlow's comparison is here priceless (an "image of death carved out of old ivory"). Yet it is in a way a natural comparison, for we were prepared to find Kurtz moribund. The life of the travellers seems for the time being quite in his hands. Why after such an extraordinary picture, where we seemed so near some decisive happening, some final aspect of the gradually unfolded truth, have we to find that we are merely facing a man with a doubtful past, weak and carried on a litter? Is it not the split in the basic idea of the story, at the same time an account of a trip and a spiritual Aeneid?

The spectre has read many letters, it speaks in a human voice (though unbelievably deep), it appears responsible for strirring some powerful feelings in dark breasts.

In a moment, a symbol of those feelings will appear, and the whole world of mystery will have been brought back. Are we

not on a see-saw? The symbol is exceptionally powerful: the passionate, mute appeal of a gorgeously apparelled negress is framed in one of the most unforgettable descriptions in Conrad's writings. We see that not only "the wilderness had found him out ... and had taken on him a .. vengeance, "but also that" however powerful, it had been disturbed by Kurtz. We are told nothing of the nature of the bond between the resourceful representative of the conquering race and this black woman, plumed and helpless like a great bird, but from various hints it is not difficult to guess that Kurtz used his influence with the tribes around in every way and pleased himself freely. Thus unchained passions are let loose in more than one direction. The portrait of the enterprising agent is fuller now and we are next to watch himself speaking.

The key words signalize the key-passions: "ivory, my plans". Whilst we are still shivering from the "personal contact" with the perpetrator of the work of moral destruction and rampant crime, we hear another 'soulless' complaint from the manager that Mr Kurtz has not been cautious in his methods. Conrad uses unsparingly the ironical intrusion of his chorus. The story deals with human darkness as displayed in various ways, by various people, not only with one condensed representative of it. It is true, however, that here again unity of purpose loses. And it loses even more by Conrad's characteristic sensitiveness. He tries to say that against the appalling darkness of the manager, worried by losses of the trade, even Kurtz himself appeared to Marlow more tolerable. (He had at least some "dash", are we to understand?). But that sort of remark weakens the effect of the previous concentration, prepared by the many anticipatory references to just this uncanny presence.

But while the purpose seemed divided for a while, our look is soon enough made to turn back to that presence. From the talk of the mad Russian we learn more about Kurtz, first of all the fact that the responsibility for the savages' attack had been his. An extraordinary rhythm seems to pulsate under the story: whilst it partly seems too much of a grotesque nightmare to matter for the "life" of the more immediate experience, we discover, alternately, appallingly practical aspects: the man could

organize the shooting from the shore which, after all, had cost a human existence. The man had his wits about him enough to fear the action of the company which meant his removal from the little dark kingdom he ruled.

Marlow is aware that he must see to the removal and so decides to get hold of the sick man as soon as he has realized his disappearance.

We watch the curious, the puzzling loom working; the pattern and the web contains threads of such different colours and origin! The final result is certainly no less than admirable, but very close examination of the texture takes somewhat from our admiration.

It is African night, as full of exciting wonders as any schoolboy might wish. The drums are beating steadily and awful shapes are moving in the dark. Marlow leaps on the bank to fetch the "nightmare of his choice". He is excited, and yet he is capable of detachment. Why should he be "loyal to the nightmare?" It sounds like a whim. Or again, he feels like giving Kurtz a drubbing and begins to encircle him, and yet it is so much like scout games that he cannot help chuckling. "Is not life like that?" somebody will ask. And we shall answer that of course it is and most awful experiences may be preceded by or interwoven with the trite or the laughable. But it is one thing if you have for instance crime and senseless laughter in its immediate vicinity as you might in mediaeval mystery or twentieth century existentialist plays and another thing if your narrator is going to reveal experiences which he obviously presents as soul-shaking and yet appears to remain for the moment a slightly amused observer.

This is all the more astounding as the hunt, apparently opening in an almost truant mood, soon proves the hunt for a soul. When Marlow faces the human shadow he was pursuing, it is not a physical struggle that constitutes the real problem. Here is a man held captive by the powers he has unchained. We are told about the spell of the wilderness; but here, more than elsewhere, the African wilderness is meant to extend in our understanding worlds beneath its physical shape. What specifically had happened in Kurtz? It is probably idle to press such questions too hard for the main reason that our formulation

must be destructive of the organic unity created by an artist, although the mere fact of their cropping up is testimony to the truthfulness of the vision of human decay conjured up by Conrad. We must at least try to elucidate as much of the vision as does not belong to mystery proper and avowed.

Failing a more exhaustive reply we may try to say that what has taken place is the essential warping of the right vision of things in which all elements, human persons and the 'visible universe' should be respected and appreciated in their proper degree. The right picture has been replaced by one in which there is respect and appreciation only for the ego. This once set in, the process becomes rapidly destructive of the personality: what is developed at its expense in an ever greater degree is "individuality", the purely material and animal load of energy. Civilisation keeps either: personality and individuality within certain bounds, for the purposes of collective welfare, mutual tolerance, order, etc. This reglamentation is not absolute. Personality as well as individuality may follow their own way. The former may transcend it, e. g. by great art (practised, as it were, apart from the crowd) or by mysticism. The latter may escape from it by launching a great social movement in which instincts will play a predominant part, and so, as we may add from the angle of our experience, of a fascist description. Individuality may also escape civilisation by travelling amongst savages. There the outward regulating frame (police, daily routine of comfort and order) appears gone and no new frame (such as primitive societies respect only too slavishly on their own) is felt as binding for a "superior European being". The outward frame is gone and no new norm has replaced it. The powerful individuality is suddenly facing the enormous sea of natural forces running amok, in the world of tropical vegetation, animal life and, especially, in the "animal spirits" inhabiting human beings, including himself. It is no idle speculation on possible facts left unsaid by a writer, but an important part of our attempt to account for our response to what is said in the book if we advance the guess that Kurtz probably had never known true inward discipline. Such discipline is a resultant of what we called at the beginning the right vision of things and we must also somehow assume

that it must have been cracked or distorted. When a man in Kurtz's position found himself on the waves of the "sea of natural forces", they would toss him with impunity. He knew no superior meaning of nature to impose on the play of its lower elements. He was bound to become more and more of a victim (whilst making victims, in another sense, of the helpless savages about him) and Conrad, in his intuitive way, seems to have been perfectly alive to that aspect. In this sense any tyrant is increasingly a victim, and this statement involves the innumerable petty tyrants gloating over the masses of human sufferers in the twentieth-century concentration camps. It is obvious that we cannot help this peculiar thrill of recognition: to us Kurtz must look like a prophetic premonition of the horrors of the unchained animal in man *redevenu sauvage* in Belsen or Oświęcim. And it is this consciousness that makes us wonder at the penetration of Conrad's glance. At the same time, just because we have witnessed savagery of the worst kind in the very heart of Europe, we note better the universal bearing of Conrad's revelation. We note it in a way in spite of certain of his statements.

Kurtz was a victim because he had deprived himself of the inward point of resistance: it is part of our task as critics to try to give a name to this inward fortress whose sense is conveyed to us artistically and so, in a way, less precisely. "The right vision of things" and the resulting correct (even if imperfect in many details) development of human personality implies a right vision of man's duties and transgressions. The fulfilment of these duties, the avoidance of these transgressions crystallizes and reinforces the personality, sets off the system of inward defences. The opposite (flowing intellectually from doubt and volitionally from a disregard of right and wrong) eats away the system, nay, eats away the very core of the personality whilst the ego, the wrong kind of self-love becomes rampant. There is self-affirmation in a display of the animal spirits and despotism. Whatever remains of personality probably tries to rise up against further invasion of the soul by things inferior to man; but the rising is less and less possible, not so much because the enemy grows in number as because the defences are themselves disabled.

Thus it was that "his soul was mad". And thus it is that Marlow, anxious to help, could not do anything. If it were a case of a man who "knows and grants the correct relationship of right and wrong" and only falls through sheer weakness, one could encourage him, enliven the vision inspiring resistance. But here (let us repeat it again) the vision had been distorted, the framework was in ruins, what was left was probably only a residue of blind impulses in the direction of the never totally obliterated goodness.

The scene is already like a death-bed scene. Repentance is slow to come to a conscience hardened for so long. Yet the description of this spiritual struggle is of course concluded in a "dialect" different from that of the usual accounts of such things. What we are shown is only an exchange of threats, almost physical, and so the method is in a way symbolical. The commentary comes immediately after.

But the death-bed proper comes only now. Marlow has managed to force Kurtz on to the stretcher. The spiritual tension will gradually subside as physical movement sets in; the emaciated human figure is now carried towards the boat. Soon the return journey will begin.

The returning phase is fittingly opened by dramatic pageantry. The banks of the river swarm again with the gleaming, dark bodies of the savages who have assembled to take leave of their gloomy moribund commander. Their accoutrement is colourful, their appearance fantastic; life is sometimes childishly dramatic.

Yet the things they practised under Kurtz (or Kurtz under their wizards) must have reached into realms (which Conrad leaves partly in the shadows) in relationship to which more palpable human crimes or perversions may have merely been like deeds inspired compared with the source of inspiration (the "deep murmurs of the crowd ... were like the responses of some Satanic litany").

With all this, the swaying negroes remain not a little childish and far behind any full responsibility for the terrible aspects of their magic. They still call mainly for pity.

And therefore it is an additional accent of what strikes us as nonsensical in life that we notice the whites on board the steamer getting ready to discharge their Winchesters towards their dark brethren. Marlow must once more act, and that quickly. The thing he has recourse to, the whistle, makes a gory nonsense into a grotesque. The lives of the savages seem saved by a device which makes them into silly, frightened animals. They run away from the screeches, terrified, and the shooting is made apparently futile. Marlow is a decent and sensible man, we notice in passing, but we are mainly absorbed in his account of how hopeless were all attempts to introduce sense or decency into a domain of madness and dread. The irony of it, that he of all people should be associated with Kurtz's methods because he is now watching over him, in a way keeping guard!

The former deputy-ruler of this domain of madness and dread lies silent. He is now a water-borne emissary of the heart of darkness from which both he and the spectator are being carried out the current. We guess that awful things keep going on behind his face.

Nevertheless there is a kind of disappointment surging in us. We were prepared for some fearful climax and we expected ist dramatic presentation. Instead we begin to realize that nothing more will probably "happen". The encounter has taken place and its hero is now being transported to a presumably safe place. Can this be all?

The powerful voice discourses, puffing out past dreams and vain glory. The emptiness inside becomes only the more evident. The bends of the river pass one by one, the rest of life and its false hopes ebbs out. Great plans will never come true, though it is not this, of course, that makes us most downcast, but the impossibility that Kurtz should even now see beyond his plans, beyond his morbid self-affirmation.

The struggle lasts (why else should Conrad make him whisper incomprehensible things?).

The puzzle lasts too: what a thing this life is, if a man who sees its drama, is involved in this most solemn of struggles (we remember that Marlow would like to help the tragic shadow before him, about to be spiritually drowned) has to attend at the

same time to "filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills", all the technical difficulties of keeping a half-broken steamer going.

In this way the appointed time has run its course. The dismal stalker of which Kurtz's skeletonlike appearance was almost a presage is now at his bed-side. And Kurtz is not unaware of this Presence: "I am lying here in the dark awaiting for death". The appointed time has run its course and Marlow seems as appallingly conscious as Kurtz that there is nothing more to be expected. He blows the candle out in the room — perhaps the most terrible moment in the whole book. The reader feels almost like pulling his sleeve and whispering that he should not be allowed, till the last second, to make the gesture of abandoning anything, however hopeless the prospect of a spiritual awakening appear.

The cabin boy's announcement that the struggle is over, whilst Marlow is sitting in the company of somebody so mean as the manager, whilst the buzzing flies suggest continual futility almost as expressively as Graham Greene's vultures suggest omnipresent decay, appears to set the seal on the total waste of the life-story just completed.

This is why Marlow's subsequent commentary comes upon us as a surprise. Even the terrible whisper which we took for final surrender, even 'horror' may be viewed positively. Marlow calls it a 'cry of victory', certainly with some exaggeration; yet it cannot be denied that having apparently touched the bottom of degradation, the human wretch somehow realized its nature: you cannot call anything horrible unless you have a firm notion of what is not horrible. In a tormented, negative way Kurtz suddenly recaptured what we called a while ago the right vision of things.

In a peculiar way, or better, in a way that leaves us no clear picture or any certainty, Kurtz was "saved". If it is impossible, without forcing the text, to speak of salvation of soul in the sense of assuring it eventual happiness beyond the grave, it is possible at least, logically or not logically, to speak of winning some game. Before disappearing from the visible, a man, even after many crimes, may grasp in what he had been wrong, may,

in some imperfect sense, redeem his faults by genuine effort, by grappling, in toil, with the consequences of his misdoings. *Wer strebend sich bemühet* ... whoever toils to achieve something cannot be condemned, and Marlow who believes himself to have been less engaged or more detached (less *strebend*?) prefers to be "loyal" to Kurtz.

Besides, he continues in his refusal to reveal or revile later on, as he identifies the delusions entertained by the dead man's fiancée with her innocence (which he sincerely admires). So she is destined to remain ignorant of African mysteries. In this, she is merely a more striking example of the general state of mind in European civilization, in European cities. Over all of them darkness is spread, people in them are so dramatically unaware of the abysses hidden in their hearts, in human hearts in general.

Everything now enhances the general effect of irony whilst we are moving farther away from the awful centre, left in Africa, thousands of miles behind us. It is just as well that we realize how wide-spread is the darkness whose heart we have touched.

It is a more direct and perhaps more tragic realization than that which accompanied the return of Gulliver: how could he ever convey the sense of upturned perspectives which he saw in the countries beyond impossible seas, to his fellow-Europeans, so childishly absorbed in what they were doing, or even so convinced of their righteousness and efficiency?

The role of the aunt is wonderfully planned at this juncture. Her completely mistaken kindness in looking after the physical welfare of Marlow who needs a moral tonic *spricht bände* and obviously deepens the continued irony. Even kindness is a part of the universal futility (which yet has not made Marlow consistently sceptical).

Marlow is firm in his refusal to help the trading company in making a scape-goat of Kurtz. Whatever he was like, they are probably worse: if they are ready to thrive in their blind and callous exploitation, at least they will not profit by knowing the papers Kurtz had entrusted to Marlow. It is the well-known Conradian motif: however awful or desperate the world and one's experience of it, one ought to remain faithful to some standards of conduct. It is perhaps even characteristic of a number of

people, essentially ethical, belonging to Conrad's original nation, whose ethical sense appears relatively independent of their Weltanschauung. They behave like decent and reliable members of the community whilst they sometimes talk almost like nihilists.

We still take a few steps along the panoramic picture of human misunderstandings. They take the form of mistaken or incomplete judgments on Kurtz. His cousin informs Marlow that the "remarkable man" had been a musician — and musicality may have here been felt as a mark of obscure animal energies dormant at the bottom of certain souls. The unawareness of the possibilities of wilder outlets for such rich energies may have been viewed as a thread in the web of misunderstandings or shortsightedness spreading over humanity.

With the next acquaintance we return to the impression of Kurtz's hollowness that had been emphasized whilst Marlow was still dwelling on the African stage of his experiences. Hollowness: it is so obviously the explanation of the words of the journalist who also used to know Kurtz. "He could get himself to believe anything — anything". Thus the enthusiasm of a would-be political leader functioned in him irrespectively of values. If it does not matter what you are excited about, then the moral core in you may be (if it is not already) eaten out. How can one know whether you will respond with the right "faculties" inside you to the right vision of things? "He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party'..." We, with our mid-twentieth century experience of mass-maddening parties, might be able to supply names as we are able to judge better of the truthfulness of the portrayal of certain potentialities and actualities in man. But the innocent journalist who speaks without so much as suspecting the implication of his words is here helpful in more than one way. First, we get a "European" sidelight on the man on whom our attention had been centred in the tropics; just a trace of the early history of the case whose dismal end we have been shown; second we note, ever more distinctly, how far all these people are from even guessing the "enemy within".

But all these encounters begin to look like mere presage when we are told of Marlow's more important visit, to see the "intended" of the shadow to whom he was loyal.

From her portrait Marlow sees the girl's essential truthfulness and trust, and thus we know that she will have to be treated with special consideration. Could one think of telling her all that had happened or was unveiled in Africa?

Yet it all comes back at the moment of pressing the bell. Whatever the messenger does will be done with high consciousness. Reminiscences swarm in the visitor's brain and so the "affair of Kurtz" may be said to be coming once more to a head. There is a sort of recapitulation of the story previously unrolled before Marlow's eyes: the effect is pretty obvious, there is to be a judgment (Kurtz, we are reminded, at this right moment, invoked justice).

The setting for the decision is anything but exhilarating. We are almost in the waiting room of an undertaker's. The evening light is failing outside and the darkness, not for the first time, is not merely physical.

The girl, filled with the conviction of her fiancé's integrity and high purpose, presses her interlocutor for admissions of merit and for eulogies. She is co obviously, so disastrously sure of the man she had chosen: disastrously so indeed, for Marlow's growing determination to keep her ignorant of truth is at the same time a terrible surrender to the general darkness (the dusk outside is ever denser); if faith in goodness (such as that of the girl in her "intended") is only a saving illusion, can there be hope of preventing, in the end, a total extinction of goodness for the thinking members of the human community?

In the meantime, we admire the clever sustaining of tension by the play of meanings — an old device, Chaucer used it with such perfection in *The Friar's Tale*. We admire it, while (as in *The Friar's Tale*) we get the creeps at the thought of the spiritual dangers involved, at the view of the awful comedy of human life, the depths of misunderstandings which of necessity involve a loss, too great not to be tragic. The girl will never know the truth; of course, not everybody should know all the particular dismal truths about life, but nobody should worship false idols whilst there may be or there are genuine values deserving of worship. We can imagine Marlow patiently reconstructing a scheme of such values after he has destroyed the bogey shrines.

We can imagine him doing it, but have we any conviction that he would succeed? So we do not wonder at his evasiveness and double meanings. We do wonder at the straightforwardness, almost brutality, of the final lie; it is true he was driven to extremity by the girl's questions, and the psychological situation in which he was asked, point blank, what the final words of Kurtz had been. He might have, however awkwardly, refused to reply. He might have refused; we wonder at what he did and yet even here we can at least understand the desperate outburst of protectiveness towards the girl and himself.

Obviously, however, the darkness has grown deeper still. This is a world where values are preserved (or only apparently so) at the cost of the deepest of them all, truth. So much was done to emphasize its top importance earlier in the story. Now that too seems to be lost. To a thinking reader this is bound to be a shock. Was this shock intended? We are back on board the yacht where the story began. We know now to what recesses the smooth waterway running across a great empire may lead a man. We have seen the centre and realized that it contains a void. We made our way back much faster than the outward journey, and in its course have become aware of human blindness on all the navigable expanse whose heart was placed by the author on the African continent. The blindness and the corresponding suffering, the impenetrability of the puzzling surface of things which in our days will prompt either the total negation of the existentialists or the ardent, if revised and renewed, approval of the Christians, have here led the observer to an attitude of abstention and musing, "...the pose of a meditating Buddha".

Perhaps it is not accidental that this would be the only attitude left, if the author was a child of his century, the great century of doubt.

Conrad does not glorify this doubt. On the contrary, his works, if not particularly *Heart of Darkness,* show his readiness to remain "in an upright posture", to do what is instinctively perceived as one's duty whether its philosophical foundation appears to dwindle or not. Being faithful to even a shattered image of reality and the notion of man's task in it, remaining so with even a shattered soul, this too may mean "doing justice

to the visible universe" (the visible part being possibly much smaller than the other).

But it may provoke others to determine, to revise the picture in order to find a possibly fuller ground for the notion of their duty in the world, of seeing whether all the tragic contradictions in this tragic life are equally unavoidable.

We do not know the answer. We may only conjecture a possible reconciliation of clashing motifs. Marlow lies to the lady and keeps her ignorant of the horrors of which he himself has become aware. Psychologically understandable if not morally defensible, his holding back the full truth from her is probably to be viewed as very different from the fundamental violence done to truth by the 'unreal' people in Africa or in the European companies exploiting that continent, as a choice of minor evils in a situation not caused by men like Marlow, but by men like the agents described, with whom the chief responsibility for "moral disturbances" in the world remains.

V

We shall now be able to assess more decidedly what in this early work of Conrad deserves the rank of a lasting achievement.

From the means employed, certain aspects of style call for true admiration. His prose is malleable to a degree, he has poured it successfully into such varying moulds as are dictated by the need, at a given turn of the narrative, of dialogue, description, plain report of facts or personal comments, and all kinds of 'slanted' narrative.

The dialogues are short, illustrative partly of the speakers' characters (these in turn are only signposts on our way to the innermost riddle) partly of Marlow's moods. They are interspersed with comments, a characteristic which to some extent helps the reader but to some extent takes away from their proper dramatic expressiveness.

The descriptions have all the festive gorgeousness of Conrad's "romantic" pen. We feel as if we had been invited to a care-

fully prepared performance, with the thrill of theatrical illusion and unusual colours. We appreciate it, and may only occasionally hesitate whether it does not look a little too 'made-up'. But the high qualities which are obvious would by themselves assure the author a place of distinction among his contemporary fiction writers.

The "plain report" of facts is not too frequent, in fact it is occasional and plays the role of a link, so nothing remarkable is connected with it.

The comments from the author are often most attractive in their very display of the author's sensitive intelligence. Their drawback is simultaneously inherent in this. We may take exception to them when we would rather have only the 'objective' literary values.

What has been called 'slanted' narrative is a highly developed feature of Conrad's writing in general, to which the author of *Heart of Darkness* committed himself by introducing Marlow into his books. From the possible methods of communicating facts, Conrad chose the one with an intermediary between himself and the reader. The resulting indirectness will in *Heart of Darkness* be manifold: first there is the general frame set by the author of the book when he introduces the initial situation or winds up his story, within the same situation, at the end; second, there is the "angle" of Marlow; third there is the Russian admirer of Kurtz whose report Marlow in turn reports.

The advantages are obvious in the cases where the narrative should concentrate on particular aspects and where the special angle enables the author to pick such a particular aspect as is essential for him.

This is most striking in the case of the Russian believer in Kurtz. His enthusiasm combined with what we know of the speaker is an excellent means of throwing light on the notorious agent.

The state of things is less simple in the case of Marlow. Certain qualities of his narrative are distinctly helpful for the general aim of the author, others appear detrimental.

The key is probably in the conception of Marlow's personality. To put it very briefly, Marlow is probably to be viewed as a not

infrequent type of modern English gentleman. He is composed, experienced, not a little sceptical; often his mature outlook upon life assumes a shade of irony, though comparatively mild. At the same time, however, this cultural specimen is unexpectedly human: he can sympathize with people, he can be deeply stirred by his experiences, he can respond with liveliness to the stimuli acting upon him. The enumerated characteristics do not form a logical unity (we somehow mind this, even though life may transcend logic); nor does Marlow; nor does, consequently, his narrative. To begin at the latter end, we, the readers, are moved by all those aspects which were a deep experience for the narrator. But we are impatient with those interwoven reactions which emphasize his irony or detachment or scepticism.

Thence we must view as a partial failure of *Heart of Darkness* all the indirectness of approach which otherwise does such credit to the subtlety of Conrad's receptive personality.

For surely enough, the book is to a very high degree a manifestation of this personality. Romanticism and realism (to choose another couple of opposites) are imperfectly welded in the man and, accordingly, in this work. Whatever has not been impaired by this imperfection remains a high achievement.

There is still the final question concerning the effect of the structure as it grows under the reader's eyes. This effect is noted in the course of the analysis which considers the stratifying echoes of passages absorbed in turn by that reader. In a more general way the following may be said:

The initial preparation in virtue of which we expect something awful to happen in the African colony does not work powerfully enough in our mind when we watch Marlow's too numerous encounters with the agents. We may say the same of Kurtz; we wait for him too long, and too much of the final shock is anticipated in the reminiscences given by Marlow beforehand. Accordingly the moment of meeting him does not act like a climax, the less so, as it is probably not even meant to open any abyss in our sensitivity. The blurring of the philosophical implications also acts necessarily in the direction of diminishing the central effect, the same refers to such portions of the narrative as the fight on the river, which is quite absorbing in itself, but finally

proves not to have added anything essential to our grasp of the central motif. (If, conversely, Kurtz is not the central motif, we must declare he is given too much scope in the book). Again, however, one should declare with all readiness that the central revelation of the book, even if the listed imperfections take something from its power, is astounding and all that is so much more alive in our minds than in those of his contemporaries concerning the human heart enhances our admiration of Conrad's insight.

The form used to convey the revelation is a long-short story reaching the full dimensions of high art.