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The Conquering Heart
– **Exploring allegorical short-cuts in**
Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Introduction

The text of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* is very dense; there is more to the text than meets the eye. In his book *Joseph Conrad and the West*, the French critic Jaques Darras coins the concept "allegorical short-cuts" for Conrad's way of using symbolic imagery to expand the text for the attentive reader and rapidly open up for a deepened understanding (Darras, p 79). His advice is "to read between the lines – why not between the words?" (ibid, p 87).

The aim of this essay is to gain a deeper understanding of the novella *Heart of Darkness* and its meaning, through exploring a number of its allegorical short-cuts: the sepulchral city, the Company's offices, the knitters of black wool, the grove of death, and Kurtz' sketch in oil. This will also give important clues to the understanding of specific elements of the story, such as Kurtz, his fiancée in Europe (the so called Intended) and Marlow's final lie, as well as of the underlying conflict between Man and Nature, between Civilisation and the Wild.

In order to enhance the understanding of Conrad's philosophy and general view of the world and Man, I start with a presentation of some crucial passages from his letters to his friend and fellow writer Cunninghame Graham from the period August 1897 to February 1899, that is shortly before and during the period he worked with *Heart of Darkness*, since this reasonably can be helpful for the interpretation of the text.

After this initial foundation-laying, I turn to the main part of the essay, the interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, where I first deal with Conrad's narrative technique using Marlow as the teller of the story, and then explore the allegorical short-cuts mentioned above, before I discuss the underlying conflict between Man and Nature and make some comments on Kurtz, his Intended and Marlow's final lie.

Page references to *Heart of Darkness* are to the version that since 1963 is the preferred text of the novella, that is Robert Kimbrough's collation of four of the story's significant forms: the 1899 magazine version, the manuscript, the typescript and the revised form published in *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories*, in November 1902. Conrad's original intention was to publish a Marlow trilogy, with three stories all told by the same narrating character, but he had to rethink when *Lord Jim* grew under his hands and developed into a full length novel. Instead "Youth" and "Heart of Darkness" were published together with "The End of the Tether". Due to the interest and fame of "Heart of Darkness", recent editions often have the title *Heart of Darkness and other stories*, as the Wordsworth Classics edition from 1999, to which page references to "Youth" and "The End of the Tether" are made in the following.

Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham

32 letters from Conrad to Cunninghame Graham are preserved from the period August 1897 to February 1899. Several of these, some of them fairly long with substantial parts written in French, deal with philosophical questions like the nature of Man and his place in the universe. Page references to C. T. Watts' edition of the letters are given in parenthesis in this chapter, and the source is in subsequent chapters referred to as *Joseph Conrad's Letters*.

In his very first letter to Graham (Aug -97), Conrad writes that he fancies himself "clinging stupidly to a derelict planet abandoned by its precious crew" (46), and this feeling of abandonment and lack of direction can be noticed also in other letters.

On the 20th of December 1897 Conrad writes the possibly most famous of his letters in which he describes the universe as a giant knitting machine:

There is a – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider – but it goes on knitting. [- - -] And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident – and it has happened. [- - -] It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. (56-57)

This image of the indifferent machine that knits us in and knits us out seems to loom large in Conrad's mind during the period in which he wrote *Heart of Darkness*, as will be evident in the subsequent analysis of Marlow's recounting of the episode at the Company's offices.

The knitting machine is mentioned again in a letter written on the 14th of January 1898:

The machine is thinner than air and as evanescent as a flash of lightning. The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful – but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life – utterly out of it. The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. [- - -] Life knows us not and we don't know life – we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. (65)

Worth noticing is the sentence on language – "Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit" – since it can contribute to the insight that Conrad's reluctance to use an explicit and direct language is not an artistic shortcoming but a consequence of a reflected notion of the shortcomings of words.

In a later letter Conrad deals with the problem of Man being *conscious* of his predicament:

What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. [...] We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming – in negation, in contempt – each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope. (70f)

Conrad's pessimistic view of Man and world is closely linked to scientific theories afloat by the end of the 19th century, like Schopenhauer's philosophy, Darwin's evolutionism, and the thermodynamist's view of a cooling, dying universe. In this scientific and philosophical context it is appropriate also to mention Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (published 1890), which, with its focus on ritual and primitive religion, presumably was of interest to Conrad.

The 8th of February 1899, when the first instalment of three of *Heart of Darkness* had just been published in *Blackwood's Magazine*, Conrad writes in French:

L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. Le crime est une condition nécessaire de l'existence organisée. La société est essentiellement criminelle – ou elle n'existerait pas. C'est l'égoïsme qui sauve tout – absolument tout – tout ce que nous abhorrons tout ce que nous aimons. Et tout se tient. Voilà pourquoi je respecte les êtres anarchistes. – 'Je souhaite l'extermination générale' – Très bien. C'est juste et ce qui est plus c'est clair. On fait des compromis avec des paroles. Ça n'en finit plus. C'est comme une forêt où personne ne connaît la route. On est perdu pendant que l'on crie – 'Je suis sauvé!'. (117)

This letter, with its view of Man as inherently evil ("méchant"), of crime as a necessary condition for organized life, and its reflections on the anarchist alternative, is congenial with the theme of *Heart of Darkness*.

***Heart of Darkness* – An interpretation**

Marlow as a narrative device

In *Heart of Darkness* (as in "Youth" and *Lord Jim*), Conrad uses an anonymous first level narrator who refers to himself as "I", and tells us the story of a second level narrator, called Marlow, telling a story. This narrative device makes it possible for Conrad to create a distance between himself and the story and the storyteller, allowing the first level narrator (henceforth called the narrator) to at intervals comment on both the teller of the story and the story he tells.

At the very beginning of the story, just when Marlow has delivered his first sentence, the narrator breaks in and describes Marlow's unusual way of telling a story: "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (9). Jacques Darras rephrases this in the following way: "we must turn away from the story's centre and look at it from the outside in order to understand what it really means" (Darras, p 87). However, Darras' perspective is still outside-looking-in,

while Conrad seems to ask the reader to seek a position *inside* the story looking out, that is trying to get at the meaning of the story by using it to understand the world we live in.

An interesting characteristic of Marlow's narrative technique, pointed out and named by Ian Watt, is "delayed decoding" (Watt, p 270), that is it only gradually daunts on Marlow what he is actually seeing or experiencing. Both this delayed decoding and the inside-looking-out perspective can be seen as techniques for what Ramon Fernandez calls "immersing" the reader in Marlow's experiencing (quote from Watt, p 270), that is the reader is not only given the end results of Marlow's experiences, but is included in the experiencing itself, including misapprehensions on the way. Due to this immersion, which invites an identification with Marlow, the reader must be aware of the fact that Marlow's experiences are pointed out as "inconclusive" by the narrator (11). This means that not only is the decoding of events delayed within the frame of the story; some of the decoding has to take place outside the text, has to be done by the reader, even after finishing the story. That Conrad sees the reader as a co-creator of the meaning of the text is shown by a comment in one of his letters to Graham: "one writes only half the book; the other half is with the reader" (*Joseph Conrad's Letters*, p 46).

Another reason for using Marlow as a second level narrator can be found in his close friend and fellow writer Ford Maddox Ford's comment that Conrad held "that truly recorded impressions communicate impressions truer than the truest record of facts" (in Pettersson, p 47). Conrad's use of Marlow as a person communicating impressions is reminiscent of the method of impressionist painters, who, like Conrad, were accused of blurriness, when what they tried to do was to communicate impressions in a true manner, because they held that there simply *are* no objective facts there to record.

Marlow is telling his story while the dusk is falling on deck of the cruising yawl *Nellie*, laying waiting for the turn of the tide. The listeners are the same as in "Youth": The Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant and the narrator. But this time the titles are written with an initial capital letter, which already from the start signals a symbolic approach. Only two characters in the story have a name: Marlow and Kurtz, the others are reduced to functions or symbols.

Symbolism relevant for the understanding of Marlow, and arguably for the interpretation of the story as a whole, is used in the narrator's detailed description of the fashion in which Marlow is sitting (pp 7, 10, 76). The preoccupation with the positions of Marlow's limbs, especially arms and hands, indicates that this carries meaning. At the first instance Marlow is said to resemble "an idol". At the other two instances he is explicitly depicted as having the

posture of a “Buddha”. The first two instances are the more elaborated: Marlow/the idol is sitting with “a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of the hands outwards” (7); Marlow/Buddha is “lifting one arm from the elbow, palm of the hand outwards” and he is “without a lotus flower” (10). These are important clues: The description of the positions of arms and hands are descriptions of Buddha’s classic iconographic *mudras*, that is different positionings of arms and hands carrying different meanings¹.

After the change of posture, when Marlow has lifted one of his arms, he is sitting with one arm dropped, and one arm raised, both palms turned outwards. This is a classical combination of the *Varada Mudra*, symbolizing compassion, and the *Abhaya Mudra*, symbolizing fearlessness (Buddhanet). It is the narrator that gives us this clue, not Marlow, who might be totally unaware of the iconographic meaning of his posture. The negative description “without a lotus flower” is also important for the reader’s assessment of Marlow. Although it admittedly would have been rather strange if Marlow *had* had a lotus flower in his hand, the explicit mentioning of his *not* having it, in opposition to Conrad’s aesthetic principle of never stating a negative², invites an interpretation, and since the lotus flower is “the symbol of achieved wisdom” (Baker, p 342), the explicit absence of it can be interpreted as a lack of wisdom or knowledge on the part of Marlow. This lack of knowledge, together with the above mentioned inconclusiveness of his experiences, makes Marlow a character not wholly reliable; he may be truthful in the rendering of his experiences, but he may lack insight into the significance of what he is experiencing and the significance of his own tale. Consequently, a wise strategy for the reader is to be prepared to question what Marlow says.

Allegorical short-cuts in *Heart of Darkness*

The sepulchral city

Before going to Africa, Marlow has to go to the Company’s offices in Brussels to sign his contract, and he says that the city “always makes [him] think of a whited sepulchre” (13). Marlow brushes the comment aside in his typical fashion, calling it “a prejudice no doubt”, and hurries along with the story. But there is all the reason to make a halt. The reference to “a whited sepulchre” is a biblical allusion. According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus emphatically criticised the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, comparing them with whited sepulchres:

¹ The inspiration to investigate this matter came from Olof Lagercrantz, *Färd med mörkrets hjärta*, pp 16f.

² See Ford Maddox Ford, in *Kimbrough*, p 213.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (*Matt. 23:27f*)

Through the biblical allusion Conrad hints that there is something rotten and unclean in Brussels, at the very heart of Civilization, below the impressive surface. Like the Pharisees, the agents of colonialism are very anxious to appear as righteous men, their words are all enlightenment, altruism and development, but their deeds are dark, egoistic and iniquitous.

Not only is there a hidden unrighteousness, there are also signs of death and emptiness in the midst of imposing architecture: The streets are “deserted” and “in deep shadow”, and there is “a dead silence”. Furthermore there is “grass sprouting between the stones”, showing that not only is the civilised varnish superimposed on a hidden iniquity, but also on a suppressed Nature, refusing to be brought under control.

The Company's Offices

Entering the Company's offices, Conrad lets Marlow describe the staircase as “swept and ungarnished”, yet another allusion to Matthew:

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation (*Matt 12:43-45*)

It is impossible to know whether Conrad's deviation from the original is intentional, but “ungarnished” instead of “garnished” might be used to enhance the picture of emptiness, so that the stairs leading up to the offices are even emptier and more welcoming to unclean spirits than the house in the biblical parallel. In any case, the allusion clearly opens for an interpretation of the Company's offices as a centre of wickedness, and perhaps a heart, or even *the* heart of Darkness.

Marlow's description of the building supports this interpretation. The “double doors” and “archways right and left”, and the two rooms, the “waiting-room” (13) and the “sanctuary” (14), reminds one of the human heart: Two rooms (the atrium and the ventricle), separated by double doors (the flaps of the pulmonary valve), and connected by archways right and left. Using this image the company can be seen as a wicked heart, a heart of Darkness, pumping people to the African continent, on the surface in a quest for enlightenment and civilisation, deep down with zeal to plunder. In “Geography and some explorers”, in his *Last Essays*, Conrad describes the Belgian enterprise in the Congo as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever

disfigured the history of human conscience” (*Joseph Conrad’s Letters*, p 151); words as harsh as the ones Jesus directs to the Pharisees in the first quote from Matthew above.

The knitters of black wool

The image of the wicked heart is not the only image used in describing the Company’s offices; there are also traces of the image of the knitting machine, mentioned in Conrad’s letters to Graham. In the outer room there are two women, one slim and young, one fat and old, both sitting “on straw-bottomed chairs knitting black wool” (13). The movements of the younger of the two knitters are described in quite a mechanical way, she “got up and walked straight at me – still knitting with downcast eyes – and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way [...] stood still, and looked up [...] and [...] turned around without a word and preceded me into a waiting room” (13). She is later depicted as repetitively moving “back and forth”, “introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown” (14). The older knitter who just sits there, mechanically throwing a quick glance at each person who enters the room, can also be seen as a cog in the cosmic knitting machine, symbolizing a part of the indifferent mechanical powers of universe, that “knits us in and knits us out” (*Joseph Conrad’s Letters*, p 57; cf above p 2).

Conrad conjures up an image of a heart of Darkness at the heart of Europe, pumping evil to the African continent. Linked to this image but working on a larger scale, enveloping everything there is, there is also the picture of the giant knitting machine as sketched in the letters to Graham. Thus the significance of Marlow saluting the knitter in the words of the gladiators before entering the Coliseum, “*Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant*”³ (14) could be read as a commentary, a fearless defiant statement, made to the blind, indifferent “knitting machine” that mercilessly decides our fates.

The thought that the heart of Darkness is located at the Company’s offices in Europe is supported by Marlow’s comment that later, in Africa, he “thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness” (14).

The grove of death

Arriving at the Company’s station, Marlow comes across appalling signs of defilement and decay: “an undersized railway-truck lying on its back with its wheels in the air”, “pieces of decaying machinery” and an “objectless blasting” (19). When he gets into a grove to find

³ Those who are about to die salute you

shadow, he suddenly finds himself in a place reminding him of a Dantesque hell: “It seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (20). In the grove, later referred to as “the grove of death” (22), Marlow finds a number of used up people from the native work force who “had withdrawn to die” (20). They are described in a de-personified way, as “moribund shapes”, “black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree” and “bundles of acute angles” and all over the grove people are “scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence” (21).

But the text is not only referring to Dante’s *Inferno*. In her essay “Marlow’s descent into Hell”, Lillian Feder points to the parallels between *Heart of Darkness* and the sixth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Feder, p 281). In both stories the word “gloom” is used repeatedly to create a sombre and obscure mood; like Aeneas, Marlow has an unburied predecessor; both loses their helmsman; and on a more profound level both stories deal with moral conflicts and the nature of evil, and the protagonist’s probing of “the depths of his own and his nation’s conscience” (ibid, p 280).

Another important parallel is the grove. In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas listens to the Sibyl in Trivia’s or Diana’s grove (Virgil, VI:16), and a “neighbouring grove” (Virgil VI:206), is the place of the tree with the golden bough (Virgil, VI:296). Read in conjunction Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and the *Aeneid* can help to explain an obscure element in *Heart of Darkness*: Kurtz’ sketch in oil.

Kurtz’ sketch in oil

Marlow notices a sketch in oil at the Central Station, and is told that it is made by Kurtz. It represents “a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch” (27). According to Frazer fire had a prominent place in the cult of Diana: “during her annual festival [...] her grove shone with a multitude of torches”, and “[b]ronze statuettes found in her precinct represent the goddess herself holding a torch in her raised right hand” (Frazer, p 6). Thus the woman painted by Kurtz can be interpreted as Diana.

Of importance for the interpretation of the painting are also “the human sacrifices once offered to [...] Diana” (ibid, p 5). The grove, in Frazer’s *Golden Bough* a place for human sacrifices to Diana, is in *Heart of Darkness* a place for human sacrifices to the colonial enterprise. The native people of Africa are seen as dispensable things, material, that can be sacrificed for the good cause of civilizing and enlightenment. The blindfold, however,

effectively contradicts the alleged enlightenment, and signals that the agents of the colonial enterprise are blind, and not at all emissaries of light, but of darkness.

Furthermore, the painting signals that among the agents of colonialism there are also the women. According to Robert S. Baker, the woman in Kurtz' sketch is "motifically sutured to" Kurtz' Intended (Baker, p 343), and Darras links the woman in the painting not only to Kurtz' Intended, but to "all the female characters in the story who, like sacred statues, have something of her immobility and her ritual solemnity" (Darras, p 80). There are, however, only two female characters in the story that fits this description, namely Kurtz' Intended and his African mistress. Darras means that the reader "encounter the same blind cult of devotion on the part of the civilised Western woman and of the primitive African one for this hollow idol Kurtz" (ibid). Feder also juxtaposes the Intended and the African mistress: "On each side of the stream of hell, *without understanding*, they devote themselves to the darkness Kurtz has created" (Feder, p 290, my italics). The question is, however, if it is really Kurtz that has created the darkness. Is not Kurtz also a victim of the darkness, a darkness created by a greedy and morally bankrupt Europe? Baker seems to think along these lines seeing Kurtz' Intended as "the symbol of a fatally corrupted European culture" (Baker, p 344), Conrad also, letting Marlow comment that "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50).

This interpretation fits well with the view presented above of the Company's offices in Brussels as the very heart of Darkness, and also gains some support from Marlow's underlining of the greed and gluttony of the people, on his return to the sepulchral city at the end of the story: "I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer" (77).

Nature versus Man – An underlying theme

Well inside the door of Darkness at the Company's offices in Brussels, Marlow becomes "one of the Workers [...] like an emissary of light" (15), and is pumped to Africa by the throbbing heartbeats of the Company. On his way to the Company's station, he is bewildered and appalled by the ongoing activities, which he describes as "the merry dance of death and trade" (17), a detached and cynic description representative of the attitude Conrad describes as "the only reasonable one" in one of his letters to Graham: "the attitude of cold unconcern" (*Joseph Conrad's Letters*, p 65). This detachment is significant for Marlow's attitude throughout the story.

Marlow reflects on the hazardous African coastline that it is “as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders” (17). The view of man as an intruder and a threat to Nature is also present in “Youth”, where Marlow contrasts the pure and serene nature with the intruding, defiling ship:

The sky was a miracle of purity, a miracle of azure. The sea was polished, was blue, was pellucid, was sparkling like a precious stone, extending on all sides, all round to the horizon – as if the whole terrestrial globe had been one jewel, one colossal sapphire, a single gem fashioned into a planet. And on the lustre of the great calm waters the *Judea* glided imperceptibly, enveloped in languid and unclean vapours, in a lazy cloud that drifted to leeward, light and slow: a pestiferous cloud defiling the splendour of sea and sky (Conrad 1999, p 14).

This contrast between pure Nature and defiling Man can be seen as a fundamental theme in “Youth”. It is also a central theme in *Heart of Darkness*, where it is not only expressed through the Company’s defiling material activities, but also in a passage where Kurtz’ talk about each station being “like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing”, is dismissed as a “pestiferous absurdity” (34). Read in conjunction with the quoted passage from “Youth” it yields a picture of Kurtz’ as defiling the air with a “pestiferous cloud” of words. And yet, these very words, dismissed in this way by the manager of the central station, in a man to man talk with his uncle, were the official way of describing the Work in Africa. In contrast to Kurtz’ defiling use of words, Marlow is depicting “[t]he voice of the surf” as “the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning” (17).

There are several more instances dealing with the same conflict, all revealing the same message, Nature’s power, endurance and victory: The grass sprouting between the stones in the sepulchral city (13); the grass growing through the ribs of the remains of Marlow’s predecessor, “tall enough to hide his bones” (ibid); “the Eldorado Expedition [that] went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver, never to be seen again” (35).

An interesting scene is also when Marlow visits the Intended and his vision of Kurtz on a stretcher, together with “phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart – the heart of a conquering darkness” seems to enter the house with him (72). Marlow describes this as “a moment of triumph for the wilderness”, thereby creating a link between “the wilderness” and “the heart of a conquering darkness”. This could be an indication of there being *two* hearts of darkness in *Heart of Darkness*, one representing Man and Civilization, and a darkness of evil and design; the other representing

Nature, and a darkness without thought or design, beyond good and evil. The stronger of the two, the heart of the *conquering* darkness, is the heart of Nature, the heart of the Wild. This is a perspective congenial to the one expressed in Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham: Man is a parenthesis; mankind is doomed to perish in due course – or to the one expressed by Marlow in "Youth": "You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something – and you can't" (Conrad 1999, p 3). It is only futility to attempt to control and check the relentless forces of Nature.

Kurtz

Kurtz is the pivotal figure of the story. Marlow picks up bits and pieces of information of the man as he gets closer and closer to him. The sketch in oil is one piece, although Marlow doesn't bother to reflect on the significance of it. He is told that Kurtz is "a first-class agent", "a very remarkable person" (22), a man "of the greatest importance to the Company" (25), "a prodigy" or even "a special being" (28).

When he finally reaches the Inner Station Marlow sees another side of Kurtz. He discovers a row of heads on stakes, which he says showed "that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (57).

Another important piece for the understanding of Kurtz is the report that "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" had asked him to write (50), and of which he is informed by Kurtz himself. The editor of Conrad's letters to Graham, C.T. Watts, writes in a note that the Belgian King Leopold II was president of "L'Association Internationale pour l'Exploration et la Civilisation en Afrique", and that Conrad might have had this in mind "when he chose to make Kurtz the representative [...] of 'the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs'" (*Joseph Conrad's Letters*, note p 150). A more striking parallel, however, is to be found in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, where there is a tract entitled "Institute for the Repression of Population", in the margins of which the main character, professor Teufelsdröckh, has scribbled some notes. First there are notes that speak of altruism and of the tragedy "should one Man die ignorant who had the capacity for Knowledge", then, "quite in an opposite strain", Teufelsdröckh has written: "The old Spartans had a wiser method; and went out and hunted down their Helots, and speared and spitted them" (Carlyle, p 172).

At the end of what Marlow calls a “moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment” Kurtz had “scrawled [...] in an unsteady hand”: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (51). In an earlier manuscript version Conrad uses another phrase: “Kill every single brute of them” (Kimbrough, p 51), but the final version is in line with the expression in the letter to Graham, from February 1899, quoted above (p 2): “Je souhaite l’extermination generale” (*Joseph Conrad’s Letters*, p 117). Kurtz can be seen as an embodiment of the anarchist view described in this letter.

A crucial event is when Kurtz is on his way to the Central station with a fleet of canoes transporting ivory, but decides not to travel all the way with his cargo, and turns back to the wilderness. Hearing this, Marlow says that he “seemed to see Kurtz for the first time”, as “a lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters” (34). This passage is just at the beginning of the second instalment of the story, and there are critics, for example Michael Levenson (Levenson, p 394f), who sees this insight into the figure of Kurtz as not only Marlow’s but also Conrad’s, that Conrad hadn’t figured Kurtz out yet when he had written the first instalment, but suddenly knew what to make of him: an anarchist turning his back on the Company and civilized society resolved to fight the wilderness and the darkness in his own way. Levenson sees this transformation in the narrative as an answer to the “need to find a perspective from which to oppose institutionalized depravity” (ibid, p 398).

Kurtz is an antithesis, both to the Manager at the central station and to the director at the Company’s offices. In the first case the difference lies in inner qualities, like intellectual capacity, where Kurtz is pictured as a versatile giant, while the manager is an ignorant dwarf. In the second case the difference is displayed through their outer features, where Kurtz, in spite of the meaning of his name, is said to look “at least seven feet long” (59), while “the great man” at the offices is a mere “five feet six” (14). But, as Levenson points out: “Kurtz represents both the reduction of imperialism and its antithesis” (Levenson, p 400). He takes the unrestrained looting to its extreme. He does, very effectively, what the colonial enterprise amounts to unmasked, and this is what renders him critique for “unsound method” (61). The main objection to Kurtz is actually not what he *does*, but that his *timing* is bad. He is not keeping up appearances and this is what makes him a problem for the Company, as made evident in the following phrase from the Manager, who joins Marlow on the journey from the Central to the Inner Station: “He did not see that the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously. Cautiously. That’s my principle. We must be cautious yet” (61). By refusing to keep up appearances Kurtz embodies what Levenson calls “the suppressed truth of European

immorality”, and the former indirect, institutionalized violence becomes “overt barbarism” (Levenson, p 399).

How far the barbarism is taken is shown by the recurrent references to “unspeakable rites”. Since they are unspeakable Marlow is not outspoken about them, but in her essay “The ‘Value’ and ‘Significance’ of Heart of Darkness”, Juliet McLauchlan has investigated the question of the “unspeakable rites” thoroughly, and concludes that Kurtz “has sunk to the ‘inconceivable ceremonies’ of ‘initiation’ into ‘rites’ which involve the deliberate sacrificial killing and eating of other human beings” (McLauchlan, p 387). It is difficult to see any textual evidence for the actual *eating* of human flesh, but it is quite plausible that Kurtz, as McLauchlan claims, has “encouraged human sacrifices to be offered up to him” (ibid, p 386). This interpretation also gains support from Kurtz’ picture of the blindfolded Diana, the Diana demanding human sacrifices, which in this perspective might be seen as a kind of prospective self-portrait. Baker comments that the painting is “a subtle form of self-criticism achieved by Kurtz before his final surrender” (Baker, p 344).

It is difficult, however, to see Kurtz as turning to the wild to *espouse* it as Juliet McLauchlan suggests. Kurtz has not “espoused the wilderness” (McLauchlan, p 381), instead he is actively and desperately *fighting* it, and this up to the very end. Shortly before his death he cries out at the wilderness: “Oh, but I will wring your heart yet” (67), just like the captain of the doomed ship *Judea* in “Youth” shakes his fist at the sky, shouting: “We will do it yet” (Conrad 1999, p 19). Kurtz tries to conquer the wilderness, do or die, but is conquered by it; he succumbs to “the heart of a conquering darkness” (see above p 11), to the “stealthy Nemesis” Marlow refers to at the end of “Youth”, which “lies on wait, pursues, overtakes so many of the conquering race, who are proud of their wisdom, of their knowledge, of their strength” (Conrad 1999, p 28).

Shortly before Kurtz final cry, Marlow hears him mutter: “Live rightly, die, die ...” (68). In his characteristic fashion when there is something interesting to be found, Marlow poses misleading questions that he leaves hanging in the air: “Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article?” (68). I think it may be a fragment of a phrase from *The Aeneid*, used by Conrad in a very intricate way. In the sixth song “wretched Phlegyas warns the world with cries / (Could warning make the world more just or wise): / ‘Learn righteousness, and dread the avenging deities’” (Virgil, VI:842-44).

That righteousness is important to Conrad has been shown by his allusion to Matthew 23:27f, where Jesus attacks the Pharisees for their iniquity – in fact it is possible to see *Heart of Darkness* as a cry for righteousness. Here we have a dying Kurtz, possibly trying to

remember eroded ideals. “Live rightly” is close enough to Phlegyas’ “Learn righteousness”, but the following “and dread the avenging deities” is distorted into a “die, die”, which can be seen as an expression of the human predicament in a world with no God and no avenging deities, where man is left on his own, without any stable moral rights or wrongs to check his evil.

Marlow seems to hold that Kurtz’ final words are a consequence of his insight at long last “that there was something wanting in him” (57). But his “The horror! The horror!” (68) is not an expression of a dying sinner’s insight in and confession of his wrongs – as Levenson says: “Kurtz’ ‘summing up’ is not a deliberation but a ‘cry’” (Levenson, p 404). An interesting question is if the iteration of the word has any significance. In the earlier manuscript Kurtz only says “Oh! The horror!” (Kimbrough, note p 68). Could it be that the iteration of “The horror!” is chosen because it is directed towards respectively institutionalized depravity and anarchism, both leading to horror? Kurtz turned his back on the Company, not to join the Wilderness, but to more efficiently and ruthlessly conquer it, but he lost. “The horror! The horror” could thus be interpreted as a kind of horror vacui, a devastating vision of the utter emptiness and futility of both these approaches in the face of a derelict universe, the mechanical indifference of the merciless “knitting machine” and the irresistible force of the Wild. Considering the last scene and the importance of Marlow’s lie to the Intended, however, it is plausible to interpret Kurtz’ final cry as a consequence of the confrontation with the darkness of his own soul and with the darkness of the true soul of colonialism, the dark (still not fully recognized) truth of Western Civilisation.

A white lie that permanent the Darkness

The initial image of the sepulchre city is connected with the final scene where Marlow meets Kurtz’ Intended. Her house and its surroundings are described in a tomblike manner. She lives behind a “high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery” (72). Worth noticing is that both the manuscript and the magazine version has “well-kept sepulchre” (Kimbrough, note p 72). Inside there is a “tall marble fireplace” with “a cold and monumental whiteness”, and a piano that is likened to “a sombre and polished sarcophagus” (72); the Intended is living in a tomb within a tomb.

The Intended is all dressed in black, and seems to absorb all the light that falls on her: “The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead” (73).

By mistake, Marlow reveals that he heard Kurtz' last words, and The Intended wants him to repeat them, because she wants something "to live with" (75). In spite of hearing "The horror! The horror" whispered in the dark around them, Marlow says: "The last word he pronounced was – your name" (75).

There are those who see Marlow's lie as a good deed, as a way of protecting the Intended, even saving what is good of civilisation (see for example McLauchlan, p 391). I cannot agree. To me it is clear that The Intended is one of the bad, even dangerous characters in the novella. As a symbol of the wealthy repressive colonial system she is a Diana, a Diana demanding human sacrifices. She is not aware of it, as suggested by the blindfold in Kurtz' sketch, and Marlow doesn't free her from the blindfold. Had she been enlightened about her blindness it could have opened her eyes to the horror of the unjust system she supports and is an exponent of, but Marlow chooses to keep her in the dark. He lets her continue to live in ignorance. He has his egotistical reasons to keep the blindness a secret, just like the characters in "The End of the Tether" have *their* reasons to keep captain Whalley's blindness a secret. But the consequence is that Marlow, by lying and keeping up appearances, joins "those devious political and commercial interests who are keeping the middle-class consciousness from apprehending the European exploitation of Africa for what it is: a cultural, economic, and geographical rape" (Allingham, p 3).

Marlow's lie to the Intended is a white lie that permanent the darkness, and consequently the story ends in darkness: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost end of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (76).

What is left are detachment, compassion and a defiant fearlessness, as symbolized by the *mudras* of the Buddha-like Marlowe on the deck of the *Nellie*.

Conclusion

The interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* carried out above, has shown that it is a multilayered story. On the surface it deals with and criticizes the European colonizers' activities in Africa; at another level it criticizes European culture and mentality at large; at yet another, deeper level, it points to a fundamental conflict between Man and Nature, between Civilization and the Wild. The deeper levels are often reached through a narrative device the French critic Jacques Darras calls allegorical short-cuts, that is a use of symbolic imagery which, for the attentive reader, expands the text and rapidly opens up for a deepened understanding.

A number of these short-cuts have been pursued in this essay: The sepulchral city, the grove of death, Kurtz' sketch in oil, the architectural structure of the Company's offices and its knitters of black wool, arousing the vision of the giant "knitting machine".

The analysis of these short-cuts, aided by the gist of some of Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham, has yielded important clues to the understanding of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole, as well as to the understanding of specific elements of the story such as the significance of Kurtz' Intended and Marlow's final lie. In my reading, Kurtz' Intended is unknowingly a Diana craving human sacrifices, and in this respect a symbol for a morally bankrupt European culture, characterized by the same unknown blindness. By withholding from her the degrading truth about Kurtz, and ultimately about the whole colonial enterprise, Marlow keeps her in the dark and thereby, also unknowingly, allies himself with the dark forces of corrupt civilization.

As the recurring theme of the conflict between Man and Nature is developed, it becomes clear which one is the stronger part. In the final scene where Marlow meets the Intended, the darkness of Nature is explicitly depicted as the *conquering* darkness, that is a darkness conquering the darkness of Civilization.

Kurtz turns his back on the Company and society in an anarchist fashion. But this reaction against institutionalized depravity only ends in personal depravity and outright barbarism, as Kurtz in his ambition to conquer the wilderness turns subhuman, in spite of an earlier expressed altruistic agenda. It is hard to pin-point the meaning of his haunting last words "The horror! The horror!", but they might be understood as a clear-sighted cry, recognizing both the darkness of the human soul, and Man's abysmally minute powers, facing the conquering heart of the Wild.

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