Joseph Conrad

Heart of Darkness

by Peter Cash

English Association Bookmarks
No. 69
Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)
HEART OF DARKNESS (1902)

by
Peter Cash

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 1902.

FURTHER READING

Joseph Conrad, Nostromo, 1904.
Robert Lowell, Skunk Hour, 1959.

SCOPE OF TOPIC

Ever since 1975, it has been impossible to view Heart of Darkness except through the window of Chinua Achebe’s essay An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Achebe, author of Things Fall Apart in 1958, is a Nigerian. Not a white man, he argues in this seminal essay that “Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist” – for which reason Heart of Darkness is “an offensive and deplorable book”, disqualified by its inherent racism from any claims to ‘greatness’ to which Conrad’s prose style may otherwise entitle it. Achebe more than resents Conrad for his portrayal of the inarticulate African, a racial stereotype of the time, likely to engage at any moment in “primordial barbarity”.

Briefly, one wonders what Achebe makes of Gabriel Okara’s well-known poem Piano and Drums which, as its title reveals, explores a very Conradian antithesis between European and African. At greater and more serious length, one reflects on the history of Africa since 1977, especially on the civil wars in Sudan (1983-1989), Liberia (1989-2003), Sierra Leone (1991-2000), Rwanda (1994) and the Democratic Republic of Congo itself (1998-2003) – not to mention Robert Mugabe’s rule of Zimbabwe. One wonders whether the atrocities perpetrated in these countries have done anything to modify parts of Achebe’s analysis.

At the same time, it is essential to point in Europe to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, the Bosnian genocide between 1992 and 1995, involving the massacre at Srebrenica and ethnic cleansing on a Sudanese scale. Jacques Berthoud’s book, published by CUP in 1978, but without either a bibliography or an index, makes these pertinent points:

Heart of Darkness, then, can be considered as an inquiry into how strong the hold of civilisation is on its members ...

Transport him [the European citizen] into a region where every external control is abolished – not only the steadying presence of butcher and policeman, but also the regulating effects of good health and a temperate
climate – and he may abandon every vestige of the restraint on which civilisation is founded, and without which it becomes a mere fraud...

This basically evolutionary view holds that civilisation is something merely imposed on man's essential nature – that culture does not eradicate, but merely keeps in check his primitive instincts ... that the ideals of European life form no part of man's essential self – that the heart of the European citizen, for all the endeavours of his education, remains an abode of darkness.

Berthoud writes not only without reference to Achebe’s essay, but also without happening to endorse the view which Achebe loathes and targets: that Conrad tells “a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question”. What Berthoud writes of Mr Kurtz makes his own view even clearer: “Kurtz has achieved self-knowledge: but thereby he has also achieved knowledge of mankind.” In effect, Berthoud is saying that, in Heart of Darkness, Conrad tells a story in which the very humanity of humanity is called into question.

Especially since the publication of Achebe’s lecture in 1977, a white man must be very careful when he comes to write about Heart of Darkness. All I can say is that I happened to read Conrad’s book before I read Lord of the Flies and it seemed to me self-evident that Golding’s tale of white boys – ‘Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart’ – was following Conrad and likewise calling into question the very humanity of humanity. My notes on the novel (which follow below) are written from this point of view.

NOTES

ESCALUS: What do you think of the trade, Pompey? Is it a lawful trade?
POMPEY: If the law would allow it, sir.

Shakespeare: Measure for Measure (1604)
Act II Scene 1

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

T. S. Eliot: The Hollow Men (1925)

In Heart of Darkness, Conrad’s thesis is that civilisation, with its various structures and systems, is a fraud practised upon feral human beings. Put another way, Conrad's view is that all civilised forms of behaviour are imposed upon men and women who – in their natural state – run wild. It is no accident that Francis Ford Coppola’s film of Heart of Darkness is entitled Apocalypse Now (1979). For Conrad’s vision of mankind is an apocalyptic vision: that is, that man – left to his own devices – will bring about his own destruction. “What is in question in Heart of Darkness,” writes Berthoud, “is man’s fidelity to the general tradition of civilisation.”

Conrad is a humanist writer: in Heart of Darkness, he sets out to demystify the nature of evil (a theological concept) and attribute it to entirely human causes. In Conrad’s view, no black magic has man in its spell.

The central thread of the narrative is that Charles Marlow, a Victorian explorer, embarks upon a mission into the Belgian Congo (Zaire/the DRC) in order to find Mr Kurtz, an administrator, a civil servant whom the Belgian Government has put in charge of its ivory trade. In short, Mr Kurtz has gone missing; it transpires that he has also – almost literally – gone native. Pre-dating Marlow’s narrative, Mr Kurtz has been entrusted with a trading post because he is a paragon of civilised/civic virtues; as such, he is an unlikely candidate to be corrupted by the
influences of the wild. Ideally/in theory, Mr Kurtz will replace the law of the jungle with the law of European/Western civilisation. The moral of the story is that he fails.

One of the central metaphors of the novel is the river. Significantly, Conrad begins his story with a nocturnal description of London as seen from Gravesend, a vantage-point upon the River Thames; over London, he depicts 'a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest and the greatest town on Earth'. This description gives us a vision of the 'upper reaches' of the Thames as it would have appeared in pre-historic times: that is, before this area was colonised, before it underwent any form of social organisation, before it was London. Suddenly, Marlow declares that this area of 'brooding gloom' was once 'one of the dark places of the Earth' and that there remain many un-colonised places exactly like it.

Throughout Heart of Darkness, Conrad presents the river on which the colonised/civilised city of London stands (the River Thames) as a waterway along which the civilised values of the Western world can travel — rather like a cargo — to other places on the globe which civilisation has not yet reached. In Conrad's imagination, European civilisation is to be seen as exporting its cultured, urbane practices to the furthest reaches of a global river. To the Victorian world, this idea of an exported civilisation is extremely congenial: after all, it was in Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) that the map of the world was painted pink in order to signify that the sun never set on the British Empire. It was in Victorian times that Britain exported both its religious and its administrative structures to a largely undeveloped world; in this historical context, it makes complete sense to imagine — as Conrad does — that the Europeans had a moral mission to reclaim the jungle/civilise the savages. Sent by his newspaper to find the Scottish missionary Dr David Livingstone, the American journalist Henry Stanley discovered him beside Lake Tanganyika (in modern-day Tanzania) on 27th October 1871 and records himself as having uttered the greeting, "Dr Livingstone, I presume." The famous quotation (which first appeared in The New York Herald on 10th August 1872) acquires its wit from Stanley's disingenuous statement of the obvious: after all, there was no other white man in Ujiji.

An apocalyptic writer, Conrad is concerned to give dramatic shape to the vision that man is ultimately a savage creature on whom civilised forms of behaviour have been fraudulently imposed. In Heart of Darkness, Conrad invites us to watch what happens when a civilised European (ostensibly civilised, that is) is sent into the African jungle in order to impose European/Western practices/structures upon it. Conrad's narrator, the merchant seaman Charlie Marlow, is endowed with a nautical vision: in his narrative, he writes as if all rivers and seas run into one another with the result that they form a global network along which all commodities — even administrative structures, even democratic freedoms — can be conveyed.

At the start of the second paragraph of the novel, Conrad (our author in his own voice) tells us that 'the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway'; before long, he is adding/reinforcing his point that the Thames is 'a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the Earth'; and, at the very end of the novel, he confirms that this waterway leads 'into the heart of an immense darkness'. Even before Charlie Marlow's narrative begins, it is clear that, in our author's imagination, the journey from London in Western Europe [= civilisation] to the Belgian Congo in Central Africa [= savagery] is one continuous voyage; in Conrad's imagination, there is a sense in which the River Thames — in spite of the intervening 4,500 miles — flows into the River Congo.

With this vision, Conrad (our author) is preparing us for the yarn which Charlie Marlow (our narrator) is about to spin to his fellow seamen (not excluding our author) on the vessel, the Nellie. For Marlow's journey will be along this 'interminable waterway'; it will be both a literal/geographical journey and a metaphorical/personal journey. For this reason, Heart of Darkness is a novel in the picaresque genre: that is, a novel in which the central character embarks upon a geographical journey which is at the same time a spiritual journey. As we shall see, Marlow's physical journey into the 'heart of darkness' [= into the African jungle] is at the same time a moral/spiritual journey into the 'heart of darkness' [= towards an understanding of man's amoral nature]. Put another way, a picaresque novel is an allegory: that is, a record of two journeys at once, one literal, one metaphorical. As we shall see,
Marlow’s literal progress up ‘that river’ (both Thames and Congo) becomes a metaphor for his progress towards a deeper self-knowledge/understanding: namely, that man’s heart is dark.

Conrad’s thesis, which Marlow’s yarn sets out, is that man’s heart is universally dark: in other words, that no man is born with a moral sense. No quotation illustrates this theory more clearly than Genesis Chapter VI:

In the beginning ... the Earth was without form and void ....
[There was] darkness upon the face of the deep.

Conrad’s thesis is that this darkness is not merely literal/physical. When Marlow declares that London ‘also has been one of the dark places of the earth’, he means that it was once inhabited by psychopathic men [= men without moral awareness] whose primitive instincts had to be curbed by other men who (as Conrad puts it) saw fit to ‘tackle a darkness’. Conrad, through Marlow, points out that there was once a ‘darkness’ at both ends of the universal river: i.e. that man can be savage whether he is a Western European or a Central African. In 1890, Africa, if not Europe, was still a place of darkness: both in terms of its ‘colossal jungle’ (‘so dark-green as to be almost black’) and in terms of its amorality (‘they howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces’). To an uncanny extent, Conrad’s analysis is Freudian in that it treats man as an id (a creature of appetite and instinct) and an ego (a personality) on which a super-ego (a conscience) must be super-imposed.

For the purpose of this novel, Conrad chooses for his setting the Congo Free State [= Belgian Congo, Zaire, the Democratic Republic of Congo] precisely because it is in Central Africa. On account of this geographical setting, it makes complete metaphorical sense to imagine that this country lies at the ‘heart of darkness’.

From the Belgian Government, Charlie Marlow receives a commission to travel to the Congo Free State (as it was then called) and find out what has happened to Mr Kurtz, a highly accomplished and respected civil servant which it had put in charge of a trading post. Although Marlow (the merchant seaman) and Kurtz (the ivory trader) are both Europeans, they react differently to the primitive lure of the African jungle. Even at the very centre of the jungle, at the very heart of darkness, Marlow retains his European values, adheres to a civilised code of conduct; in this respect, he resembles the Chief Accountant who also manages to retain his Western integrity, continuing in the jungle heat to wear ‘starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts’ in order to advertise this fact. Because the Chief Accountant has resisted the cry of the jungle and held out against ‘the great demoralisation of the land’, Marlow admires him. If the two of them had been school boys on William Golding’s island, then they would have been the ones to build shelters and keep the fire going; by contrast, Mr Kurtz would be ‘sharpening a stick at both ends’ ready for the pig-hunt.

Mr Kurtz, on the other hand, has answered the call of the wild and abandoned all codes of civilised behaviour in order to exploit the African natives. What Mr Kurtz does is to abuse his charismatic powers of persuasion (‘A voice, a voice!’) in order to establish a tyranny over the natives to whom he appears god-like. Conrad’s point is that all manifestations of refinement (such as Kurtz’s eloquent voice) are veneers: beneath the polished surfaces, there lurk savage instincts which encourage men to participate in ‘unspeakable rites’. Kurtz has submitted to ‘the heavy mute spell of the wilderness’: as an ivory trader, his rapacity, his urge for material satisfaction, has got the better of him (‘found him out’) and transformed him from a cultured/refined individual into a ‘hollow man’.

It is the conflict between the two value-systems – European civilisation and African savagery – that creates the drama of the novel. Conrad’s pessimistic point is that this conflict will be inevitably resolved in favour of African savagery; as a result of his own maritime experiences between June and November 1890, he concludes that, in the final analysis, man’s base instincts will prove more powerful than his acquired accomplishments/refinements. The moment when Mr Kurtz realises this truth, his moment of anagnorisis, is the most significant
in the novel: at this moment, Kurtz’s eloquent voice thins to a whisper in order to utter his apocalyptic judgement upon mankind ("The horror! The horror!") For Kurtz, ‘the horror’ is that man is not naturally and ultimately a moral creature; suppressed within him, at the heart of him, is an anarchy which he had never suspected.

Conrad’s/Kurtz’s vision of man is of a creature in whom the tension between civilisation and savagery is resolved in favour of the more destructive, more dynamic force. In Heart of Darkness, Conrad explores “the disparity between a moral fiction and an amoral reality” (James Guetti, 1965). Guetti’s point is that human morality is a fictional construction; by contrast, the reality is that man is amoral.

CHAPTER 1

Conrad’s Heart of Darkness comprises only three chapters. It is a semi-autobiographical travelogue of Joseph Conrad’s journey to the Congo Free State in 1890 where he experienced the ‘utter savagery’ of a jungle wilderness.

The circumstances under which Charlie Marlow secures his appointment as ‘skipper of a river steamboat’ are suitably ominous. Having crossed the English Channel in order to sign his contract, Marlow finds himself in Brussels in which the offices of ‘The Company’ are situated. He goes up ‘a swept and ungarnished staircase’ at the top of which he meets two symbolic figures: ‘one fat, the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool’. Because ‘the two women knitted black wool feverishly’, they are reminiscent of the French women who sat at the foot of the guillotine in the French Revolution (1789). These women – les tricoteuses – create ‘something ominous in the atmosphere’. In Marlow’s imagination, these ‘old knitters of black wool’ are guarding ‘the door of darkness’: that is, the door to the room in which the map of Africa is spread out, coloured yellow to indicate the Belgian colony. Marlow’s parting thought – ‘not many of those she looked at ever saw her again’ – suggests that the mortality-rate among explorers of Africa in the 1890s resembles that of French aristocrats in the 1780s.

Heart of Darkness is an indictment of colonialism: in order to illustrate this evil, Conrad weaves into his narrative structure a series of episodes which show that colonial invasion/expansion is ‘a rapacious and pitiless folly’. Cf. Mbella Sonne Dipoko’s poem Our History.

One anecdote/episode involves ‘a man-of-war anchored off the coast’ [of Africa]. This gunship becomes an emblem of the ‘rapacious and pitiless folly’ of the colonial power: in this case, Belgium. For no logical reason, its commander has decided to train ‘the muzzles of the long six-inch guns’ upon the bush:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent.

Conrad’s language is designed to show how ludicrous and preposterous this action is: after all, there is something oxymoronic about ‘firing into a continent’. First, there is nothing to be achieved by this action because the guns are unlikely to miss such a target; second, there is no point in hitting this target because the shells cannot possibly make any important impact upon it. In short, the gun-boat is engaged in an act of wanton destruction; its commander is creating a pitiful degree of havoc simply because he can. It is an act of gratuitous violence, committed for no finer reason than self-indulgence.

Conrad/Marlow finds for us two further examples of ‘wanton’ destruction; both are so entirely without apparent purpose that they too conform to the concept ‘of a rapacious and pitiless folly’. The first is his discovery of ‘a vast artificial hole .... the purpose of which [Marlow] found it impossible to divine’: as Conrad/Marlow writes, ‘it was just a hole’. Although he speculates that this hole may have been dug for the dubious purpose of keeping the ‘criminals’ occupied, he concludes that it more likely serves no purpose at all. Secondly, he
discovers that ‘a lot of imported drainage pipes’ have been broken: as Conrad/Marlow writes, ‘it was a wanton smash-up’. In this case, he does not speculate; the fact that every single pipe is broken convinces him that he has discovered an act of vandalism, of systematic and thorough destruction.

One of the most memorable descriptions in the novel is Conrad’s description of the ‘chain-gang’. He introduces it by means of a chilly metonym: in dramatic terms, he reduces the six black men who comprise this gang to ‘a slight clinking’. The purpose of this description is to dehumanise the men, reduce them to the ‘black rags’ round their loins and the iron collars round their necks – in which context this rhythmical ‘clinking’, this poetic movement, is gruesomely incongruous. The melodic sound endows them with an unintended dignity; it is brutally ironic that these poor creatures should give an impression of human harmony. So dehumanised do these men appear that Conrad/Marlow resorts to identifying them merely by means of metonyms: ‘black shapes’, ‘black shadows of disease and starvation’, ‘bundles of acute angles’, ‘brother phantom’. The precise function of these metonyms is to divest these men of earthly status, to suggest that they are no longer citizens of the living world – which, in one sense, they no longer are. It is significant that ‘one of these creatures ….. went off on all fours’ as if he were no more sentient than a beast. In juxtaposition with the members of the chain-gang, Conrad places ‘the Company’s chief accountant’. The obvious purpose of this juxtaposition — between creatures ‘in every pose of contorted collapse’ and this ‘starched’ and stiff company official — is to illustrate graphically the colonial white man’s degradation of the black native. For the Chief Accountant embodies every trapping of human ‘elegance’; by contrast, he is to be identified by his sartorial fastidiousness:

I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished books.

In this case, Conrad identifies the man by means of synecdoche in that he becomes important only for the salient aspects of his appearance: eg. his high collar, his ‘parted, brushed, oiled’ hair. It is under these circumstances that this supremely conventional figure becomes grotesque; it is in the African setting that his European attention to sartorial detail looks bizarre. So immaculately is he turned out that Conrad/Marlow ultimately finds for him the simile of ‘a hair-dresser’s dummy’. He is, however, careful to point out that the Western details of his appearance are ‘achievements of character’. What Conrad means is that the Company Accountant’s dress-style points to the resilience of his moral sense; given ‘his got-up shirt-front’, he is unlikely to have a heart of darkness. Especially eccentric is the ‘green-lined parasol’; especially incongruous is his explanation that – in 100⁰F heat – he has stepped outside ‘to get a breath of fresh air’. Conrad’s use of the phrase ‘apple-pie order’ to suggest this man’s preserved sense of Western values further emphasises what an incongruity he is.

Conrad kept a diary of his journey into the Congo Free State in 1890. During his hunt for valuable minerals, he encountered a number of colonial officials whose brutal oppression of the native population he records in his novel. For instance, there was a German doctor by the name of Edward Schnitzer who, in spite of being Jewish, converted to Islam and changed his name to Emir Pasha; significantly, this individual first became a governor of a Sudanese province, but then formed his own private kingdom in which he dealt in vast quantities of ivory. Other corrupt Belgian officials in this part of the world included Guillaume von Kerckhoven and Georges Antoine Klein, both of whom wielded savage power over the natives and enjoyed parading the heads of their executed victims on poles. Most significantly, Conrad’s original name for Mr Kurtz was Mr Klein; from this name-change, it is reasonable to infer that Conrad had in mind an actual person of diminutive stature.

It is safe to assume that ‘the manager’ is an autobiographical figure. Conrad/Marlow’s description of him is designed to portray his complete and utter ordinariness:

He was commonplace in complexion, in feature, in manners, and in voice. He was of middle size and of ordinary build.
Being such a nondescript figure, he is perfectly equipped to represent ‘the banality of evil’ (Hartley Shawcross). He is a composite of Edward Schnitzer and Georges Klein in whom Conrad/Marlow endeavours to trace the quality which enables ‘a common trader … nothing more’ to predominate. Significantly, Marlow notes that ‘he had no genius for organising, for initiative or for order’ and that, moreover, ‘he had no learning and no intelligence’. Marlow attempts to understand how this man, given no positive qualities whatsoever, has achieved ‘his position’. It is

because he was never ill ..... Because triumphant health in the general rout
of constitutions is a kind of power in itself.

In the end, Marlow comes up with a Darwinian analysis: that predominance will come only to those few who are fit enough to survive ‘on this beach of the tumid river’, to withstand the jungle. In this primitive world, a man achieves ascendency over other men primarily by virtue of his immune system – nothing more civilised or more sophisticated than that. No wonder that the manager has been heard to say that “men who come out here should have no entrails.” Such a statement represents an insight into the very darkness (‘a door opening into a darkness’) with which Conrad is concerned: namely, what lies at the ‘heart’ of man.

Implicit in Conrad’s description of the Belgian administration of the Congo is an assumption that all administrations conform to a civilised, structured pattern. What Marlow brings to the Congo Basin is a belief that he is going to find there a version of European orderliness. What immediately and repeatedly puzzles him is that he finds no such thing; instead, he persistently encounters forms of behaviour incongruous with his Western expectations. Viewed in a Western perspective, the following observations seem so out of place as to be surreal or unreal. Everything seems to be ‘to no purpose’ or illogical. For instance, the Central Station

was on a back water surrounded by scrub and forest, with a pretty border of smelly mud on one side, and on the three others enclosed by a crazy fence of rushes.

Conrad’s use of adjectives illustrates this illogicality: eg. the ‘central’ station is on a ‘back’ water of the river, the border of ‘smelly’ mud is ‘pretty’ and the fence itself is ‘crazy’. When Marlow then sees ‘men strolling aimlessly about’, there is no wonder that he asks himself ‘what it all meant’; indeed, he transfers the epithet ‘absurd’ from the men’s general demeanour to the impractical staves which they carry in their hands (‘absurd long staves’). Marlow’s attempts to sum up this behaviour – ‘imbecile rapacity’ – confirm that, by his Western standards, it makes no sense: ‘never seen anything so unreal in my life’.

Other figures whom Marlow observes reinforce this point. For instance, when ‘a grass shed’ catches fire, a ‘stout man’ rushes down to the river with ‘a tin pail in his hand’; admirable though his energy is, purposeful though it may seem, there is ‘a hole in the bottom of his pail’. For another instance, there is a fellow to whom the making of bricks has been entrusted. It is therefore ironic that ‘there wasn’t a fragment of brick anywhere in the station’ because the brick-maker is without the necessary material [straw] to make bricks. What this state of affairs means is that the Europeans who populate the Central African jungle ‘are all waiting’. In this respect, the figures whom Marlow encounters anticipate Beckett’s Estragon and Vladimir in their Godot-like waiting; that is, they are waiting for something which will never turn up. In the meantime, they devise ways of passing the time (which would pass anyway); they find ways of giving themselves the impression that they exist. For instance, they brutalise the native population: because the shed caught fire, they decide to beat a nearby native so badly that he can be heard ‘screeching most horribly’ and spends several days ‘trying to recover’.
Conrad’s reading of human psychology inclines him to the view that man is an essentially and fundamentally indolent creature. Although the Belgians out there foster a ‘desire to get appointed to a trading-post’, they are so lazy that they are not prepared to lift even ‘a little finger’ to attain this end for themselves; it is for this reason that they just sit about, waiting. This situation – illogical by the standards of Western efficiency – applies equally to the repair of Marlow’s steamboat. In order to repair his steamboat, he needs ‘rivets’.

Rivets. To get on with the work – to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted.

What is so illogical/absurd as to be ‘unreal’ is that there are ‘cases of them down at the coast’, but that there is not ‘one rivet to be found where it [is] wanted’: namely, in the interior. What is even worse, what compounds this absurd/unreal situation, is that ‘every week’ a caravan arrives bringing in trade goods which serve no practical purpose: “ghastly glazed calico .... glass beads .... confounded spotted cotton handkerchiefs .... And no rivets”. What is interesting here is Marlow’s difficulty in understanding this complete and utter lack of logistical organisation. By his European standards of efficiency, it makes no sense. Consequently, he begins to analyse the value of work:

I don’t like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work. 
The chance to find yourself. Your own reality.

Although Marlow can understand why the expatriates prefer to laze about, the European in him recognises the value of the work-ethic: namely, that ‘work’ gives a man the chance to find himself/to know his ‘own reality’. What therefore is unreal about the situation in the interior is that the men there have dispensed with the traditional Western way of finding for themselves a secure sense of personal identity.

To illustrate this point, Marlow refers to his steamboat in affectionate terms; he finds for it a memorable simile – ‘rang under my feet like an empty Huntley & Palmer’s biscuit tin’ – which expresses his domestic familiarity with his craft. By contrast, the men who staff the caravan are visibly and audibly alienated from their work; as a result, they go about it with ‘an absurd air of disorderly flight’; they deliver ‘an inextricable mess of things’ about which they could not care less. At the expense of these ‘sordid buccaneers’, Marlow is bitterly ironic: ‘this devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition’. Both the adjective ‘devoted’ (deliberately misplaced) and the epithet ‘Eldorado Exploring Expedition (falsely dignified) suggest a practical and moral grandeur which is nowhere to be seen: for instance, there is nothing golden (el dorado) about this enterprise at all.

In 1890, “the ravages of King Leopold’s International Association for the Civilisation of Central Africa” (Achebe) included mutilations on an industrial scale. From the work of missionaries Edmund Morel and Joseph Clark, it is clear that King Leopold II of Belgium had turned the Congo Free State into a massive labour-camp in which discipline was maintained by barbaric means: eg. amputations and mutilations were conducted by quota. Conrad, however, does not describe these barbarities in any lurid detail; rather, he is concerned with the absurd rapacity of human behaviour in the African jungle. Of the members of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, he notes that ‘there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them’; literally, they do not know what work is. What therefore fascinates Conrad is the spectacle of fellow Europeans/fellow men going about their business without ‘moral purpose’. Indeed, it is this fascination that he develops with Mr Kurtz: what, he wonders, has become of ‘this man who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort’? How, Marlow wonders, will moral ideas fare in the jungle? Will they founder or prosper? When he embarks upon his steamboat for the interior, will he be heading into both a literal and a metaphorical heart of darkness?
CHAPTER 2

At the start of Chapter 2, Marlow finds himself eavesdropping upon a conversation between ‘the manager’ and his uncle. Lying upon the deck of his steamboat, Marlow overhears them talking and begins slowly to make sense of their words. It transpires that the subject of their conversation is Mr Kurtz (‘They had been talking about Kurtz’) and his heavy involvement in the ivory trade (‘Ivory .... lots of it – prime sort – lots’). From this conversation, it becomes clear that Kurtz is such a celebrity that no one needs to mention him by name; instead, he is identified by epithets (‘that man’) and pronouns (‘he’, ‘him’). Marlow’s first vision of Kurtz, then, is of a ‘lone white man’ who – for some as-yet-unspecified reason – inspires awe in those who work for him. What Marlow is wondering is why Kurtz should have ‘set his face towards the depths of the wilderness’. The answer (which is waiting for us in the remainder of the novel) is that this man has discovered for himself circumstances in which he can exercise absolute and supreme power; in other words, Kurtz is to embody the adroit imperialist who will use the advantages bestowed on him by his civilised upbringing to exploit the natives/‘savages’. At this point in the narrative, Conrad puts into the mouth of ‘the manager’ the idealistic/optimistic reason behind colonial expansion:

Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving instruction.

It is this fine moral principle that Kurtz, intent on ‘improving’ only himself, betrays. At this point, the manager extends ‘his short flipper of an arm’ and gestures towards the jungle – ‘the forest, the creek, the mud, the river’. Although Marlow has previously referred to ‘a darkness’, here is the first occasion in the novel on which he articulates a formulation of Conrad’s title: in pointing to the jungle, the uncle is said to point ‘to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart’. Such a description instantly begs questions: what evil is hidden? in what sense, other than the literal, is the heart of the jungle dark?

From this point, Conrad begins to make free with the idea that the heart of the jungle (because it is literally dark) is a metaphor for the heart of man (which is morally dark). Consequently, there goes into Marlow’s detailed descriptions of the jungle an enormous energy, designed particularly to illustrate that the Congolese jungle replicates conditions at ‘the earliest beginnings of the world’ when men were universally uncivilised: i.e. without a moral sense, without a conscience, intent only on survival. Under those primaeval circumstances, moral values (patience, disgust) had no meaning: ‘beliefs and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze’. Marlow makes the explicit point that European/Western efficiency (in his case, steering a safe course for his ‘tin-pot steamboat’) tends to disguise from Western Europeans such as himself ‘the reality’/‘the inner truth’: namely, that man has a dark heart. His description of the ‘trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense’ beneath which ‘the little begrimed steamboat’ crept is a supreme form of travel writing: not only does he describe the jungle’s interior, but he also conveys its capacity to put man and his machines in perspective: ‘it made you feel very small’. Consistently, Conrad’s writing has an ulterior motive: in describing the literal jungle through which he travels in 1890, he is also describing a region of his human self into which he travelled on that same journey. In other words, his declarative statement — ‘We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness’ — charts both a literal and a metaphorical quest.

Conrad’s big idea is that the Congolese jungle resembles the conditions on Planet Earth as they were at the Dawn of Time:

We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet.

According to this idea, Marlow and his men are the ‘first of men’ to take possession of this planet – that is, until they are met by a native population which pre-dates them and behaves
like a horde of neanderthal men; significantly, Conrad/Marlow describes these hordes by means of metonymy (‘a burst of yells’) and synecdoche (‘a whirl of black limbs’). Of course, the function of these figures of speech is to deny to this indigenous population the complete semblance of humanity: in particular, the use of synecdoche (‘eyes rolling’) indicates that these Africans – who form a ‘black and incomprehensible frenzy’ – are members of the human race, but outside European understanding.

What then troubles Marlow lies at the heart of the novel. His second thought is that ‘the prehistoric man’, incomprehensibly gesticulating on the river bank, bears an uncanny resemblance to the same men travelling through the Congo Basin. In Marlow’s view, ‘the worst of it’ is his sudden suspicion that these creatures are ‘not inhuman’. It dawns ‘slowly’ on him that he, a modern European, bears a ‘remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar’ and he is ‘man enough’ to admit to himself that there does actually exist within ‘the terrible frankness of that noise’ a meaning which he – allegedly ‘remote from the night of first ages’ – can actually comprehend. Significantly, the close kinship which he, not to mention Mr Kurtz, shares with ‘prehistoric man’ involves an innate lack of moral awareness. For Chinua Achebe’s argument, Conrad’s acknowledgement of a ‘kinship’ between African and European is troublesome and he quibbles with the word, complaining that it is standoffish. Given ‘the psychological pre-disposition’ of Conrad’s 1902 readers, to which Achebe points, it may – on the contrary – be courageously inclusive.

To illustrate that Marlow has embarked upon a picaresque journey, Conrad keeps identifying landmarks along the way ‘towards Kurtz’: eg. ‘a hut of reeds’ in which ‘a white man’ had lived ‘not very long ago’. Conrad’s repeated descriptions of the Congolese jungle (‘the living trees, lashed together by the creepers’) are designed to suggest Marlow’s alienation from the civilised world:

The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared.

It is both his geographical and his moral bearings that Marlow is about to lose. It dawns on him that, in ‘the immense matted jungle’, a man is in danger of losing the power of ‘restraint’ by which he is civilised/made moral.

‘Some fifty miles below the Inner Station’, Marlow’s steamer comes alongside an abandoned ‘hut of reeds’. Outside this hut hangs a sign which encourages its readers to ‘Hurry up’. Marlow’s questions – ‘Where? Up the river?’ – represent a civilised and sane attempt to find a sense of direction in a world from which all direction seems lost: in other words, that imperative ‘Hurry up’ makes neither geographical nor semantic sense in the mad world of the Congo Free State in 1890.

Inside the hut, Marlow makes an extraordinary discovery. The text-book which he finds – An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship – is extraordinary not only because it is a book (a sign of literacy) but also because it is a manual of such technical complexity that it is flagrantly incongruous in the Congolese jungle. What strikes Marlow about this frayed book is the earnest evidence it gives of human affairs: ‘a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work’. Such a system of organisation is entirely out of keeping with the wilderness in which he has found it. In short, Conrad keeps pointing to the conflict between European order and African chaos, a chaos in which every detail of logistical sophistication (such as a manual of seamanship) looks ridiculously out of place. It is for this reason that Marlow comes to the pessimistic conclusion ‘that no man [is] safe from trouble in this world’: without civilised restraint, the law of the jungle operates. What, Marlow asks, happens when there is no effective law? It is in this context that he starts wondering what he is going to say to Mr Kurtz – only to realise all too quickly that anything he says will be a ‘mere futility’: ‘What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored?’ In the African jungle, European values cease to count. This nihilistic conclusion Conrad complements with his neat description of the jungle: ‘Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard.’ At this point, the centre of the jungle seems not so much a ‘heart of darkness’ as the end of the world.
When a native war cry goes up, one of Marlow’s companions asks ironically, ‘Good God! What is the meaning ….? ‘ The ironies are that both of his instinctive expressions are embarrassed by the context of the wilderness in which he utters them: ie. there is no ‘God’; there is no ‘meaning’. Of the natives whom they have encountered, Marlow remarks that they have no concept of time (‘any clear idea of time’). The reason he gives for this perception is that ‘they still belonged to the beginning of time’: because they have not evolved, because they have not travelled through time, made civilised progress, ‘they have no inherited experience’ to define them. Repeatedly, Conrad uses synecdoche (‘human limbs in movement’) to indicate that the Congolese natives are forms of human life, but not as the Europeans know it.

At this stage, Marlow comes to the realisation that the point of his picaresque journey is ‘a talk with Kurtz’. At the same time, he fears that Kurtz is already dead and that his journey may be to no avail; in this context, he fears that he may have been ‘striving after something altogether without a substance’. This phrase is ironic, for it refers not literally to the dead Kurtz, but metaphorically to the living Kurtz who – being a ‘hollow man’, a man without a moral core – is equally ‘something altogether without a substance’ [= without moral substance]. Specifically, Marlow worries that he ‘will never hear him, for Kurtz presented himself as a voice’.

One of the great strengths of Conrad’s narrative technique is that every so often his narrator Marlow can address the seamen who are listening to him on the Nellie as if they are Conrad’s own audience. One such episode occurs when Marlow speculates about the process by which Mr Kurtz went native/was corrupted. Informing Marlow’s vision of Kurtz’s demise is a supernatural sense that there are at work ‘powers of darkness’ which men must actively resist; this supernatural notion accounts for Marlow’s feeling that Kurtz has taken part in ‘inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation’ and that he has become one of ‘the devils of the land’. The truth, however, is more mundane and more disturbing. Marlow’s appeal to his audience –

You can’t understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ....

— implies that they cannot comprehend Kurtz’s circumstances because they (unlike him) can feel ‘solid pavement’ under their feet, hear ‘kind neighbours’ whispering advice and see a reassuring policeman on the street corner. Marlow’s point is that civilised man relies for his moral security on the trivial trappings of his everyday life; these menial contacts protect him from the solitude ‘of the first ages’ in which a man can so easily revert to bestial type. By its use of contrasting adjectives, Marlow’s conclusion — ‘these little things make all the great difference’ — confirms that social minutiae (talking to the butcher ‘and the policeman’) are what preserve a man’s moral self; they are what defend him from a descent into the moral abyss. Perhaps the most pessimistic note of the novel is Marlow’s feeling that a man cannot rely with any confidence upon ‘his own innate strength…. own capacity for faithfulness’: in other words, that man, left to his own devices, will bring about his own destruction/meet an apocalyptic end.

Conrad enjoys irony. When Marlow observes that ‘all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’, it sounds as if he is simply describing Kurtz’s Anglo-French background; at the same time, he is of course pointing out that Kurtz as a human individual was made by the various cultures in which he was brought up and that, once he travelled beyond the reaches of their influence, he lost all moral direction and no longer knew who he was. In short, there are two senses in which Europe made Kurtz: first, he was shaped by its cosmopolitan influences; second, he was moulded by its moral restraints – without which he became lost in the jungle.

Marlow learns that Mr Kurtz has been asked by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to draw up a report for its future guidance. Having read this report, Marlow can confirm that it is ‘a beautiful piece of writing’ which brings to the problem ‘every
altruistic sentiment’ with which Kurtz’s European upbringing has endowed him. The measure of Kurtz’s decline comes in the form of a fascist postscript which he scrawls later at the foot of the final page: “Exterminate all the brutes!” In other words, Kurtz – after having gone native – has become quite contemptuous of his originally enlightened approach to the problem and, anticipating Hitler’s approach to the Jews, recommended ‘a final solution’ – that euphemistic way of describing genocide.

One measure of Marlow’s enduring humanity is his sense of bereavement at the loss of his ‘helmsman’: ‘I missed my late helmsman awfully.’ That Marlow can grieve for this man, even though he was not much of a helmsman, illustrates the extent to which he has not gone native; he continues to feel a sense of comradeship with/loyalty to the colleague who was killed by a spear. Loudly though the wild may call, Marlow continues to feel compassion.

When Marlow’s steamboat arrives at the Inner Station, he notices ‘the man on the shore’. This man, who comes quickly into focus, is conspicuous by his sartorial appearance: ‘he looked like a harlequin’. In his motley clothing, he looks ‘extremely gay and wonderfully neat’; indeed, Marlow cannot help but notice ‘how beautifully all this patching had been done’. In this respect, ‘the harlequin on the bank’ bears a resemblance to the Company’s Chief Accountant who also sought to preserve his European dignity by adopting a fastidious dress-style incongruous to the Congolese jungle. It turns out that this clown-like man is a twenty-five year-old Russian who – significantly – ‘had started for the interior with a light heart’. Being young, he had resolved to ‘gather experience, ideas, enlarge the mind’. Here, however, he met Mr Kurtz. It was for Mr Kurtz that he abandoned the shack in which Marlow discovered Towson’s shipping manual and it is of Mr Kurtz that he is now in complete awe: “You don’t talk with that man – you listen to him”. The harlequin confirms that Mr Kurtz has ‘enlarged [his] mind’. Ironically, this phrase ‘enlarged my mind’ will come to apply to the very different effect that Kurtz has on Marlow’s mind: whereas Mr Kurtz impressed the Russian by his charismatic command of the Inner Station, he disgusts the Englishman Marlow by the brutality which the command involves. As a result, the two men’s minds are ‘enlarged’ in opposite ways.

CHAPTER 3

In Chapter 3, Marlow concludes his assessment of the Russian harlequin. To Marlow, he proves ‘an insoluble problem’ because he cannot conceive how such an ingenuous character has survived the perils of the Congo Free State. He comes to the conclusion that the Russian has survived because he is so naïve: that is, utterly unthinking. Because he is not given to circumspection, he remains unaware of his precarious position; he is ‘thoughtlessly alive’ and ‘indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity’.

Marlow’s final analysis is that the Russian harlequin, in his pristine naiveté, sought nothing but ‘glamour’: that is, he was motivated purely and simply by the ‘unpractical spirit of adventure’. Conrad suspects that ‘this be-patched youth’ has survived the great solitude of the Congo Basin simply because he has conducted himself without pre-meditation: if he had given any thought to ‘his devotion to Kurtz’, then he would not have continued it.

Not for nothing does Francis Ford Coppola’s film Apocalypse Now follow Marlow’s/Willard’s progress up the River Congo with deliberate slowness. As his steamboat follows ‘the brown current’ towards Kurtz’s Station, it passes the results of the ‘unspeakable rites’ in which Kurtz has engaged in order to gratify ‘his various lusts’: ‘those heads on stakes’. At this point, it occurs to Marlow ‘that there was something wanting in him’: namely, a ‘restraint’ which could/would have inured him against the call of the wild. Instead, ‘the wilderness .... found him out early’: that is, its ‘great solitude’ supplied him with an opportunity to understand that ‘he was hollow at the core’. What he learned ‘about himself which he did not know’ was that,
free from the moral constraints of Western society, he could not resist the temptation to engage in all sorts of depravity.

The occasion on which Marlow first catches sight of Mr Kurtz is dramatic: upon an improvised stretcher, he is being carried by a horde of naked savages. What Marlow first sees is 'an uplifted arm'; when this 'atrocious phantom', this 'apparition', comes more sharply into focus, Marlow realises that Kurtz is in a seriously emaciated condition. Cadaverous and moribund, Kurtz's 'lank figure' perfectly complements the metonyms which Marlow has used for him. Although his name implies a person of diminutive stature, Kurtz [= 'short' in German] looks to Marlow 'at least seven feet long' and has ironically taken on the appearance of an ivory carving. Predictably, it is when Kurtz speaks that he lives up to the reputation which has gone before him. Even though he may have been transformed/corrupted into the ivory out of which he has made his fortune, his voice retains its humanity: 'The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! A voice!' At this point, Marlow can comprehend why Kurtz has exerted such a charismatic influence over the natives who have been enslaved by him. It is the timbre of his voice which has endowed his utterances with an authority which they would otherwise have lacked; even when such a resonant voice is preaching a dissolute/depraved creed, it sounds dignified. Although he is terminally ill, Kurtz remains 'a remarkable man' by virtue of his stentorian eloquence.

Heart of Darkness is a study of man's 'unlawful soul'. By this phrase, Conrad/Marlow means that man's soul does not naturally obey any law other than the law of the jungle. Kurtz's trade in ivory is 'a lawful trade' purely and simply because the law of the jungle allows it. In conducting such a trade, causing human misery on a continental scale and keeping the profits for himself, he has gone 'beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations': that is, beyond the bounds of conduct which would be 'permitted' by the man-made law of Europe. Without a civilised context, a Belgian legal structure, Kurtz becomes answerable only to himself; in this lawless context, he finds that he has complete licence to indulge in the 'brutal instincts' and 'monstrous passions' which the freedom of the jungle has awakened in him. For this reason, Marlow cannot 'appeal [to him] in the name of anything high or low'; to be precise, he cannot appeal to Kurtz's better nature [= his moral self] because he no longer has one. It is in this sense that Kurtz has 'kicked himself loose of the earth': that is, freed himself from the 'restraints' of the Freudian super-ego by which mature Europeans are routinely controlled. What Kurtz has done is look into himself and find nothing there 'but the barren darkness of his heart'.

Marlow records a series of brief exchanges between Mr Kurtz and himself. On the first occasion, Kurtz discloses that he 'had immense plans'. Either Kurtz's career in the Congo is a gruesome illustration of Robert Burns' line that 'the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley' or it has come ironically to fruition in that he has conducted a comprehensive take-over of the Congolese ivory trade. On another occasion, Kurtz is mumbling deliriously ('Live rightly. Die ... die') as if he regrets the immoral course which his life has taken. It is significant that Marlow (who overhears him) did not have much time for Kurtz because he was so busy attending to the 'leaky cylinders' of the steamboat:

I lived in an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet-drills.

The clear suggestion is that Marlow himself has not succumbed to 'the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness' because he has kept himself so busy with 'things': that is, kept himself preoccupied with the tedious matters of everyday life, the details to which men must attend if they are to organise their lives efficiently.

On the final evening of Mr Kurtz's life, Marlow approaches him 'with a candle'. It is of immense symbolic significance that Kurtz, lost in 'an impenetrable darkness', cannot literally see the light of a candle which is within 'a foot of his eyes'. By this candle-light, Marlow can
see on Kurtz’s ‘ivory face’ a look of ‘intense and hopeless despair’. At the moment of death, Kurtz’s face (ironically reduced to the skeletal likeness of the ivory in which he has traded) expresses his horrified realisation that man at heart is not a moral creature: “The horror! The horror!” Symbolically, Kurtz’s sonorous voice has been reduced to a mere whisper. What he whispers is too horrifying for him to countenance with equanimity: namely, that life is a ‘mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose’.

In conclusion, Marlow notes that the most a man can hope from life is ‘some knowledge of yourself; this is the reason why he re-affirms ‘that Kurtz [is] a remarkable man’. In Marlow’s view, Kurtz had arrived at ‘a form of ultimate wisdom’: even though this wisdom is grim and horrific, it represents ‘a moral victory’. Perhaps the supreme irony in the novel is that this ‘moral victory’ involves an acceptance of the fact that man in the end is not a moral creature.

The moral of Kurtz’s career is that ultimately man is motivated by the promptings and urgings of his id and his ego; by contrast, the moral of Marlow’s career is that ultimately man can be motivated by ‘less material aspirations’: eg. he treats Kurtz’s Intended with a conspicuous generosity of spirit.

In the end, Heart of Darkness tells a cautionary tale: that is, it cautions Victorian/Edwardian man against the moral complacency on which he has built his empire. No character in the novel is more complacent in her assumption of man’s moral nature than Kurtz’s Intended. Upon his return to ‘the sepulchral city’ of Brussels, Marlow eventually resolves to visit her and hand to her ‘the bundle of papers’ which Kurtz had given him; these include ‘a slim packet of letters and the girl’s portrait’. From this portrait, it is evident to Marlow that Kurtz’s Intended (who is never named) is a paragon of European virtues; from her features, he divines that she is completely ‘without suspicion’ of man’s true nature. For this reason, Marlow begins to question his reason for going to see her: originally eager to exorcise his memory of Mr Kurtz, ‘to surrender personally all that remained of him’, he makes his final approach to her house without a ‘clear perception’ of his purpose.

As he enters her street, makes his way to her ‘tall house’, stands before her ‘mahogany door’, Marlow’s memory of Mr Kurtz – especially ‘the colossal scale of his vile desires’ and his ‘whispered cry’ – returns to him and he has second thoughts about divesting himself of his burden, about unloading it (with the ‘slim packet’) upon the unsuspecting fiancée. Although Mr Kurtz wanted ‘no more than justice’, Marlow – by the time that he is admitted to the bourgeois interior of the house – is in no mood to dispense it.

For his meeting with Kurtz’s Intended, Marlow’s distinct recollection of Kurtz’s hoarse cry – “The horror! The horror!” – supplies the background noise. Even as he waits among the sumptuous furnishings of her drawing room, it is audible in his mind’s ear. When she comes forward to greet him, ‘all in black’, her actual expression confirms that she possesses ‘a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief’ [in the lightness of man’s heart]. Her ‘pure brow’ and her eyes are ‘trustful’ that he has come to share with her a good impression of Mr Kurtz.

Because Marlow has decided not to disabuse her, Conrad takes a rich pleasure in constructing an ironic dialogue between Marlow and Kurtz’s Intended. The dialogue is ironic because the terms in which they refer to Mr Kurtz are perfectly ambiguous. From the outset, it is clear that Conrad proposes to put into their mouths references to Kurtz which can be taken in two conflicting ways. Whereas her remark (“You knew him well”) implies an expected familiarity with Kurtz’s moral qualities, Marlow’s reply –

“I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another”

– refers to his altogether more intimate knowledge of Kurtz’s amorality. The irony, of course, is at the expense of Kurtz’s Intended whose European conditioning renders her incapable of suspecting that Marlow’s tidings of her fiancê may be other than glad. When she blithely
assumes that Marlow must therefore ‘admire’ Kurtz, Conrad enables Marlow to evade the truth by putting into his mouth the double-edged epithet – “He was a remarkable man” – by which Kurtz had become known; the precise and grim sense in which Kurtz is ‘remarkable’ – that is, for his ‘knowledge of unexplored regions’ – is left unarticulated. In her innocence, Kurtz's Intended could never conceive that his ‘knowledge’ is of ‘regions’ – more spiritual than geographical – which no modern man had previously dared to explore on account of their existential ‘darkness’.

Kurtz’s Intended continues to put a misplaced confidence in Marlow’s opinion of her fiancé. She puts her trust in Marlow’s judgement of Kurtz because he was with him at the end of his life: “you who heard his words”. The supreme irony is that both Marlow and ourselves (as readers) know, whereas she doesn’t, what those last words were: “The horror! The horror!” Kurtz’s Intended (“But you have heard him! You know!”) presumes that Marlow will have heard his ‘magnificent eloquence’, his ‘gorgeous eloquence’. She takes it for granted that, where Mr Kurtz is concerned, she and Marlow share a level of awareness; pitifully, she has no idea that Marlow (“Yes, I know”) can repeat her words without agreeing with them. He knows, but is not disclosing what he knows: namely, that Mr Kurtz went native, saw that without Western customs and laws to constrain him he could indulge his primitive lusts with impunity.

If Heart of Darkness is ultimately an optimistic novel, then it is because Marlow refuses to try to extinguish ‘the light of belief’ within Kurtz’s Intended and instead finds himself giving her credit for keeping it aglow: ‘bowing my head before the faith that was in her’. What Marlow knows is that her perception of Mr Kurtz is an illusion; at the same time, he knows that it is this very illusion (‘that great and saving illusion’) which rescues us from the nihilistic abyss into which we – like Kurtz – would otherwise descend. Consequently, he respects her passionate adherence to this saving lie and does not bother to correct her when she asserts that she has been ‘very fortunate’ to have known Mr Kurtz: that is, Mr Kurtz as he was before he went into the dark heart of the African jungle. For his part, Marlow too considers himself ‘very fortunate’ to have known Mr Kurtz: that is, Kurtz as he was when he came to a horrific self-knowledge (‘that supreme moment of complete knowledge’).

Conrad ensures that his two speakers remain perfectly at cross-purposes. When Kurtz’s Intended seeks reassurance that her fiancé has left a legacy, her plea – “His words, at least, have not died” – invites a familiar ambiguity: “his words will remain.” What of course Marlow means is that he will never forget Kurtz’s reaction to his moment of epiphany: when he looked inside himself and saw to his ‘horror’ that he was ‘hollow’. When Kurtz’s Intended seeks further reassurance that Mr Kurtz was a path-finder, a role-model, her phrase – ‘his example’ – permits another double-edged answer: “Yes, his example.” What Marlow omits to say is that Kurtz set an example which civilised man would be wise not to follow.

Throughout this dialogue, Marlow’s sins are compassionate sins of omission; he makes a tactful point of not adding the sense in which his answers are true. The effect is a continual irony at the expense of Kurtz’s Intended. Accordingly, this response –

“His end .... was in every way worthy of his life”

– tells the truth in a manner beyond her comprehension: that is, Kurtz’s end was ‘worthy’, but not in the way in which she imagines. To be kind, Marlow omits to say that Kurtz’s ‘end’ – summing up his career and judging himself amoral – was ‘in every way worthy’ of his life in that he was honest enough to confess that his horrid life had come to a horrid end. This said, it is important to note that Kurtz, in passing his horrified judgement on his present self, can be doing so only by reference to the moral standards of his former self.

Up to this point, Conrad has crafted these exchanges so that Marlow, without actually lying, need never deny to Kurtz's Intended the consolations for which she is searching; eventually, however, Marlow is shown to run out of resources. When Kurtz’s Intended asks him to
repeat Kurtz’s last words, she asks him to do so because she wants ‘something – something – to – to live with’. All along, Marlow has been aware that she could not ‘live with’ the savage truth about Kurtz; at this point, he further reflects that, if Kurtz’s vision is sound, then none of us has anything which we can ‘live with’, any value which we can live by. Finally, he has to tell a lie:

“The last word he pronounced was – your name.”

In telling this white lie, Marlow argues that he could not give Kurtz ‘that justice which was his due’: that is, represent him to the Western world in his horrific, but true colours. He could not tell Kurtz’s Intended that Kurtz had arrived at a nihilistic vision because ‘it would have been too dark – too dark altogether …’ He concludes that she, together with the bourgeois society from which she hails, is better off with her illusion of a beauteous and virtuous mankind. In short, Marlow treats Kurtz’s Intended with magnanimity; significantly, his decision [not to tell her anything] illustrates by its moral sophistication the extent to which he at least has remained uncorrupted by his jungle-experience.

It is therefore ominous that, at the end of the novel, the Nellie (on which Marlow has been spinning his yarn) should be ready to brave a waterway which seems to lead ‘into the heart of an immense darkness’.

Peter Cash was Head of English Studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire 1985-2009. He is an Emeritus Fellow of the English Association.