

Transformations from Europe to Africa in *Heart of Darkness*

Mark Vallely

The title *Heart of Darkness* has many meanings¹. It suggests the unknown, a place of darkness, but also the discovery of a secret which will lead to a life changing event. This in part was Conrad's own experience of Africa. Conrad's voyage to Africa and his subsequent journey up the Congo River were the beginning of such an experience². The physical and mental effects that followed his Congo experience shortened his life at sea and confirmed him in his desire for a career as a novelist³. He had already written much of *Amayer's Folly* by 1890. We could say that Conrad's journey to a heart of darkness was a form of enlightenment. Here the themes of light and darkness can be seen to affect the author's own understanding of his psychological condition. That the term darkness, as we have seen in the quotation from Benita Parry, can imply such a wide spectrum of inferences, illustrates the range of themes dealt with in *Heart of Darkness*. It would seem that this understanding of enlightenment is central to humanity's concept of not only its own degree of ignorance or insight, but also its understanding of how far the human species has developed since first appearing as a distinctive species in Africa. Darkness is something to be feared because it separates the individual from knowledge and others who may render assistance. However, it also refers to a solemn influence as we can observe at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*:

The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and greatest, town on earth.⁴

The coming darkness and the 'mournful gloom' indicate a time of death. The following description by the frame narrator juxtaposes the backdrop of gloominess with the fellowship of the sea. The camaraderie of the audience appears to be a kind of defence against anything that the darkness can perpetrate. As we see later, even though the audience listening to Marlow's story cannot see each other, still they are united in listening to his seaman's tale: "Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake be-

¹ '*Heart of Darkness* registers its manifest preoccupations in a title which by signifying a geographical location, a metaphysical landscape and a theological location, address itself simultaneously to Europe's exploitation of Africa, the primeval human situation, an archaic aspect of the mind's structure and a condition of moral baseness.' Benita Parry. *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983.20.

² 'Before the Congo I was only a simple animal.' D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke. *Beyond Culture and Background*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990.

62.

³ 'It is true that the physical disorders Conrad suffered during his Congo journey incapacitated him so that he was compelled to curtail his career as a seaman and , in part, confirmed him in his already emerging predilections to be a writer.' Ibid 62.

⁴ Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*. Ed. with an introduction by Cedric Watts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Worlds Classics, 1996. 135.

sides myself”⁵. The inability to see temporarily separates one listener from the others. However, their presence in the darkness reinforces the bond after having heard another listener. In this way the darkness both divides and unites. Marlow himself struggles against the darkness and according to Daleski attempts to get at the truth of the story and in doing reminds us of Conrad’s critical declaration in the Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*⁶. Seaman’s tales were meant to be appreciated as a group activity: a tradition of auditory rather than literary entertainment. In the darkness the group is divided. A few words of reproof have the ability to unite. Indeed, we find in Marlow’s words of consolation and sympathy an impression that he too feels reunited with the others in spite of the night and the darkness of his story:

I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed, what does the price matter, if the trick be well done? You do your tricks well. And I didn’t do badly either, since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It’s a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road.⁷

The fellow feeling evoked by Marlow here seeks a consensus after he momentarily exasperates one of his audience with a trivialisation of their work: ‘you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? Half-a-crown a tumble’⁸. However, even in his attempts at reconciliation he cannot get away from darkness. His reference to being ‘blindfolded’ returns us to this dominating theme. If Marlow is the hero, his heroics are expressed in maintaining this connection between him, his past and his fellow crew members.

In *Heart of Darkness* there are two cities: London and the more obliquely referred to but identifiable Brussels in the nineteenth century. The London portrayed at the beginning of the story in part effects the patient composure of the hero. As the frame narrator reflects, the city is ‘brooding motionless’⁹. Later he describes Marlow as sitting ‘cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hand outwards, resembled an idol’¹⁰. Marlow represents the hero driven to the edge of the darkness where he ‘looked at him [Kurtz] as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines’¹¹. And indeed as Krieger comments, through the benefit of Mr. Kurtz Marlow never has to confront directly the darkness or pay the full price for such knowledge¹². Even though Marlow will not pay the full price and go the way of Kurtz, he still retains a semblance of that which has affected him deeply while in the Congo jungle. His

⁵ Ibid 184.

⁶ ‘As Marlow struggles to get to the bottom of things, to the underlying truth of the affair, the aesthetic which Conrad enunciated in the preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* become the ethic of *Heart of Darkness*.’ H.M. Daleski, *Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. 52.

⁷ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 184.

⁸ Ibid 184.

⁹ Ibid 135.

¹⁰ Ibid 136.

¹¹ Ibid 239.

¹² ‘Thanks to Mr. Kurtz, Conrad’s magnificently proportioned Marlow never need pay the full price himself for so costly a victory and a vision. And this is the debt to Kurtz that he acknowledges and that he meets, however modestly, in that cautious ethical realm which Marlow clasps for his safety.’ Murray Krieger, *Visions of Extremity in Modern Literature Volume I, The Tragic Vision: The Confrontation of Extremity* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 155.

'legs folded before him, he had the pose of Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower'¹³. This aspect reveals how changed he is now from when he was first charmed by the snake: 'The snake had charmed me'¹⁴. We can see that Marlow's transformation under the influence of the African jungle has revealed a deeper awareness about the world, which goes further than the mere desire for employment or adventure. Both the posture of Marlow and the 'brooding'¹⁵ immensity of London make us feel that both have peered down at a darkness and afterwards found inner composure, borne of a self-revelation. Marlow's comment that 'this also [...] has been one of the dark places of the earth'¹⁶, enforces the similarity between the hero and 'the greatest, town on earth'¹⁷. Cedric Watts' comment on the romanticism of the frame narrator's description of London and Marlow's rejection of this suggests a similarity between Marlow and the City in that they both have seen darker times and have now learnt from experience¹⁸. This proceeds from Marlow's reminder that 'And this also ...has been one of the dark places of the earth', introducing the idea that Great Britain would have once seemed as savage a wilderness to Roman colonizers as Africa seemed to Europeans in the nineteenth century. This also enforces the idea that both Marlow and the City have grown and realised that there is no final fulfillment in imperialism or empire building¹⁹. Just as Marlow can look back at an experience with the darkness of humanity's thoughts and actions, the history of Great Britain in general and London in particular reveals a darkness which would have felt every bit as dangerous to the Romans as the Congo felt for Europeans in the nineteenth century:

Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'ye call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north [...] Imagine him here—the very end of the world, sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink.²⁰

That London has been transformed suggests a reversal in fortunes and a reversal in the process from light to darkness which Kurtz experiences in Africa. As I have already noted in respect to Conrad, his Congo experience left him a more thoughtful person²¹.

During the late nineteenth century a whole collection of political and economic ideas were emerging to threaten the dominance of Victorian traditional values, not least of these

¹³ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 140.

¹⁴ Ibid 143.

¹⁵ Ibid 136.

¹⁶ Ibid 138.

¹⁷ Ibid 135.

¹⁸ 'The anonymous narrator speaks with romantic eloquence of all the great men who have sailed forth on the Thames, but Marlow interjects "And this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth", and proceeds to remind him that Britain would once have seemed as savage a wilderness to Roman colonizers as Africa now seems to Europeans.' *The Cambridge Companion, Heart of Darkness* by Cedric Watts 59.

¹⁹ 'This is a rebuke to empire-builders and to believers in the durability of civilization; it invokes a humiliating chronological perspective; and may jolt the reader into circumspection.' Ibid 59.

²⁰ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 139.

²¹ 'Conrad's confrontation of this stark contradiction between the ideal and the real in the political, historical, and moral domains was no doubt the main spiritual burden of his voyage up the Congo; and the depth of his disillusionment must have been increased by the physical and mental crises which he endured there. In the last stages of the breakdown of his own health on the Congo, Conrad had faced alone the fact of his own mortality.' Watt 146.

were science, industrialism, utilitarianism, democracy, socialism and individualism²². The rise of these forces cast the ideas of imperialism in a new light. Far from imperialism being the bringer of light to the dark regions of the world, it was performing the reverse. Marlow hints early in the story at the ultimate effect of imperialism in Africa: 'It had got filled up since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness'²³. Paradoxically, bringing light brings darkness. Evidence of this contradiction can also be seen in Kurtz's sketch of the lady with the lamp:

Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister.²⁴

As Cedric Watts points out in his notes to the World's Classics edition of *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, this image is suggestive of the ideas of impartial justice and liberty. However, that this image is of a woman suggests not only an alma mater, but also the image of deceit. The blindfolded woman in the picture is denied that primary sense which most makes sense of the world. That this is a picture of a woman also suggests benevolence and sympathy. The reality of imperialism in Africa is the complete opposite. Also, the picture may also be seen as a transitional figure between Kurtz's woman in the jungle and the Intended. Marlow sees in all three similarities in movement and carriage. For example, the movement of the woman in the picture is described as 'stately'²⁵. Kurtz's woman in the jungle is described thus: 'She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress'²⁶. And the movement of the Intended is described as follows: 'She came forward, all in black, with a pale head, floating towards me in the dusk'²⁷. The movement of all three suggests a certain nobility and status. Something remains. There is the darkness in the 'sinister' nature of the picture, the 'savage' quality of Kurtz's woman and the 'somber and polished sarcophagus' like quality of the Intended's drawing-room. However, there is a quality in all three, which leads back to Kurtz. This I believe is the ostensible idealism inherent in Kurtz's formal declaration of belief: 'Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing'²⁸. This noble thought is of course later replaced by 'Exterminate all the brutes!'²⁹. His reputation is also maintained by the manager's desire to 'preserve appearances'³⁰ and Marlow's lie to the Intended. There is also the matter of his extremism. When the journalist says 'He would have been a splendid

²² 'Conrad has arrived in England during the last years of the ascendancy of the Victorian world order. That order, as we can now see more clearly, had essentially been a rearguard action against the destructive implications of the most characteristic new features of nineteenth-century civilisation: the growth of science, industrialism, utilitarianism, democracy, socialism, and individualism. But for a long time a host of optimistic rationalisations were used to conceal the fundamental challenges which the new intellectual and social forces posed to traditional values.' Ibid 148.

²³ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 142.

²⁴ Ibid 169.

²⁵ Ibid 169.

²⁶ Ibid 225.

²⁷ Ibid 246-247.

²⁸ Ibid 181.

²⁹ Ibid 208.

³⁰ Ibid 196.

leader of an extreme party' [...] 'Any party'³¹, his ability to inspire profound loyalty in those with whom he comes into contact, no matter what their political beliefs, reveals a break down in the ideals of imperialism through the wide range of opinion to which he is able to appeal. However, his beliefs also bring darkness inasmuch as such a following produces blind loyalty to those values, which are supposed to wean 'those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'³². The intention might be to bring light, but the method produces darkness.

After having been 'charmed'³³ by the snake, Marlow's first experience of the shadows closing in on him is during his visit to the city which makes Marlow 'think of a whited sepulchre'. If Africa was not a place of darkness before the introduction of imperialism, then this is the source of the darkness which envelopes the Congo region after its introduction. Marlow notes that England was once a place of darkness, and represents a view of an earlier period in history when light was used to extinguish the darkness in foreign lands³⁴. However, for Marlow the 'sepulchral city', is the origin of darkness which spreads throughout the Congo territory wherever the white men go. It is this 'Prejudice'³⁵ which changes for Marlow the reality of the city. Things suddenly seem strange. Having to step into the shoes of the 'supernatural being'³⁶ who preceded him as captain of a river boat, Marlow becomes aware of a 'narrow and deserted street in deep shadow'³⁷. The 'grass sprouting between the stones'³⁸ of the street is reminiscent of 'the grass growing through his [Fresleven's] ribs'³⁹. In this is illustrated the beginning and the end of greatness. Fresleven's fate was written in the streets of the sepulchral city. The ultimate fate of the supernatural⁴⁰ being could be seen in the city where 'these two [the two office women] [were] guarding the door of Darkness'⁴¹. Similarly, for Kurtz, who started out thinking that for the 'savages' 'we whites [...] "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings"'⁴², 'the cause of progress got [him] anyhow'⁴³. This 'cause of progress' can be seen in Marlow's encounter with the 'alienist'⁴⁴. The measuring of Marlow's head appears a crude evaluation. It is an attempt to reduce human kind to the shape of their heads. That the doctor does not measure his patients' heads after they return and comments that 'the changes take place on the inside, you know'⁴⁵, reduces the status of the 'great man' in the cause of medical science. Just as Marlow is subjected to this examination we may presume that Kurtz or even Fresleven was

³¹ Ibid 244.

³² Ibid 149.

³³ Ibid 143.

³⁴ 'For the vision of a heroic England bearing the torch into unknown lands he substitutes another and earlier picture: England herself an unknown territory, receiving the attentions of a Roman invader.' Jacques Berthoud. *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 43.

³⁵ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 145.

³⁶ Ibid 144.

³⁷ Ibid 145.

³⁸ Ibid 145.

³⁹ Ibid 144.

⁴⁰ 'Usually, the gap between the human and divine is insurmountable, especially in Western religions. The most egregious sin in the West is the attempt by humans to become gods, epitomized by the vain efforts of Adam and Eve and of the builders of the Tower of Babel.' Robert A. Segal, ed. *Hero Myths: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid 147.

⁴² Ibid 208.

⁴³ Ibid 144.

⁴⁴ Ibid 148.

⁴⁵ Ibid 148.

before him. From this a certain knowingness and prior warning about the dangers of the environment in Africa suggests that all are susceptible to the changes that can take place within the solitude of the mind. The humiliation of having one's head, literally, examined and being asked 'Ever any madness in your family'⁴⁶ is an unwelcomed familiarity and callousness which sharply contrasts with becoming 'in the nature of a supernatural being'⁴⁷. The efforts of the Company to transform all resources into wealth physical or psychological, hardly prepares those going to Africa. Greatness, in this situation, may not be so much measured in terms of controlling the world outside the mind, but instead controlling what happens inside. This is where the real heroism lies. Ironically, the truly great man in the Congo jungle is 'the Company's chief accountant'⁴⁸. His ability to keep his books 'in apple-pie order' certainly illustrates his attempts to resist the mind changing forces of the African environment. However, that 'His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy', exposes the dehumanising side-effects of such a struggle. This character has maintained a degree of composure which Marlow describes as 'backbone'⁴⁹, but at the cost of not being able to empathise with those suffering in 'the grove of death'⁵⁰ and 'the homeward-bound agent [...] lying flushed and insensible'⁵¹. Indeed, Marlow's ironic description of him as a 'vision' and a 'miracle'⁵² express his true greatness and singles him out for a 'great man'. That the accountant is a supernatural being of a different kind from Kurtz and Fresleven, brings a distinguished quality to the normality of maintaining everyday life. In the accountant the hierarchy of greatness has been reversed. For the 'alienist' for whom the changes take place inside, which contradicts Marlow's expectation, the accountant maintains a head which is 'brushed [and] oiled under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand'⁵³, while Kurtz's own head: 'that ivory face'⁵⁴; resembles more that material wealth for which the colonialists exploit Africa. The difference between the accountant's head and Kurtz's head belies what the 'alienist' says about the effect of the changes. The heads on stakes too display the obvious changes that take place inside:

I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black dried sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless jocose dream of that eternal slumber.⁵⁵

The 'jocose dream' contrasts with the 'nightmare' of the heart of darkness and yet reminds us of the unreal conditions of the sepulchral city. Just as Marlow feels a connection between the two women knitting in the Company's offices and Kurtz crawling about the jungle, there appears to be a darkness connecting the head-measuring alienist and the heads on stakes. Just as the effects of colonial exploitation are taking place primarily in the jungle, Marlow senses obliquely these changes in Brussels. If we may see through the organic analogy, Brussels to be the head, where the Company's head office is, then whatever changes are effected upon the body, in this case the colonial possession of the Congo jungle, may be

⁴⁶ Ibid 148.

⁴⁷ Ibid 208.

⁴⁸ Ibid 158.

⁴⁹ Ibid 158.

⁵⁰ Ibid 160.

⁵¹ Ibid 160.

⁵² Ibid 157.

⁵³ Ibid 157.

⁵⁴ Ibid 239.

⁵⁵ Ibid 220-221.

sensed in the head that is the sepulchral city. The head on the stake outside Kurtz's compound, dreaming a 'jocose dream' maybe dreaming ironically of the effects taking place inside the city of the Company's head office and of which the 'alienist' appears to be oblivious. The trail of heads from Brussels to the Inner Station illustrates an exchange of darkness between the source of light and the place where the real effects of this darkness-producing light can be felt. The effects taking place inside the heads of those in Africa are probably already taking place inside the head of the 'alienist'. The bureaucracy that the Company attempts to replicate in Africa and which is meant to be the 'means of transforming social action into rationally organised action'⁵⁶, is already showing signs of disorganisation in the person of the 'alienist' and the ill feeling Marlow experiences:

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out.⁵⁷

The alienation Marlow feels is just an echo of the darkness in Africa, a darkness which has its source in 'sepulchral city'. This kind of environment which attempts a machine-like bureaucratic exploitation of a colonial possession has no place for the 'great man'. Marlow in his disgust at the activities of the company's employees turns to the only person who seems separated from this faceless anonymous atrocity. That this person is Kurtz, shows perhaps not so much how close Marlow feels to Kurtz, but how much he dislikes the materialism of the manager and the pilgrims, who are true bearers of the darkness from the source of the 'spark'⁵⁸ to the heart of Africa⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Weber, *Economy and Society*, III, 987, 988, I. Max Weber, *Max Weber on Law and Economy and Society*, ed. Max Rheinstein (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954) 351.

⁵⁷ Watts, ed., *Heart of Darkness* 146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid* 137.

⁵⁹ 'But though Kurtz's position is isolated, Conrad emphasizes from the first that he is not alone in wickedness.' Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment* (London: Bowes and Bowes Publishers Limited, 1969) 19.

Works Cited

Works by Joseph Conrad

Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness and Other Tales. Ed. with an introduction by Cedric Watts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Worlds Classics, 1996.

Works by Other Authors

Berthoud, Jacques. Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Daleski, H.M. Joseph Conrad: The Way of Dispossession. London: Faber and Faber, 1977.

Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. Beyond Culture and Background. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990.

Hewitt, Douglas. Conrad: A Reassessment. London: Bowes and Bowes Publishers Limited, 1969.

Krieger, Murray. Visions of Extremity in Modern Literature Volume I, The Tragic Vision: The Confrontation of Extremity. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

Parry, Benita. Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983.

Segal, Robert A., ed. Hero Myths: A Reader. Oxford: Blackwell Publishes Ltd, 2000.

Weber, Economy and Society, III, 987, 988, I. Max Weber, Max Weber on Law and Economy and Society. Ed. Max Rheinstein. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954.