

*Heart of Darkness*

MICHAEL WILDING

Central to Conrad's vision in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) of what was happening in Africa is the masking of the work of brutal exploitation by the phrases of Christian enlightenment. And he puts his emphasis not on the mere hypocrisy of the Christian-civilizing phrasing used to mask the real activities, but on the ultimately inextricable identity of the Christian, the civilizing, the exploitative, the brutal. Marlow has, thanks to his aunt's arranging things, been appointed captain of a river steamer. He goes to see his aunt before he leaves for Africa.

I was going to take charge of a two-penny-halfpenny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.<sup>1</sup>

This play with the religious mission of the whites in Africa as the ideology for the trading activities runs throughout the book. Notice the pun on "capital"—the capital letter for Workers of enlightenment—but also the capital financing and structuring the work being done here. At the trading station upon the African river, Marlow sees the European Workers:

I saw this station, these men strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard. I asked myself sometimes what it all meant. They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. (p. 23)

Visually, with their wooden staves, they look like medieval pilgrims. And the object of their pilgrimage, the shrine they are making for, the God they are praying to, is ivory. It is this displacement of religion by material acquisitiveness that Marlow sardonically notes in calling them pilgrims. But simultaneously

1 *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (Norton Critical Edition), New York 1971, p. 12. All page-references are to this edition.

the term records his dismissive attitude to the "unproductiveness" of religion. These workers are "strolling aimlessly about in the sunshine of the yard", not working; their inefficiency, their laziness, precludes Marlow's seeing them as workers as the company would see them. So the term captures both the mystification of the brutal, exploitative, avaricious bases of western Christianizing missions, the ideology of emissaries of light beneath which imperialism operates; and at the same time the idle, inefficient, unproductive characteristics of these supposed workers that equally upsets Marlow. And from this point on they are always referred to as pilgrims, with no comment, no emphasis. The context of their actions creates the emphasis, the irony. When the river steamboat is ambushed on the way to Kurtz, "A fusillade burst out under my feet. The pilgrims had opened with their Winchester, and were simply squirting lead into that bush" (p. 46).

Calling the white ivory traders "pilgrims" is at an immediate level a contemptuous irony; but it opens out beyond irony as an example and exposure of the propagandist language of imperialism. It is one of a group of words whose ideological nature Conrad reveals. Sailing along the African coast Marlow is introduced to the "enemies".

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them enemies!—hidden out of sight somewhere. (p. 14)

They are "enemies" because they resist the commercial depredation of their land by Europeans. "Enemies" in any traditional aggressive sense, "enemies" in any way that would shake the civilization of Europe with invasion, they are certainly not, and Marlow's stress is on the absurdity of calling them "enemies". His values are old world, humane mystifications; he does not understand the nature of capitalism, the imperialist imperative. Unless continually new raw material sources are found, unless continually new markets are opened up, capitalist Europe will

collapse; in resisting the commercial depredations of Africa by Europe, the natives are as much "enemies" as any traditional military "enemy" assembling at the border.

But Marlow does not see things in that way. His humane values of human decency are affronted by the imperialist term. He thinks things need not be done that way. Behind Conrad's horror at "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa"—as he described the theme of *Heart of Darkness* to his publisher, William Blackwood—lies the assumption that the "civilizing" could be achieved efficiently, altruistically.

What shocks Marlow is that things are being done badly, not that they are being done. After "enemies", he encounters "criminals" when, arrived in Africa, he sees a line of six blacks carrying baskets on their heads, each with an iron collar on his neck, connected to each other by a chain.

They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (p. 16)

"The bursting shells . . . from the sea" associates the categorization of "criminals" with the earlier categorization of "enemies". Outside Kurtz's encampment, Marlow is introduced to a further category, "rebels". The Russian who is devoted to Kurtz explains to Marlow why there are all the heads mounted on poles.

These heads were the heads of rebels. I shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels. (p. 59)

Marlow brings them all together again—the enemies, the criminals, the workers, and now the rebels. And his dissociation from the phrases is stressed by their being introduced with the prefatory, placing "called"; "he called them enemies", "they were called criminals". Marlow does not call them that, and he stresses that other people do the naming. The distance between the labels and realities is underlined by this "called" formula. This alien, European imperialist, trading invasion has brought its vocabulary. It is a vocabulary designed to justify the colonizers' theft of the wealth of Africa. By calling people enemies, rebels, workers, criminals, an appearance of European legality can be maintained on paper; the people back home in Europe can be assured that everything is being done properly, that law, justice, punishment are being brought for "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (p. 12).

What upsets Marlow is the discrepancy between the sonorous phrases and the shoddy truths. In his vision, words like enemies, criminals, rebels, workers, pilgrims relate to highflown realities; there *are* enemies of order, rebels against social stability, workers for the truth and so on. He cannot accept that the vocabulary that contains words like criminals, rebels, workers, and enemies, is merely the vocabulary of the victorious, the vocabulary of the people with the guns, the technology, the brute power—a vocabulary intended to validate the holding of power and to invalidate the defeated or exploited.

The culminative example of this vocabulary is in the manager's comment on the way Kurtz acquired the huge amounts of ivory. The manager expresses no regret or unhappiness at the human suffering, the murders, the theft that Kurtz caused. His sole concern is the *economic*. The economic base of the civilizing mission is made unavoidable in the manager's comments. What upsets him is that Kurtz's methods have now alienated the blacks and made the district impossible for further exploitation. *Deplorable* is the word the manager uses: but what is deplorable is not the brutality, but the fact that the "trade" cannot be continued in the district any more.

'There is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously, cautiously—that's my principle. We must be cautious yet. The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory—mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events—but look how precarious the position is—and why? Because the method is unsound.' 'Do you,' said I, looking at the shore, 'call it "unsound method"?' 'Without doubt,' he exclaimed hotly. 'Don't you?' . . . ! 'No method at all,' I murmured after a while . . . (p. 63)

Marlow is horrified that all the brutalities, massacres, thefts and other mysteriously nameless things that Kurtz has done can be reduced to the colourless, and economically oriented, euphemism of "unsound method". He is shocked that the human issues, the moral issues are expressed by the inhuman, technical, practical terminology. This is the political use of language. In one sense it conceals the actualities of what has happened: "unsound method" is the distanced, sanitized, technical, alienated way of expressing a reality of atrocities. But the further horror is that this sort of language all too clearly reveals what is going on—it reveals the imperialist and capitalist way of putting economics first, humanity second.

Marlow's distaste for the way in which the white colonialists refer to the blacks as enemies, criminals and rebels is a mark of his humane value-system. His disgust reaches its peak when the manager blandly refers to Kurtz's "unsound method". At that Marlow cannot even face the manager, he turns away so that he is "looking at the shore", and he comments "I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile." But what Marlow finds vile is the manager's bland terminology. His distaste for that is a mark of his humanity—but it is also a mark of his mystification. It reveals his assumption that "civilization" could be undertaken "decently". It reveals his unawareness of the nature of capitalism, his wish to avoid the realities of imperialism. He does not want to believe that economic values are dominant values. And his mystification is revealed in his uncritical commitment to the work ethic, to "efficiency". It is the "criminality of inefficiency" that horrified Conrad about imperialism in Africa. If the "civilizing work in Africa" were tackled efficiently, unselfishly, wouldn't that make all the difference? But what *Heart of Darkness* gradually reveals, is that the "civilizing work" is inseparable from criminality, inefficiency, and selfishness, it cannot be anything else, that is the nature of imperialism.

But first of all Marlow encounters the inefficiency.

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. (p. 16)

When the steamboat Marlow is to take up river has been holed, he works out that it can easily be repaired. But there are no rivets to repair it with, and though he keeps sending orders for them they never arrive. The lack of rivets where they are needed serves as an example for Marlow of the unworkmanlike inefficiency of the whole organization.

Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast—cases piled up—burst—split! You kicked a loose rivet at every second step in that station on the hillside. Rivets had rolled into the grove of death. You could fill your pockets with rivets for the trouble of stooping down—and there wasn't one rivet to be found where it was wanted. (p. 28)

Marlow consequently has to sit around waiting, idle.

No, I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but

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I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (p. 29)

The mystique of work that Marlow puts forward is that work is a way to find yourself. He admires it against the laziness and inefficiency of the whites in the trading company, he admires it as a way to self-knowledge. However, the specifics of work in *Heart of Darkness* are not as abstract, as contextually pure as Marlow would seem to imply. Work cannot but involve a relationship between the worker and his environment. The social context in which Marlow works qualifies the “pure” self-fulfilling work he does. It is not that he denies this—simply he seems unaware of it. Looking at the world map in the company headquarters, Marlow remarks on the areas coloured red—the traditional colouring on maps for British territory, for the old Empire.

‘There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there . . . (p. 10)

Work, “real work”—efficiency, and the British Empire are all associated for Marlow. And it is often asserted that Conrad had a simple, unqualified admiration for things British, especially the Empire.

In *Heart of Darkness*, however, the concepts of work, empire and simple seamanlike efficiency come in for some questioning. Heading up river to find Kurtz, Marlow comes across a deserted hut

and by the door I picked up a book. It had lost its cover, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson—some such name—Master in His Majesty’s Navy . . . Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there was a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakeably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn’t believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it—and making notes—in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery. (pp. 38-9)

Efficiency, hard work, the serious study of unexciting minutiae, the book written by a British naval officer, study going on in the demoralizing jungle: all the evidence that leads Marlow to thinking he has found traces of another Marlow, another serious, civilized, work-ethic oriented, seaman. And then he finds the owner is the ridiculous Russian with the patched clothes, the Russian who looks like a harlequin, a clown, the Russian whose values are not at all those of the hard-working efficiency seaman, but of the inefficient, erratic, naïve romantic. And the code, the cipher turns out to be merely notes made in Russian.

The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags, his destitution, his loneliness, the essential desolation of his futile wanderings. For months—for years—his life hadn't been worth a day's purchase; and there he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive, to all appearance indestructible solely by the virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity. I was seduced into something like admiration—like envy . . . His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. If the absolutely pure, uncalculating, unpractical spirit of adventure had ever ruled a human being, it ruled this be-patched youth. (pp. 55-6)

The images of efficiency, of practicality are exposed as illusion. Marlow has misinterpreted the data.

And the misinterpretation casts doubt on the whole concept of the work ethic, the efficient simple seaman. Do such people really exist? Is it all so simple as Marlow wants to imagine? Early in the novel we are shown Marlow's admiration for the chief accountant, rigged out in

a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots . . . I respected the fellow, Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. (p. 18)

Typically Marlow admires the efficiency, discipline, order amidst all the demoralization, ruin and decay. Yet even in his admiration, his phrasing introduces doubts. The chief accountant "kept up his appearance"; "keeping up appearances" is so close to the illusion of civilizing work that the Company propagandizes it is carrying on. The emptiness, the lie involved in keeping up appearances, is implied in the very efficiency of the chief accountant. And his efficiency is, after all, all implied in his dress, in his appearance. Just as the inefficiency, the dilettantism, of the Russian, is revealed by his appearance. The suggestion lurks that the clothes are mere illusion, that the values they emblemize

are mere illusion too. Is there any such thing as pure work, as simple efficiency? How can work or efficiency be other than tainted by this imperial context?

The annotator of *An Inquiry into some points of Seamanship* turns out to be the Dostoyevskian simpleton, the romantic Russian wanderer, totally inefficient. More than that, he turns out to be the most loyal supporter and advocate of Mr Kurtz. How are the values of decent work and Mr Kurtz compatible except through the misinterpretation of the annotated copy of the *Inquiry*? Yet there is another way of looking at the issue. For one of the things that especially fascinated Marlow about Kurtz, was Kurtz's supposed efficiency; the fantastically high yields of ivory from his station. Everything that Marlow hears about Kurtz when he arrives suggests that Kurtz is different from the other white pilgrims. And since the objective qualities of the other whites are clear enough—their laziness, inefficiency, brutality, wanton murderousness—Marlow can readily assume that Kurtz must be their antithesis. Kurtz is both efficient, and a believer in "civilization". Marlow is disgusted by the "civilization" demonstrated by the pilgrims. He assumes Kurtz offers the real thing. Marlow one night overhears the manager of the station downriver from Kurtz talking to his uncle who is leading the dubious Eldorado Exploring Expedition.

'And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk,' the manager says of Kurtz. 'He bothered me enough when he was here. "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing." Conceive you—that ass!' (p. 33)

Marlow's reaction is one of contempt for the Eldorado explorers and excited expectation at the prospect of meeting Kurtz. Kurtz must be good because of the hostility he provokes in the other whites.

But Marlow's assumption that Kurtz will somehow be not only different but better than the other pilgrims, derives not from any demonstrable facts but from his need to believe that someone, somewhere must be good. Working for the trading company whose modes of operation are everywhere and inescapably clear to view, Marlow needs to believe that at least one of the other employees is a man of integrity, that it is possible to be a man of integrity in such an outfit. If there isn't a man of integrity somewhere, then that leaves Marlow as the only decent person; and that seems unpersuasive. If there is no one else of integrity, then



Marlow will unavoidably be forced back to examining his own involvements in the company; is it likely that he alone is unsullied by the imperialist corruptions? Can he persuade himself that he alone is true, honest, efficient, honourable?

We do not need to come up with ideas of Kurtz as Marlow's *alter ego*, or any other critical sophistications, to explain the role Kurtz occupies in Marlow's narrative. Marlow's fascination with Kurtz, his need to believe in Kurtz, can be accounted for quite adequately within a reading of the novel that stresses the objective realism of the theme of imperialism. Colonial exploitation is the setting; Marlow needs to believe that Kurtz is uncorrupted by the situation in which he works. The horror of the realization of the truth about Kurtz is the horror of Marlow's having to realize how utterly unconvincing are his own, Marlow's, protestations of a belief in pure work, pure efficiency, pure duty. His work, efficiency and duty contribute quite simply and quite directly to the furtherance of the imperialist exploitation—the objective evidences of which so horrify and disgust him. Marlow's "work" ethic, his premium on efficiency and practicality, is another mystification—like the civilizing mission of the company; it is something with which to delude other people, and more frightening, something with which to delude oneself; it is an ideology for exploitative imperialism. Marlow's obsession with work, with just doing a job well, is a way of avoiding recognizing just what his work is in the service of.

In *Nostramo* Conrad presents a third world society with some considerably developed, Western style political superstructure; and shows the forces of British and United States economic involvement, Italian radicalism, European intellectualism operating with and against indigenous forces. The result is a political arena that can be seen as embodying the political forces of not only the colonial third world, but also the internal forces of the exploitive imperial powers. *Nostramo* can arguably be held to embody the politics of Europe, or the U.S.A., as well as of the third world. In *Heart of Darkness* the setting is an Africa more recently colonized, without the developed political superstructure. But the forces at work there are those same forces that work in the political societies of Europe. Jonah Raskin noted how Conrad came to believe that the true nature of European society was revealed in the colonies (and also in revolutions) and in his fiction he focuses on men in the tropics and on revolutionaries. It is not accidental but rather the outcome of his total outlook that his best novel, *Nostramo* (1904), in which he presents an image of the mod-

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ern world, brings these two concerns into focus in its portrayal of revolution in Latin America. The early Marx noted that "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes" in the 'colonies, where it goes naked'; more recently Sartre noted that "the strip-tease of our humanism" took place in the tropics, and that "In the colonies the truth stood naked." Conrad is a long way from Marx, Marxism, and Sartre, but he shares the notion that in the colonies one saw the truth about Western society.<sup>2</sup>

Conrad establishes the integral connexion between the colonial situation and the European situation by having Marlow's story set within a wider narration. Marlow is telling his story to four other men on a ship in the Thames estuary. This isn't a setting simply to fill the story out. The story we know from Conrad's letters was longer than he had originally estimated to *Blackwood's Magazine*; he had promised 20,000 words, but when serialized in 1899 it turned out nearer 40,000 words. The setting makes important connexions of imagery and theme with Marlow's story.

The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. (p. 3)

The "mournful gloom" relates to the darkness of the heart of the African darkness, the pervasive imagery of Africa. Gravesend is a town on the Thames estuary, but in this novel about darkness and death, in this novel where we are soon to see Marlow in the "sepulchral", tomb-like, city that houses the headquarters of the trading company (p. 9), grave's end takes on deathly associations. Later the narrator offers a further description of London:

farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in the sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars. (p. 5)

"Monstrous" suggests not only something large but in the context of words like "ominously" and of the emphatic darkness imagery—the "brooding gloom"—associations of something wrong, something evil, something grotesque develop. The description associates London with the ominous quality of the African material. And just as with the African material we soon find black and white become utterly interchangeable in their metaphorical denotations, so here the darkness-light contrast is already locked into paradox. In the daylight, the "sunshine", London is marked by a "brooding gloom", the smoke of capital-

2 Jonah Raskin, "Imperialism: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", *Journal of Contemporary History*, II (1967), 115.

ist industry darkening the bright sky. In the darkness of night it is marked by a "lurid glare", the artificial light of capitalist technology and of all-night industry creating a hellish light in the sky.

There is something amiss, something unnatural about London, heart of the British Empire, just as there is something amiss, something unnatural, about the feel of the imperialist exploited Africa. There is something amiss about both—and both are identified with each other in being associated with, in possessing, in creating this same wrongness.

Conrad was not alone in noticing the parallels between the Congo and industrial London. Introducing Jack London's 1903 account of London's East End, *The People of the Abyss*, Jack Lindsay remarks

It is hard for us to realise how completely clothes, manners, talk, attitudes to every aspect of life divided the people of England into two nations; and the middle-class person who ventured into the jungle of lowlife felt like an explorer in darkest Africa. Not for nothing had William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, called his book on the slums *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). Asking 'Why Darkest England', he gave an account of Stanley in the Congo and went on, 'As there is a darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England?' Englishmen could 'discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horrors to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest.'<sup>3</sup>

The horror, the horror.

The group of listeners with Marlow are not a simply random collection. They consist of "the director of companies", "the lawyer" and "the accountant"—deliberately chosen as emblematic representatives of trade, industry, capitalism. The fourth person is the narrator, given no occupation by name, but since he tells us the story that we are reading it is sensible to assume he is a storyteller, novelist, artist—the ideologist for his society, the analyst and apologist for capitalism and imperialism. How far he is analyst, how far critic, how far apologist is never spelled out; he is like Conrad, he more or less is Conrad. He gives us the story, we draw our conclusions from the evidence he has chosen to give us.

The listeners are not even given names—just their functions, their occupations. Their anonymity stresses that they exist only in and for their social roles: they are the equivalents to the people behind the company that employed Marlow, the company

3 Jack Lindsay, introduction to Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, London 1977, pp. 6-7.

responsible for the spoliation of that part of Africa Marlow was in.

This achieves two things. It stresses a continuum between the African adventure Marlow tells and the people listening to it. The shared imagery and the selection of occupations for the listeners stresses that the way bourgeois capitalist society is conducted in England is on the same principles as those in Africa. Maybe things are a little less dramatic in England, but structurally they are comparable.

And secondly, though the novel is about an anonymous part of Africa, the same criticisms can be applied to those parts of Africa controlled from England. Conrad avoids explicitly criticizing the British imperial adventures; but the imagery and structure of the book, by choosing those listeners, and setting the storytelling on the Thames, the commercial waterway of London, centre of the British imperial trade, stress the identity of the British empire in Africa and the anonymous area in which Marlow worked.

The very unspecificness of the area in which Marlow worked is important. Marlow never says that the headquarters of the company were in Brussels; it is simply a "sepulchral city". He never calls the river the Congo. This was not from discretion, from unwillingness to name the Congo. Conrad may well have wanted to avoid identification with a particular political campaign—and the campaign was underway by the time *Heart of Darkness* came out in book form in 1902. He did not want to ally himself with radicals, missionaries and others who uttered anti-Congo propaganda. But in avoiding that specific identification, Conrad also allowed a ready transferability of his story. He does not restrict it to one country's, one monarch's, imperial adventure. He stressed to his publisher that the theme was "not topically treated". To have treated it "topically" might have seemed to limit his account of colonialism to the Congo alone: King Leopold and the Belgians bad, everyone else good. He does quite the opposite from that. He stresses the cosmopolitanism of the colonial exploitation. He involves everyone, all Europe. Marlow goes to Africa on a French steamer (p. 13). He goes up river on a ship captained by a Swede (p. 15). The man Marlow is replacing was a Dane (p. 9). The man who tells Marlow about Kurtz is a Russian who had fitted himself out for his journey from a Dutch trader (pp. 54-5). And Kurtz himself, the end of Marlow's journey, the summation of all this,

had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz. (p. 50)

Marlow doesn't specify the nationalities of the other halves of his parents, but he does tell us at one stage that Kurtz is a German word.

So we have French, German, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, Russian and English. England is not excluded; the English may be more pious about their civilizing mission in the Empire, and Marlow shares the piety—admiring the red parts of the map where good work is done (p. 10). But Kurtz, of course, had a more pious attitude to his imperial work than the other traders. England is present ambiguously—but no less firmly for that. “You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society”, Marlow says with careful ambiguity (p. 8). The idiomatic English use of the word “continental” is dissociative—separating England from the dubious things that happen “on the continent”, across the English Channel over in Europe. But there is another reading possible. The introduction of “continental” here can be taken as stressing that all Europe is involved, that it is a “continental” not merely a national exploitation, and that England is part of the continent of Europe geographically, the mere channels of sea merely concealing the cultural, economic and geographical realities.

But how far is the pervasive sense of evil in *Heart of Darkness* ascribable to the circumstances of imperialist exploitation, and to the connexions of that exploitation with the capitalist exploitation within Europe? There is certainly sufficient brutality, sufficient death, sufficient corruption associated with the European exploitation of Africa, presented clearly enough in Marlow's story. A number of critics have complained, however, that there is a mystifying vagueness about the evil—particularly in relation to Kurtz's mysterious practices. F. R. Leavis argues in *The Great Tradition* that Conrad overdoes and so undercuts the horror. The narrated detail fully establishes the evil:

By means of this art of vivid essential record, in terms of things seen and incidents experienced by a main agent in the narrative, and particular contacts and exchanges with other human agents the over-whelming sinister and fantastic 'atmosphere' is engendered.<sup>4</sup>

4 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948), Harmondsworth 1962, p. 196.

But, Leavis continues,

Hadn't he, we find ourselves asking, overworked 'inscrutable', 'inconceivable', 'unspeakable' and that kind of word already?—yet still they recur . . . The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors; to magnifying a thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul. The actual effect is not to magnify but rather to muffle. (pp. 196-7)

Leavis never once mentions imperialism or colonialism or capitalism or exploitation in his discussion of *Heart of Darkness*. His approach is deliberately "moral" (that word recurs), deliberately mystifying in its purporting to be apolitical. Nonetheless, he does incisively indicate how the objective socio-political detail of the novel is muffled by Conrad's own mystifications, "the inconceivable mystery" (p. 200) that has lured readers and commentators away from the objective horrors. And so encouraged by Conrad, commentators struggle off in pursuit of some ineffable will-o'-the-wisp of mystery: or find the whole thing ridiculous—as Albert Guerard does:

On this literal plane, and when the events are so abstracted from the dream-sensation conveying them, it is hard to take Marlow's plight very seriously. Will he, the busy captain and moralizing narrator, also revert to savagery, go ashore for a howl and a dance, indulge in unspeakable lusts?<sup>5</sup>

Having established the objective detail of imperialist exploitation in Africa, it is as if Conrad recoils in horror from what he has been writing and proceeds to divert attention from it. Jonah Raskin remarked

literary critics have neglected imperialism and have transformed the novella into a timeless myth about the exploration of the human soul and the metaphysical power of evil. These are only some of the more radical interpretations; there are others which, if they shed some light, still distort the novella, which gives us a concrete record of Belgian colonialism in the Congo and transforms a personal experience into a myth about imperial decadence. (p. 109)

But the critics have simply followed the lures that Conrad has built into this novel. It is not accidental that so much critical activity devoted to this novella has been to turn away from looking at the manager who talks of Kurtz's "unsound method". The displacement is structural to the book. Having encountered the horrors of imperialist, economically-based exploitation, Marlow

5 Albert Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge Mass. 1958, cited in Kimbrough, p. 169.

recoils and commits himself to a pursuit of a mystery, to an idea of Kurtz who must, he believes, be different from all this. Having been told by the manager that Kurtz's "method is unsound", "it seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief" (p. 63). Yet already at this point in the story, Marlow has encountered the heads of rebels impaled outside Kurtz's house. "They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house" (p. 58). It is a brilliant touch, the heads facing towards the house so that Kurtz can look at their expressions. Marlow comments

I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some smaller matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible revenge for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core . . . (pp. 58-9)

Mere exploitation, mere brutality, mere imperialism has been widened out into some larger, cosmic horror. The great solitude, the hollowness within has become Marlow's subject. The mere exploitative evil done by Kurtz has been replaced in Marlow's fascinated speculations by some cosmic sense of human futility. The manager may demonstrate the corruption of petty economics, bureaucracies, exploitative trade; but Marlow finds Kurtz more interesting because Kurtz represents the corruption of all human endeavour.

The meaning of *Heart of Darkness* becomes deliberately ambiguous. Kurtz regresses from civilized values. Perhaps there are no civilized values anyway, perhaps they are all illusory. We have seen what the "pilgrims" were really like. Is Kurtz's savagery any the worse? The novel is structured on a series of contrasts between images of black and white—white Europeans and black Africans; at an individual level, Kurtz's white fiancée and his black mistress; at a physical level, the "white sepulchre"

of the European capital, the darkness of Africa; at an ideological level, the enlightenment of civilization that Kurtz espouses ("each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things"), and the darkness of primitive rituals that he ends up participating in, presiding "at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites". Very rapidly the basic distinctions of white's white and black's black become confused. Black and white seem so absolute, such a basic, traditional good-evil binary confrontation. Conrad contrives to blur all distinctions, to make them interchangeable. What difference is there between the white "pilgrims" shooting their rifles at the blacks for a jolly lark, and the unspeakable rites of darkness in which Kurtz engages? In the end is Kurtz still trying to get more ivory, or does he despise the ivory trade at which he is so successful; is he still trying to "civilize" and finding new values in the black culture, or has he identified with the black culture in a war against white culture? Is the black culture morally better than the white exploitative imperialism; or does it offer even greater potential for evil—black magic, sorcery, blood rituals? Are there any moral distinctions that can be made?

At the end of the book Marlow tells Kurtz's "intended", his European fiancée, that Kurtz died with her name on his lips. In fact Kurtz died saying "The horror, the horror".

Marlow continually tells us how he hates lies. One reason he hates the whole African experience is because of the lies the trading company has put out about what is happening there. So when Marlow himself lies, does this mean he has become corrupted like everyone else? The darkness has taken over Marlow too? Or has he now realized the futility of everything, and sees no value in dispelling her illusions? Or do we take Kurtz's "intended" symbolically—not so much as an individual fiancée but as a symbol for the homeland, for Europe? The people in Europe are never told and do not want to know the truth about what happens in colonial Africa, South-East Asia, South America. As long as someone will run the show, they avoid having to know what actually happens. And yet they *must* know if they think about it. How else can the work be done, except in the violent and brutal and exploitative way that it is done? The intended asks Marlow to repeat Kurtz's last words.

I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! the horror!' (p. 79)



The words are there if she wants to hear them. The truth is unavoidable. But the truth can be temporarily blotted out by the mystification of progress, beacons of enlightenment, civilization.

Similarly Marlow doesn't tell his four listeners the truth about *their* colony, about England's involvement in Africa, India, Malaysia . . . even though the words of the horror are clearly enough resounding around them from his narrative if they want to hear them. But they don't; they prefer not to admit and recognize the truth.

And Marlow chooses not to insist on the truth. "I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether . . ." (p. 79). The darkness of evil, the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of confusion, or all three, or more still?

Conrad's movement in *Heart of Darkness* is from European mystification about "civilizing" work in Africa, to a revelation of the realities of imperialism. But he does not go from that revelation to a political programme. Instead he moves from objective revelation to a new mystification. He turns from the materials of political analysis, to cosmic despair. He doesn't relate the horrors of imperialism back to the nature of capitalism, but to "human nature". He takes refuge in a *fin de siècle* despair that abandons all hope of improvement, of change; he surrenders the world to the trading companies and the managers and the accountants, directors of companies and lawyers. He sees through the ideological mystifications, and then lapses back into a despair that in essence is conservative.

It is a persuasive conservatism just because of its very lack of specific analysis. He shies away from continuing his analysis of the objective details of imperialist exploitation. In *Nostramo* he attempts some specific political analysis, and his conservatism is obtrusive; his structuring of possibilities becomes unpersuasive, he all too clearly has a particular political stance to expound.<sup>6</sup> At least in *Heart of Darkness* his shying away from further analysis of imperialism prevents him from expounding his own politics—so the *Heart of Darkness* is more powerful, less manipulated, more resonant of meanings. Nonetheless, the cosmic despair of the book is in effect a conservative sidestepping of the issues raised; it is a deliberate avoidance of following through the implications of the objective data of the observations of what was

6 I have argued this case in "The Politics of *Nostramo*", *Essays in Criticism*, XVI (1966), 441-56; XVIII (1968), 234-6.

happening in Africa. The specifics are finally subordinated to the non-topical, eternal, cosmic despair that was Conrad's hopeless vision.

Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of a tumble-down hovel, with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange—had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell. The word 'ivory' would ring in the air for a while—and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel. Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on—which was just what you wanted it to do. (p. 35)

It is with passages like this, recurrent passages, that Conrad expresses the futility of existence; the smallness, the minuteness of man's efforts and man's aspirations, amidst the great indifference of nature. This is the omnipresent note of the book; the sense of how little impression man is making on the vast immensity of nature—the size of the trees, the lushness of the vegetation, the hugeness of the continent. In the context of the huge indifference of things, any of man's illusions, ambitions, values and delusions are equally ridiculous—hollow, empty, like the hollowness Kurtz found within himself, like the hollow claps of the stern wheel. We have moved from a concrete exposé of imperialism to a despairing view of all human endeavour.