Heart of Darkness: Marlow's 'Spectral Moonshine'

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I

CONRAD was a man more burdened than most by feelings of guilt. Biographers have associated these feelings with his early life, his leaving Poland despite the wishes of his guardian, his going away to sea, his refusal to use his literary talents in the cause of Polish liberation. With such a deeply sensitive, introvert personality, guilt was always liable to attach itself to specific experiences. In relation to the Congo journey itself, it seems likely that his painful experiences gave rise to what Guerard has called 'the guilt of complicity'.[1]

From the start Conrad, like Marlow, had gone to some trouble to get his aunt, who had many friends in Belgian government and court circles, to use her influence on his behalf. After his return, however, he did little to take any stand against the injustices and brutal conditions in the Congo. Although profoundly shaken by what he described as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration',[2] this did not deter him from trying to obtain command of the Katanga Company's ship, nor did he support Roger Casement's subsequent work for Congo reform. They had met in Matadi in June 1890. That Conrad was not averse to the notion of capitalistic enterprise in Africa is indicated by his unsuccessful attempt when living at Stanford-le-Hope, Essex (Sept. 1896 to Sept. 1898) to float a diamond mine in South Africa with three men, who became the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant of *Heart of Darkness*. The way that that post-Congo attempt is alluded to within the tale

before Marlow sets out is itself significant of the curious link attaching Conrad's own attitudes to colonial capitalism with the experience of Marlow. Before leaving for the Congo, Marlow had described himself as, 'loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got *a heavenly mission to civilise you*' (my italics). The irony works back to the immediate biographical fact as well as forward to the 'civilising mission' of the tale.

It would be easier to accept Guerard's suggestion that Conrad 'felt a debt must be paid for his Congo journey and . . . paid it by the writing of this story',[3] if a more practical repayment had not been neglected or if the story itself had turned out to be a less ambiguous discharge of it. What becomes fascinating and alarming, in fact, is Marlow's elaborate efforts at resisting a direct payment, even of refusing to acknowledge to himself or to others that such a debt exists. This makes Marlow's account a baffling excursion into confusion and concealment.

The story of Kurtz[4] might easily have been told by an honest, intelligent observer, who offered it as a straightforward account of colonial exploitation, with an organisation stretching from Brussels to the heart of the Congo pursuing a policy (concealed at home, but open in Africa) of 'robbery with violence'. But it had become increasingly necessary to present that policy to the public at large as a civilising mission of trade and education with newer agents like Kurtz representing what the older hands cynically, but truthfully, describe as the 'new gang of virtue'. There is plenty of evidence that the wily and rapacious Leopold II and his top-level associates saw the political need for such white-washing. Leopold indeed was a master of the same kind of rhetoric as characterises Kurtz's famous report.

No doubt Kurtz was an 'idealist' when he started out, but he was also an ambitious young man starting a career and anxious to secure the hand of his Intended as soon as possible. This meant that he had to amass rapidly enough money to pursuade her wealthy parents that he would prove a good match. He certainly seems to have had

special backing from Brussels as a promising, go-ahead young man who had been specially recommended to the company by his fiancée's rich parents. The ill-will shown by the older agents towards him springs from the fact that he has this special backing, that they are ordered to send him to a rich ivory area, and that having done so he is proving far more successful than they. Kurtz soon discovers that his mere presence dominates the natives, those 'simple people', who worship him. Amongst them he is the leader dispensing rough justice, but, until his goods are exhausted, still a trader. However, the effects of loneliness, isolation, and sickness are affecting him. 'Idealism' gives way to egotism: power, greed, loneliness and sickness combine to disorientate him, and trading gives way to armed raiding, the toleration of bloody tribal rites becomes an encouragement of them. He then comes to realise, what perhaps he has always dimly apprehended, that the true nature of the civilising mission comes down to the imperatives of 'exterminate all the brutes'. Now half crazy he will show Brussels just how 'efficient' an ambitious, trusted young agent who understands both the 'ideal' and the practical can be. But it is too late. He is going completely to pieces. As he lies dying, he exclaims, 'The horror, the horror'. If, at the moment of death the veil has really dropped from his eyes, it is to see the terrible nature of what he has pursued, the horror of unchecked imperialistic exploitation. On the other hand, perhaps the veil has not really dropped. We have only Marlow's word for it, and Kurtz's previous ravings ('My Intended, my Station, my career, my ideas') throw doubt on such a death-bed conversion. In which case, 'the horror, the horror' coming from a man, who by this time is a desperately sick and unbalanced megalomaniac, is like someone with D.T.s seeing rats.

This is the man who Marlow wishes to present as a figure of transcendent evil, one who embodies a 'madness of soul'.

But is there any mystery in Kurtz? Surely the mystery is in Marlow and his transformation of the facts of the case into a parable of transcendent evil. Marlow's experience of actual evil in the earlier part of his journey has

apparently so unnerved him that he is driven to magnify the meaning of Kurtz to a point where a concept of some 'unspeakable', transcendent, metaphysical evil seems inevitable. Against a transcendent evil is also set a transcendent good; against the 'nightmare' of the one is set the 'dream' of the other. At this level, a contrast is almost automatically set up between two phantom entities—Kurtz and his Intended, one a figure from nightmare, the other a figure in a dream.

Yet one can no more deduce a transcendent evil from the one than a transcendent good from the other. We need to recognise that while the powers of rational explanation are indeed weakened at times of powerful emotional stress, it is precisely under such conditions that delusion is likely to supervene. The enlargement of a specific evil into a generalised abstraction is such a delusion. If the attempt to minimise an actual evil is frequently a form of self-delusion made to avoid the painful experience of a direct appraisal of the facts, the need to generalise and thus to maximise that evil into a cosmic state of affairs is no less an escape. Both are distortions of reality.

Actually, *Heart of Darkness* dramatises, with different degrees of intensity and completeness, several different forms of self-delusion. There are those who 'idealise' and sentimentalise the facts of colonialism (Marlow's Aunt, Kurtz's Intended), those who callously ignore its evident cruelties (The Manager, the Accountant, the Pilgrims), those who cynically carry out their professional duties in relation to it (the Brussels medical doctor). But though each form of self-deception characterises a particular distortion of reality, it is Marlow alone who is impelled to make of it a parable of cosmic evil. His method is to envelope his story in a haze, 'in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine'. These words are not Marlow's but the author's in one of his rare intrusions into the narrative. They supply the hint that Marlow's setting of the story of Kurtz in a spectral light as of some pervading spirit of metaphysical evil will prove to be so much 'moonshine'.

II

From the beginning of the story it is very difficult to get at the 'normal' Marlow because the way he relates it does not allow us to see him with any certainty *before* the Kurtz experience has had its effects upon him. Therefore, although he starts chronologically 'from the beginning' in his account, it is also the end from his point of view. In other words, we cannot be sure that his story at any time is a reasonably objective account of what went on. Even his description of the beginning of his expedition is coloured and perhaps distorted by the psychological effects of its end. This makes it hard to know clearly why a presumably sane, balanced, experienced sea-captain with a high moral and professional code should want to go to the Congo in the first place. Admittedly, the physical circumstances seem plausible enough. He has finished a spell out East, is ashore waiting unsuccessfully for a sea-going berth, sees a map of Africa, sees the vast, yellow-coloured portion with the Congo like an immense snake with its head in the sea, and so he decides to fulfil a romantic, boyhood dream. Once determined, he works hard to get the charge of his steam-boat. He uses family influence in Brussels, as perhaps Kurtz did—maybe Marlow is himself of mixed nationality like Kurtz, though technically an Englishman. At any rate, he has relatives living on the Continent who find it cheaper to live there than in England and—'it is not so nasty as it looks'. It is not unlikely that Marlow's 'excellent Aunt' is a shareholder in the Belgian company. Certainly, like many others, she is a great believer in the civilising mission. She speaks of 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways', and already as if he were a Kurtz, she has represented her nephew to the company as a kind of Apostle of light. He is referred to them as 'an exceptional and gifted creature—a piece of good fortune for the company—a man you don't get hold of every day'. Without doubt, Marlow recognises this whole line as humbug from the start and he even tells his aunt that the company is run for profit. From the moment of his arrival in Brussels he has already observed

that it is a place struck with speculators' fever, a sort of Continental Klondyke. Everybody is full of the company's activities. 'They were going to run an over-sea Empire and make no end of coin by trade.' Marlow's account of the set-up in the company's office is heavily tinged with his retrospective emotion, but even so there is no doubt that he recognised at the time the ominousness of the surroundings and the pervading menace of death. After all he is himself preparing to step into a dead man's shoes. The doctor's clear implication that anyone going out to the Congo must be mad cannot have been lost on him. In short, here is the situation of a man of intelligence and good character who has no illusions about the fake idealism surrounding the 'civilising mission', who knows that it is run for profit and that it is likely to be a dangerous venture for himself, who admits that he feels that he is joining some evil conspiracy and that he is an imposter. Yet he does not withdraw. To the question 'Why?' there seems to be no immediately satisfactory answer, no rational explanation. We have to be content with Marlow's representation of himself as a silly little bird fascinated by a snake. The image contains more truth than Marlow realises either at the time or even when he has been through his Congo experience.

In the earlier stages of his journey, Marlow is confronted with terrible and abundant evidence of the evils of unchecked Imperialism, all recorded with disturbing concreteness of detail and with a full awareness of its utter inhumanity. All his sympathies are with the natives and his contempt for the officials, the Pilgrims, and all who are associated with the civilising mission is unceasing. And he has no illusions whatever about 'the merry dance of death and trade' and the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern. From time to time he even admits his own complicity: 'After all, I also was a part of these high and just proceedings'. But it is a very striking feature of the book that despite Marlow's clarity of vision in these earlier stages and the sense of his own complicity, as he journeys nearer to the Heart of Darkness so his emotional reactions develop in inverse relation to the scale of the happenings

that incite them. That is to say, he becomes more and more disturbed as the strict evidence of *actual* evil becomes increasingly fragmentary, hard to locate, and impossible to describe. It is as though Marlow's imagination rides ahead of the facts of the case as they stand, for Kurtz's activities, however pessimistically interpreted, are perfectly explicable and are really no worse than anything that Marlow has already directly witnessed. There is, however, a more and more hysterical tone in his narrative, an increasing need or compulsion to confer upon the shadowy figure of Kurtz a diabolic, Satanic quality, some appalling essence of an unmentionable Evil which yet has something 'great' about it. It seems that the observable facts of Imperialist greed and exploitation are not enough to satisfy Marlow's hunger for a more metaphysical dimension; those unadorned facts demand the kind of practical response that he cannot or will not make. He cannot face them, yet feeling acutely guilty he constructs for himself an increasingly hair-raising, spine-chilling fiction that there is something worse 'beyond', something which demands his allegiance while he denies its hold upon him. Marlow is thus making of Kurtz a mirror-image of his own disordered imagination, the 'proof' that he requires of the existence of inscrutable and unknowable 'powers of darkness'. So while Marlow torments himself with 'the fascination of the abomination', the real Kurtz and the reality he represents is obscured under a fog of evasive words and evasive actions, and a constant invoking of Dark Powers.

Marlow's words, his disordered rhetoric, his voice, are blended, as the narrative proceeds, into the voice of Kurtz, but this is not because he is now registering a troubled awareness of Kurtz within himself. It is true that Kurtz had a compelling physical voice which was an important part of his powers of leadership, but this is just another natural physical fact about him which again Marlow must assimilate into the larger metaphysical symbol. A truer representation of the facts is not that Kurtz's voice takes over Marlow's but that Marlow's takes over Kurtz's. It distorts what it takes to be the meaning of Kurtz to its own egotistical purposes. Something in Marlow's imagina-

tion forces him to distort the voice of the real Kurtz because he does not want its truth. He prefers his own 'lie'. This is what Marlow means by claiming that he has remained loyal to the 'nightmare' of his choice. It is not just a matter of choosing between the nightmare represented by the Manager and the Pilgrims and that representing Kurtz. Marlow needs a phantom figure through which to ventriloquise his own voice. Speaking through it, it is as though he can superimpose upon Kurtz's own statements the excesses and cravings of his own fevered imagination as it strives vainly to account for its own guilty nightmares and dispel them.

The choice that Marlow makes is a lie disguised as a truth and the consequence is that he never dispels his nightmare. In refusing to face and 'betray' the real Kurtz he remains loyal to the Kurtz of his own fantasies. This is what lies behind Marlow's obscure utterance, 'I did not betray Kurtz—it was ordered I should never betray him—it was written that I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice'. The 'victory' that Marlow mysteriously attributes to Kurtz is not the victory conferred upon a man who has finally recognised the horror he has committed. It is Marlow's expression for the triumph he himself has bestowed on the Kurtz of his own distorted making. The curious verbal formulation of Marlow's statement should be noted, because it prompts the question, who or what is ordering and instructing Marlow and with what possible meanings of loyalty and betrayal in mind. Is Marlow being paid by the Brussels office to keep quiet about the real Kurtz? This seems a crude and absurd hypothesis and should surely be discounted. But why does Marlow assure the official of the Company who asks for Kurt's documents that, 'Mr. Kurtz's knowledge, however extensive, did not bear upon the problems of commerce or administration'? It is hard to believe that Marlow could have learned so little or could be so naive as to suppose this. Of course, there is a deep irony in Marlow's remark, deeper than he apparently realises, otherwise he would see how much his own untruthful words incriminate him. Again, it may be fairly asked, why does Marlow tear off the postscript

from Kurtz's *Report* before handing it to the same official? Is Marlow trying to protect Kurtz's memory? Actually, when Kurtz originally entrusted Marlow with the document he did not ask for the postcript to be removed. Marlow says he had apparently 'forgotten' all about it. But there is no evidence to suppose that he had. Why should he indeed? It is probable that he thought that it would have a good influence on his career. He actually said so at the time. It would show unmistakably that he saw right into the heart of Company policy. Of course, it would not be tactful to show it to the old ladies like Marlow's aunt who were members of the Society, but he knew the Company would not allow that to happen and its inclusion would show that he carried out his duties to the end. Marlow's action may be sentimental, or cynical, but it does suggest that he does not want to see the truth of the real Kurtz himself and wishes, perhaps unconsciously, to prevent others from seeing it also.

Something of the same situation is repeated in Marlow's final 'lie' to Kurtz's Intended, which certainly silences Kurtz's real voice for ever. This he justifies on humane grounds: 'I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether. . . .' As such it tends to meet with the indulgent acceptance of the reader. But the sentimental desire to 'keep the ladies out of it' is less creditable if we think of it as an excuse to cover Marlow's refusal to face the facts of the real Kurtz and the true civilising mission and to do something constructive about them. The Conradian 'not before the ladies' is an invariable symptom of masculine evasion. No doubt Kurtz's Intended, beautiful in her noble sorrow, will now become an active member of *The Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs*, dedicating herself to the preservation of Kurtz's inspiring memory.

Marlow's general reluctance to enlighten people as to what was going on in Leopold II's Belgian Congo is quite extraordinary in a liberal, humane man, unless he is striving desperately to hide his *own* guilt and complicity. His wry comment to his auditors that he proposes to disclose no trade secrets is in an important sense true, not only in the

factual ways already alluded to but more pervasively in the tortuous manner he is telling his story. The evasion, the ambiguity, the irony never quite sure of itself, the double-talk, all operate together to exemplify the method by which Marlow chooses to remain loyal to the nightmare of his choice. As we have seen, this means that he remains loyal to the Kurtz of his own metaphysical imaginings and thereby betrays the true Kurtz. He falsifies the real, historic Kurtz, who perhaps correctly diagnosed the horror which underlies the Imperialist mission. It is *that* horror which Marlow, consciously or not, wishes to conceal. The process is not, of course, in the ordinary sense deliberated. If Marlow's words are so often rationalisations of actual facts too painful to be contemplated, at the same time they take the form of invoking ghosts and phantoms which are, if anything, more intolerable than those they are meant to exorcise. This is the penalty Marlow has to pay for his self-deception. Posing as a Buddha preaching in European clothes, he sits mesmerised and helpless before his own phantoms, but he will never hold the lotus-flower of self-forgetfulness.

It remains to be asked how much Marlow has really learned as the result of his terrible experience. His final preliminary words to his listeners before he begins his story offer a revealing summing-up. He has been speaking of Roman colonists in Britain in classical times and making a comparison with the modern Imperialist mission which he has just experienced at first hand:

> 'What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account really. They were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind —as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The

> conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea-something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . .'

This passage focuses in a most disturbing light Marlow's mental confusion at the very end. The 'efficiency' he speaks of is as applicable to Kurtz's running of his ivory station as to his own efficient handling of his old tin-can of a steam-boat. Kurtz's 'efficiency' does not save *him*. Marlow's 'efficiency', and the whole Merchant Navy code attached to it, cannot be said to save Marlow except in the physical sense. It is not merely that Marlow's 'efficiency' is out on hire to the civilising mission just as much as Kurtz's, though this is important, it is much more that that very quality of 'efficiency', seemingly so attractive in its insistence on the virtue of work well done, on fidelity, restraint, and the like, disguises for Marlow his own radical infidelity to the truth. Marlow says that a man 'finds' himself in his work, but it is equally true that a man may 'lose' himself in it when he is placed in circumstances of intolerable strain. For Marlow, 'efficient' work, though a necessary form of action at the time, is even more the only way of controlling the nightmares of his own inflamed imagination.

Marlow remains similarly confused on the whole question of the Imperialist mission. In the passage quoted he expresses two utterly conflicting attitudes. The first, 'robbery with violence', is accepted as the necessary 'blind' action for those who tackle a darkness. As for the second, he claims that the only way that Imperialism can be redeemed is through its 'idea'. But what such an 'idea' can possibly mean for him cannot be clarified because he is unable to formulate it. He breaks off inconclusively as he offers the extraordinary interpretation of the 'idea' as, 'something you can set up and bow down before, and offer

a sacrifice to. . . .' This is an image of Kurtz! Does Marlow really think that in fact Imperialism is redeemed by Kurtzian Idealism? If this is irony, it is not only grim and cynical but incomprehensible unless we concede that Marlow has been quite unable to learn anything from an experience which continues to baffle him to the end. We leave him as a brooding, self-absorbed figure of fatality, helplessness, and indeed futility. The last word on him must be the author's: 'I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river.' Conrad's 'faint uneasiness' is also ours with the proper adjustment of emphasis that the ironic understatement implies.

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NOTES

[1]Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 38.

[2]Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays*, p. 17.

[3]Ibid.

[4]I am indebted to R. N. Maud for the idea of separating the 'plain tale' of Kurtz from Marlow's account.