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Echoes of Rituals of Initiation and Blood Sacrifice in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

ABSTRACT

In *Heart of Darkness*, the protagonist Kurtz, of whom we do not, in fact, see much, is shown as connected with a native “sorcerer,” a “witch-man,” who had “antelope horns” on his head. Antelopes, or goats, are typical sacrificial animals, and the protagonist of this novella is a European who perishes in the midst of tropical forests, in spite of the high hopes that accompany his decision to try his luck in an exotic environment. Kurtz has promising beginnings, but later he gradually degenerates, carrying out what may be called a reversal of the ritual of initiation, comparable to the inverted ritual, to use V. Propp’s term, in folklore. In this sense, he may be regarded as a counterpoint to Conrad himself whose life can easily be described as a modern and uncommonly successful enactment of the same ritual. Meanwhile, Kurtz’s, and to a lesser extent also Marlow’s, failure as initiates is inscribed in the failure of the European civilization to construct a European empire in Africa.

Keywords: ritual, initiation, sacrifice, Conrad, Kurtz, identity, folklore.

1

Let me start with some remarks concerning the phenomenon and ritual of initiation, so that some aspects of it can be singled out that may be used in an analysis of Joseph Conrad's remarkable life trajectory and also in an approach to one of his most important works, *Heart of Darkness*.

It is clear enough that an initiatory experience was of crucial importance for Conrad, a writer who managed to almost completely change both his way of life and his cultural identity. It is an experience that consists in dying to one mode of life and in becoming reborn to another. As Mircea Eliade asserts: "All the myths of re-birth or resurrection, or the symbols they imply, bear witness to the novice having entered a new mode of existence, inaccessible to those who have not gone through trials of initiation, who have not experienced death" (18).¹ The very title of Conrad's masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* may be reminiscent of the idea of a death-like, or near-death, experience, such as being devoured by a huge monster, as an important ingredient of the ritual of initiation. In his familiar circular interpretations of the Hero's Journey, Joseph Campbell refers to this experience as "the belly of the whale," an obvious allusion to the biblical story of Jonah:

[The threshold guardians] illustrate the fact that the devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. . . . Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both denoting in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act. (Campbell, *Hero* 92)

Darkness is naturally an important aspect of the belly of the whale experience. In the words of Joseph Campbell: "You enter the forest at the darkest point, where there is no path. Where there is a way or path, it is someone else's path. You are not on your own path. If you follow someone else's way, you are not going to realize your potential" (Campbell, *Hero* 5). Pathlessness then, a feeling of having become lost in darkness, and of utter confusion and disorientation, is a precondition for finding one's way, and also a guarantee that this will be one's own true way, that is, the one willed by God, or destiny. As we can see, the initiatory death is not normally a real death: Jonah, having been swallowed by a whale, eventually emerges hale and hearty. In some cases, the death may seem to be real, but it is

¹ All translations from Mircea Eliade from the original French into English are mine.

followed by some kind of resurrection, as evident in the Egyptian myth of Osiris, the god of fertility and afterlife, who could return to life, having been killed, by his brother Set, and even torn into pieces (see Campbell, *Hero* 92).

As for the change of one's identity, let me provide another quotation from Eliade concerning the initiation of adolescent boys among Aboriginal Australians: "Since an Australian tribe is divided into two 'intermarrying classes,' the class A is made responsible for the initiation of the young men belonging to the class B, and vice versa. So the novices are being initiated by their potential fathers in law" (28). Assuming that similar practices were also observed among other so-called primitive tribes, which is what Eliade suggests (see Eliade 28) by stating that the Australian initiatory customs represent an archaic form of the ritual, it is obvious that the novice, or rather the initiand, was not initiated by his closest adult kinsmen but rather by relative strangers, the purpose of which is clearly to avoid the harmful effects of inbreeding, so that his initiation has, so to speak, both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. By the vertical dimension, I mean being recruited into the group of one's hierarchically superior elders, and by the horizontal one I mean becoming accustomed to a different social group, different because less closely related and/or inhabiting a more distant area. This horizontal initiation may naturally be of great help in the initiate's later married life. It is also clear enough that both dimensions must sometimes be combined with each other: the tribesmen from the other intermarrying class, conducting the initiation, will also be socially superior in relation to the initiand. Naturally, there is also a temporal and historical dimension to the ritual of initiation, an attempt to recover what had happened *in illo tempore* (in those days), with its organizers often being concerned with recreating the mythical events happening in a dim and distant past, such as the mythical heroes' exploits that motivate and justify the ritual (see Eliade 30–33).

2

Another important and dynamic aspect of initiation, concerned particularly with myths and folktales echoing this ritual, is what Vladimir Propp used to call the inversion of the ritual, which, as I am going to show, can also be applied to an interpretation of the plot of *Heart of Darkness*:

Between the ritual and the wondertale there is one important difference. In the ritual it is the youth's eyes that are plastered with a sticky substance, in the wondertale the same happens to the hag, or other

similar characters. In other words, the myth or the wonder tale represents a precise inversion of the ritual. Why has such an inversion taken place?

The ritual was something terrible and dreadful for children and their mothers, but it was regarded as necessary, which is why the one who took part in it gained something that could be called the magic power over the animal, the ritual was thus characteristic of the primitive hunting. The moment, however, the weapons became more accomplished, and agriculture was introduced, the new system of social organization made the old cruel rituals appear unnecessary and accursed, they turn, as it were, against their own perpetrators. If, during the ritual, the youth was blinded by the creature that tortures him and threatens to devour him, the myth, liberated from the ritual, becomes a means of protest. Something similar takes place in the case of the motif of burning, in the ritual, the children are being “burned,” while in the wondertale, it is the children that burn the hag. (Propp, *Historical* C74)²

It follows, then, that the original master of the initiation (sometimes called the *guru*), ideally fulfilling the role of a stern but benevolent examiner, may undergo—especially in stories not necessarily closely related to the genuine ritual—a transformation into an enemy. Propp is referring, for example, to the early form of the fabulous fiery dragon, the classic enemy of the hero, having been originally a positive and helpful character (see Propp, *Historical* 309–10). Hence the ambiguity of Campbell’s devouring monster, which Campbell himself apparently has not noticed. In the popular Hansel and Gretel fairy tales, usually known in the Grimms’ version, it is the children who, metaphorically speaking, “devour” the monstrous witch, by shoving her into the oven, instead of letting themselves be eaten by her, which is what she clearly intends to do. It can easily be noticed that the concept of the inversion of the ritual destroys the relatively static and conservative scheme of the initiatory ritual and introduces an element of rebellion connected with the generation gap. It is a feature of the traditional fairy tale that it sides with the young and the underprivileged. In the words of Max Lüthi: “The blind, the disinherited, the youngest, the orphaned, the gone astray—such are the true heroes of the fairy tale because they are isolated and therefore better prepared for making essential connections” (61).³ This rebellious element does not, however, lead to revolutionary consequences; it is concerned with rejuvenating the existing system rather than abolishing it. The hero, in spite of his usually humble origin, may become a king but this does not betoken a political change of any kind.

² The translation of this passage from Polish into English is mine.

³ The translation of this quotation from Lüthi from the original German into English is mine.

At this point, it should be emphasized that Propp's conception of the inversion of the ritual refers not only to the initiation ritual but also to the sacrificial one:

Formerly it was customary to kill aged people, but the wondertale narrates how an old man was spared. During the time that this custom existed, a person who showed mercy to the old man would have been held up to ridicule, perhaps castigated, or even punished; in the wondertale, the person who shows mercy to the old man is depicted as a praiseworthy hero who acts wisely. Similarly, it was customary to sacrifice a virgin to the river whose flood ensured good crops. This would be done at the beginning of sowing and was supposed to facilitate the growth of the vegetation. But in the wondertale, the maiden is rescued from the monster by the hero. As long as the ritual existed, such a "liberator" would have been torn to pieces as the greatest of profaners. as one who jeopardized the well-being of the people, the crops. . . . But with the decay of the once sacred system, the custom in which the virgin went (sometimes willingly) to her death became needless and repugnant, and the role of the protagonist switched to the former profaner who interfered with the sacrifice. (Propp, *Theory* 107)

This ritual, involving human sacrifice, was widely practiced in Europe and in the Mediterranean in the Neolithic age to be later replaced with animal sacrifice, as is graphically represented in the well-known Biblical story of Abraham's unaccomplished sacrifice of his son Isaac, who is about to be killed when an alternative appears in the shape of a ram. In some versions of the story of Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, the goddess Artemis substitutes her for a deer and thus saves her life, which is naturally analogous to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. This inversion is clearly of a less radical character than the previous one. If it were similarly radical, Abraham and Agamemnon would have been sacrificed instead of the sacrificial animal. Both inversions side firmly with the younger generation. Unfortunately, Propp does not say anything about the substitute animal that is eventually sacrificed, probably because this motif does not appear in folklore.

3

It seems possible to represent Joseph Conrad's life as a process of initiation understood in keeping with Eliade's formula of "entering a new mode of existence" (Eliade 18). The whole of Conrad's life is characterized by attempts, on the whole remarkably successful ones, to abandon one

way of life and embrace another. What I principally mean is his passage from the condition of a member of the Polish-Ukrainian landed gentry to that of a British sea captain. Did this shift signify a complete overhaul, or metamorphosis, of his personality? Did Conrad actually become an Englishman, forsaking his Polish identity? He himself addressed these questions and suggested that the correct answer was both yes and no: "My point of view, both on land and sea, is English, but it should not be concluded that I have become an Englishman. It is not so. *Homo duplex* (The double man) has, in my case, more than one meaning" (Conrad, *Listy* 223; Dąbrowska 181).⁴ The idea of "homo duplex" can be associated with the thought of Emile Durkheim:

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These two aspects of our psychic life thus oppose one another as the personal and impersonal. There is, within us, a being that represents everything to itself by relation to itself, from its own point of view, and that is concerned, in what it does, only with itself. But there is also another, within us, that knows things *sub specie aeternitatis*, as if it draws on another thought than our own, and that at the same time strives to achieve ends that go beyond it. The old formula *Homo duplex* is therefore verified by the facts, far from us being straightforward, our internal life has something of a double centre of gravity. On the one hand, there is our individuality, and more especially our body, that is its foundation, on the other, everything that within ourselves expresses something other than ourselves. (37)

Durkheim's conception may easily be confused with Freud's more famous distinction between "id," "ego" and "super-ego," but they are hardly the same. Freud's super-ego, while being the highest level of an individual's psyche, is based on such essentially negative notions as repression, prohibition and punishment, while for Durkheim the social side of *homo duplex* consists in the positive idea of overcoming, or "going beyond," the limitations of the individual side.

Naturally, we don't know whether Conrad spoke of a *homo duplex* in the strictly Durkheimian sense of this notion, even though he could have known the French sociologist's basic ideas before he wrote the above-mentioned letter. It would have been perhaps more sensible to assume that Conrad had in mind simply that he saw himself as being partly Polish and partly English without suggesting which aspect of his personality was superior or inferior (as in the distinction between ego and super-ego),

⁴ Dąbrowska claims that this passage is from a 1902 letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski, while in Najder's edition of Conrad's letters it is included in a letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski dated 5 December 1903. The translation of this passage from the Polish original is mine.

more individual, or more social. But such a solution seems too simple, especially in view of what Maria Dąbrowska says about the development of this writer's creative personality.

We have to reckon with some rather peculiar and contradictory statements by Conrad himself concerning his command of the English language. On the one hand, he remarked that "my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born" (Hervouet 242),⁵ but, on the other hand, he could also state: "In writing, I wrestle painfully with that language which I feel I do not possess, but which possesses me—alas" (Hervouet 242). Dąbrowska has commented on this as follows:

On the basis of the above words, we may conclude that Conrad's attitude towards English was so profound as if this were his beloved mother tongue. This is because one's own for Conrad could only be something conquered. Neither the Polish language nor French, however much he loved both of them, could have the status of something conquered. (Dąbrowska 127)⁶

Conrad's *homo duplex* is, then, a rather paradoxical creature, reminiscent of a hermit crab, that can only properly inhabit and domesticate a space that is far away from one's home and from one's original environment, a foreign space that needs to be acquired and conquered. In other words, for him, only a home away from home can constitute a proper home, which, however, does not make him forget about his old home. As a result, he could think of himself as, apparently, a Pole and an Englishman in one, or rather a creature with a Polish heart but an English worldview. We could already see, in the first section of the present article, that such an attitude corresponds, to some extent, to the initiatory principle of "entering a new mode of existence," and the horizontal dimension of initiation, even though the formula of *homo duplex* allowed Conrad to emphasize both the element of change and that of continuity. This does not mean, however, that those two aspects of his personality, the Polish and the English, were perfectly harmonized with each other, which is what his partly contradictory statements bear witness to. This circumstance signals what might be called a disturbed process of initiation which can hardly be described as an accomplished passage from one mode of existence to another.

Dąbrowska also writes interestingly about the special affinity between Conrad and the English language: "I assume that something much more

⁵ This sentence originally comes from Conrad's text *Personal Record*. See *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*.

⁶ The translation of all quotations from Dąbrowska into English are mine.

fundamental took place here, that is, the fact of discovering a peculiar affinity between the non-intellectual part of Conrad's spirituality and the intricate English idiom sharing some characteristics with the babble and the murmur of the ocean's waves" (126). If we take Dąbrowska's rather puzzling perception at face value, it appears that the call of the sea, in Conrad's case, was also the call of the English language: it seems that the ocean spoke English (the language whose sound uncannily resembles that of the waves breaking on the shore) to the Polish seaman and demanded that he become an English writer. This may sound both mystical and mystifying but it corresponds to a radical and dialectic interpretation of initiation—not so much as a vertical movement to join the society of one's social betters, but rather as a horizontal movement beyond one's original environment which, however, manages to preserve, on a deeper level, the essential unity between one's old and new selves. In this case, we are dealing with the phenomenon of a man, who, while being a son of the Ukrainian steppes, becomes, as a British sailor, "a son of the waves."⁷ The similarity between those two environments, notwithstanding all the obvious differences, has long been noticed by Conradian scholars. As Witold Chwalewik remarks: "For a group of Polish early romantics (the so-called Polish-Ukrainian school) the wide spaces of Conrad's native countryside, the Podolian 'ocean of dry land' had become an image of infinity, charged with all kinds of intimations more usually associated with the sea" (32). The sea, then, is a new, acquired, version of the native steppe, just as the English language (and culture) becomes a new, acquired object of affection and identification that does not erase the old loyalty to the Polish language and culture. The two seem, in fact, almost to grow into one, hence Conrad's surprising statement that he felt as if he had been born into English.

The process of, as it were, growing into a foreign language is characteristically described by Conrad as adoption:

I have a strange and overpowering feeling that it had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. The merest idea of choice had never entered my head. And as to adoption—well, yes, there was adoption; but it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language. (Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*)

Adoption is a good synonym of initiation understood as gaining admittance to a new society. Conrad here correctly points to his sentiment of being

⁷ This is of course an allusion to the official march of the Royal Navy, i.e. *Heart of Oak*, coming from around the year 1760, and containing the line: "For who are so free as the sons of the waves?"

adopted by an originally foreign factor. Here this factor is “the genius of the language” but a national (and in this case increasingly also international) language such as English is, like every other national language, an equivalent of the spirit of that nation.

4

There is also the question of another language in this configuration, namely French. The French language, of which Conrad had a near-native command, could not, apparently, fulfil the role of a new and initiatory object of affection because he acquired it almost in the same way as he learned his native Polish and still as a child. So it was indeed an object of affection, but on a par with Polish—that is, unsuitable as the expression of a new, painfully acquired initiatory identity. As a native speaker of two languages, he eventually opted for a third one, thus becoming, in a sense, a *homo triplex*.⁸ This might point to the function of English in Conrad's life, which does not emerge from the previous, dualistic considerations based on the opposition between Polish and English. According to Jean C. Cooper, “Plato says that two is a digit without meaning since it implies relationship, which introduces the third factor” (114). Duality, and the number two, are often indeed associated with conflict, the third factor is needed to introduce some equilibrium or stability. Aristotle apparently insisted that “[t]he Triad is the number of the whole, inasmuch as it contains a beginning, a middle and an end” (Cooper 114). As such, the English language can be thought of as the logical third element, the *tertium quid*, that makes sense of Conrad's being, as it were, divided between his two native languages of which French could be, after all, called pseudo-native because, unlike, for example, Chopin, Conrad had no family ties with France and only spent four years there. This triadic symbolism corresponds quite well to the three stages of Conrad's life: the first seventeen years spent in Ukraine and Poland (1857–74), then the four rather dramatic and unsuccessful years which he spent mainly in Southern France (1874–78), already serving as a sailor, and finally, the long period from 1878 to the writer's death in 1924, when he was first connected with the British navy and then—particularly after he abandoned his career at sea in 1894—with Britain itself.

It should be noted that Propp's conception of the inversion of the sacrificial ritual is also triadic in spirit. A full inversion would have

⁸ Conrad had also good working knowledge of German and Russian, but they were clearly not the languages close to his heart.

been binary and would have consisted in the sacrificial victim becoming a victimizer, the one who puts to death those who wanted to kill him or her as an act of live sacrifice. Instead, a compromise solution is found and it is the third factor, the substitute animal, that is killed. Eliade also conceives of initiation in a triadic manner. His reflections on the practice of subincision—particularly common among Aboriginal Australians—as part of the initiation point in the direction of the male initiate's imitating "the divine totality" on the level of which the features, even the basic biological characteristics, of the two genders coalesce into one (cf. Eliade 67–73). This does not mean of course that the initiate truly becomes a transgender, or mixed gender, person. The temporary assumption of the features of the opposite gender should rather be seen as an expression of the yearning for perfection consisting in overcoming binary differences of all kinds.

5

Conrad's "belly of the whale"—the lowest and most traumatic point of his life which could also mark a new beginning—might be identified as his mysterious and on the whole unfortunate love affair, during his stay in Marseilles, which culminated, in 1878, in his attempted suicide, by shooting himself in the heart, camouflaged as a duel,⁹ possibly also motivated by his reckless running into debt (Adamowicz-Pośpiech 99–112). It is largely as a result of these events that the young Conrad decided to become a British sailor. At this point, we should mention Conrad's most prominent "master of the initiation": his maternal uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski, who, in a sense, replaced the writer's parents, both of whom died when Conrad was still a child. The uncle supplied his nephew with money: in fact a steady flow of substantial sums, as Bobrowski was a practical man and quite rich. Moreover, he was extremely fond of his nephew, even though he could occasionally be very stern and censorious towards him, which, perhaps, we should not marvel at, considering that the young Conrad was not practical at all and often acted carelessly with money. Let me quote a passage from Bobrowski's letter (unfortunately, none of Conrad's letters to him have survived) concerning, among other things, the shooting incident:

You've spent the whole year idling around, you've run up debts, you deliberately shot yourself at the worst time of the year, whereas I have, tired and in a hurry, paid your debts at the worst exchange rate imaginable, spending around two thousand roubles. Moreover, I have increased your

⁹ In the classical biography of Conrad by Róża Jabłkowska, published in 1961, the author is still in two minds as to whether this was a suicide or a duel. See Jabłkowska (42).

allowance, taking your needs into account. All this is apparently too little for you. (Helsztyński 41)¹⁰

Here it seems that the master of the initiation is on the point of turning into the initiand's worst enemy, even though the latter's near-death experience (and it was indeed a very near-death experience) caused no lasting damage to the young man's health. The apparently growing rift between the uncle and the nephew was, however, soon healed, considering that Conrad mended his ways, and became more disciplined, purposeful and hard-working, which coincided with his joining the British merchant navy, initially as an ordinary sailor, later becoming a first officer and a captain.

No doubt his first years in the British navy were also a difficult time. Helsztyński writes of this period:

The spoiled young man transformed, partly of necessity and partly of his own will, into a physical worker dealing with ropes and sails, carrying heavy sacks on his own back, and what is more, enjoying the company of simple fellows and understanding the necessity of climbing all the rungs of a seaman's career including that of a physical worker. (42)

But it was apparently his African experience, in the Belgian Congo, at a much later stage of his career, in the year 1890, that had the strongest initiatory value in his life, hence the statement in one of his letters: "Before the expedition to Congo I was a mere animal" (Helsztyński 45).

6

Ivo Vidan (1927–2003), a Croatian Anglicist, singles out "stories with the theme of initiation" (20) in Conrad's output and mentions under this heading *The Nigger of the "Narcissus," Youth, The Secret Sharer, A Smile of Fortune, The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold*. He refers to *Heart of Darkness*, together with some other novels and short stories, as narratives that "contain an outer setting within which a story is told by a narrator who is himself not the hero of the story" (Vidan 21). I am not going to deny that the former group of novels are indeed based on the theme of initiation, but the same theme is also clearly present in the second group. Vidan himself alludes to it by stating that "[i]n fact, the relationship between the narrator and the hero is often the source of tension, which in a way illuminates the moral core of the central anecdote, and reveals

¹⁰ All quotations from Helsztyński are translated from Polish into English by myself.

the human significance of the story” (21). This tension is analogous to the tension and the relationship between the initiate and the master of initiation, where Marlow plays the father-like role of the latter, as can be seen, if we continue with the above quotation:

The relationships of Marlow with Kurtz and with Jim are good examples of such a situation. Marlow is in an ambiguous way attracted by Kurtz, and during the whole of his story about his journey he suggests some kind of potential moral identity between himself and Kurtz. In the same way in *Lord Jim* Marlow is constantly aware of an inherent human possibility of collapse in a test. Jim’s case makes him realize that there is always a danger that under particular circumstances a man might fail to stand up and face the exigences of the moment. (Vidan 21–22)

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The case of Marlow and Lord Jim is apparently more obvious than that of Marlow and Kurtz. Marlow is to some extent Jim’s spiritual father who discreetly watches his progress and his being tested, even though, unlike in the classic initiatory event, he is not the one to organize the testing of the hero. The situation in *Heart of Darkness* is more difficult and the connection between Marlow and Kurtz is much more tenuous; yet the suggestion that there could be “some kind of potential moral identity” between them relates to what some might perceive as the ultimate purpose of initiation:

You have to feel that what you call yourself is just another name for your Master. A feeling of indivisible oneness must be established between the Guru’s consciousness and the disciple’s consciousness. You may say that what you have and what you are, you are giving to the Guru. But if you are living inside the Guru, then there is no giving and no taking. There is nothing to give and nothing to take. There is only the feeling of growing inside the Guru’s heart. (Sri Chinmoy)

This conception of initiation, conceived of as a process of going beyond the limits of one’s selfhood and merging with other minds or things, apparently clashes with the conception of initiation as individuation: “The integral relationship between initiation and individuation can be grasped through the essential logic of the entire process of evolution. From the standpoint of matter, the logic of transformation involves increasing heterogeneity, differentiation and complexity” (Raghavan).

Heart of Darkness is filled with intimations that can be associated with various aspects of initiation. The kind of darkness where no familiar path can be discerned, where no path at all can be found, may indeed be described as “the darkest point,” the heart of darkness. It is doubtful, however, whether the experience of that sombre place is conducive to

the realization of any character's potential in the novel. As for Kurtz, the initiatory near-death experience in a radically unfamiliar place turns out to be his death pure and simple, and one does not wish it otherwise seeing that his contact with the African "darkness" brought about his degeneration rather than regeneration. The name "Kurtz," that is "the short one," may be interpreted as an allusion to his regenerative cycle being cut short, midway through his perilous journey.

The novel begins with a vision of London as a sombre and gloomy place:

In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint. . . . A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. 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. (47)

Gravesend is a strategic little town at the end of the estuary of the Thames where the Port of London meets the outer sea, a place where culture ends and nature begins. Conrad's vision of London brings together the sky, the sea and the city itself in one mournful and gloomy whole. London is referred to not only as the biggest, but also as the greatest, city in the world; it is the true centre, a place that deserves to be the centre, and yet it is overcast and covered with mist as if the forces of nature were inimical to it.

The topic of darkness and paradoxical light that harmonizes with darkness is also strongly emphasized in the following sentence:

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men. . . . And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars. (*Heart of Darkness* 48–49)

The "monstrous town" of London may be an echo of Milton's infernal "dungeon horrible" (see *Paradise Lost* 1, 61) (213), and it may also be associated with Campbell's monstrous whale, but actually what we get is a tribute to the greatness of London and of England, which may be interpreted as an ardent expression of Conrad's "acquired" English patriotism:

The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the

nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen’s Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. (*Heart of Darkness* 48–49)

Sir Francis Drake, a highly successful sailor, one of the first who circumnavigated the globe, stands for the glory of early colonial England, while Sir John Franklin symbolizes the tragic, but still heroic, side of geographical exploration, leading the ill-fated expedition intended to conquer the North-West passage in 1845, which ended in the loss of the two ships: the Erebus and Terror, and of the men aboard them. Thus the estuary of the Thames is shown as a birth canal that produces both triumphant and tragic heroes. Conrad, as a *homo duplex* (a double man), represents England, his alternative and acquired motherland as a *terra duplex* (a double country).

A similar dialectic is evident in another passage dedicated to England, this time from *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*:

At night the headlands retreated, the bays advanced into one unbroken line of gloom. The lights of the earth mingled with the lights of heaven; and above the tossing lanterns of a trawling fleet a great lighthouse shone steadily, like an enormous riding light burning above a vessel of fabulous dimensions. Below its steady glow, the coast, stretching away straight and black, resembled the high side of an indestructible craft riding motionless upon the immortal and unresting sea. The dark land lay alone in the midst of waters, like a mighty ship bestarred with vigilant lights—a ship carrying the burden of millions of lives—a ship freighted with dross and with jewels, with gold and with steel. She towered up immense and strong, guarding priceless traditions and untold suffering, sheltering glorious memories and base forgetfulness, ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions. A great ship! For ages had the ocean battered in vain her enduring sides; she was there when the world was vaster and darker, when the sea was great and mysterious, and ready to surrender the prize of fame to audacious men. A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! and anchored in the open sea. (121)

This is apparently a piece of almost jingoistic rhetoric, but the triumphant vision of England as “the great flagship of the race”¹¹ is carefully qualified

¹¹ The word “race” probably refers here to the Anglo-Saxon race, or rather the totality of English speaking nations, not the Germanic, or Nordic, race, as someone might perhaps think.

by a series of rather negative terms: “the dark land” contrasted with “a great lighthouse,” “untold suffering” contrasted with “priceless traditions,” “dross” contrasted with “jewels,” “base forgetfulness” contrasted with “glorious memories.” Finally, we have a rather strange phrase: “ignoble virtues and splendid transgressions,” where we would rather expect splendid virtues and ignoble transgressions. It seems as though Conrad wanted in this way to emphasize the strangeness of this mixture of the base and the sublime that he found, as a foreigner, in England.

7

Heart of Darkness naturally presents a much more skeptical vision of England, or rather Britain, as it was when the ancient Romans first arrived there more than twenty centuries ago, a vision that begins with Marlow's words: “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (49). And this is how he describes the parlous conditions awaiting the new conquerors:

Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a 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. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death—death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh, yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. (50–51)

In the Roman parallel, we seem to first encounter the distant temporal perspective to which Eliade refers in his description of initiation, as an act of “recovering the mythical sacred time” (Eliade 31). But, in this description, the sacred time, the *in illo tempore*, is the time of the forefathers, mythical heroes, or even gods thought of as forefathers, avatars and progenitors of the actual fathers and masters of initiation. The new time is reinvigorated, as it were, owing to this connection with the ideal past. But in *Heart of Darkness*, the forefathers of the English are not shown as great heroes or masters of initiation; rather, they appear either as initiands, in need of acculturation, of being raised from the barbarous condition to a state of civilization, or as creatures of darkness, spreading death, as part and parcel of ancient Britain

seen as a devouring monster. Here, then, is a Conradian variety of Propp's inversion of the ritual, where, as we may remember, the beneficial and lordly masters of initiation become transformed into forces of darkness. It was usual in the 19th century to compare the British Empire with the ancient Roman Empire (see Brunt 267) so that the British could appear worthy successors to the Romans. The idea was particularly attractive in view of the fact that the Romans were seen as an extinct nation that died out together with their empire. The pretensions of the Italians to the name of the new Romans were often dismissed by pointing to the inability of the Italians, for many centuries, to unite Italy, let alone construct anything that could resemble the old Roman Empire. Conrad may have taken this idea seriously but he also noticed its less flattering and ironical aspect. The existence of Roman Britain meant that the proud successors were once servants and slaves, or at best disciples, to their precursors. Naturally, Conrad could not predict that the British Empire, in comparison with the Roman one, would prove a rather ephemeral phenomenon.

How should we, in this context, assess the statement with which Marlow summarizes what can be called the matter of the Empire, which is the central motif in *Heart of 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[.] (51–52)

The first sentence in the above quotation is, from the modern point of view, politically correct and it gets often quoted as a negative assessment of European colonialism. But what follows is not so correct at all. Marlow, and presumably Conrad, whose porte-parole Marlow seems to be, allude to some idea that can “redeem” colonialism and empire building. It is perhaps characteristic of Conrad that we are left in the dark as to what this idea may actually be. What we are told is that it is “unselfish” and connected with a “sacrifice.” The idea in question could of course be the conception of “the White Man’s burden,” meaning the colonialists’ (real or alleged) civilizing mission.¹² This idea may be thought of as playing the role of the *tertium quid*, that is of something that makes it possible, at least theoretically, to overcome the violent contradictions inherent in the idea of initiation.

¹² Incidentally, Rudyard Kipling’s well-known poem entitled “The White Man’s Burden,” which launched, defined and tried to defend the whole idea, was published almost simultaneously with the first instalment of *Heart of Darkness*, in February 1899.

Lillian Feder in her article “Marlow’s Descent into Hell” convincingly compares *Heart of Darkness* to selected aspects of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in particular to the motif of Aeneas’ descent into the Underworld. She also suggests that Marlow’s, and Conrad’s, “unselfish idea” should be connected with the heroism needed to construct an empire: “Implicit in Marlow’s remarks is the theme of the *Aeneid*, for Virgil is concerned with this ‘idea,’ the heroic goal as justification for Rome’s plunder and cruelty; moreover, Conrad, like Virgil, sees the tragic limitations of those dedicated to the heroic ideal” (282). Though she does not make it explicit, Feder appears to refer here to the famous words that Anchises, the father of Aeneas, directs to his son when the latter finds him in the underworld:

*Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento; // hae tibi erunt artes;
pacificque imponere morem, // parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos.*
(P. Vergilius Maro VI, 851–53)

Roman, be this thy care—these thy arts—to bear dominion over the nations and to impose the law of peace, to spare the humbled and to war down the proud! (Virgil VI.1151–54) (translated by John Jackson 108)

Peace can indeed be regarded as a positive fruit of empire building, something that may even be worth dying for. The problem, however, is that this peace is an imposed one, achieved by means of the so-called pacification, which usually involves a military campaign “to war down the proud.”

Aeneas’ visit to the Underworld is in itself a good example of the use of the motif of initiation in literature. The hero has to carry out a number of difficult and dangerous tasks before he can see the land of the dead and, even more importantly, return safely from it, which is an achievement reserved only for the greatest of the heroes of Greek and Roman mythology. As a result of this adventure, he gains some special and precious knowledge accessible only to initiates. This fact is recognized by Feder, who says: “In Virgil’s poem, Aeneas’ descent is part of his initiation for the role of leader of the Roman people” (281). What she does not recognize, however, is that Conrad’s equivalents of Aeneas and his father Anchises—that is, Kurtz and Marlow—have their roles reversed in relation to Virgil, and that it is an ironic reversal, assuming of course that it is possible to talk about Marlow as if he were Kurtz’s father. Aeneas is looking for his father in the underworld while in *Heart of Darkness* it is rather Marlow who is looking for Kurtz. Anchises has a prophetic message for Aeneas and the message concerns the glorious future of the Roman state while Kurtz’s message,

if it can be called a message, is entirely egocentric¹³ and its only prophetic aspect is a vision of horror. Kurtz's competence as someone entitled to bear a message of some importance is connected with his "belly of the whale" experience of utter darkness, also within himself, and his being a child of Europe, with Europe standing for the New Rome: "The original Kurtz 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" (*Heart of Darkness* 108).

There is a similarity between Anchises' vision of the Roman Empire and Kurtz's private empire on the Congo, both are based on war and manslaughter, and Anchises does not try to hide it, while connecting it with the notion of glory, significantly absent in Conrad: "There stands he shall drive his car in victory to the Capitol heights—triumphant over Corinth, glorious from slaughtered Achaea" (Virgil 108).

Marlow leaves Kurtz behind, just as Aeneas left Anchises, who does not have to die, as he is already dead, even though very eloquent, and returns to Europe. It is perhaps prophetic on the part of Conrad that he treats Europe, at least in relation to Africa, as a whole, in spite of the fact that Europe in his times was hopelessly divided and on the brink of a war that, in effect, put an end to Europe's domination on the global scale. Marlow hardly returns as a conquering hero: to save some appearances he has to lie to Kurtz's fiancée, his "Intended," that Kurtz pronounced her name before he died. By lying, Marlow, in a sense, loses face, loses his integrity or individuality, which the initiation, in its ideal sense, was supposed to strengthen and consolidate. The ritual is indeed inverted, though not quite in the Proppian sense of the word, and even though it can be naturally claimed that Marlow gained something from his African experience and his encounter with Kurtz.

The overall impression of selfishness triumphing over selflessness is confirmed by the following description of an exploring society:

This devoted band called itself the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, and I believe they were sworn to secrecy. Their talk, however, was the talk of sordid buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose

¹³ I mean particularly the statement: "You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh, yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—' everything belonged to him" (108).

at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe. Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot. (*Heart of Darkness* 82–83)

This is certainly a description of the theoretically superior and idealistic Europeans, who have turned, like Kurtz himself, into monsters whose vices are also monstrous in the sense that, unlike ordinary vices, they are devoid of at least partly redeeming qualities. It might be possible to think that Conrad's belief in "the idea" was based on the distinction that he, and also presumably Marlow, made between British colonialism, intent on introducing a Pax Britannica, modelled on Pax Romana, on the one hand, and Belgian and Dutch colonialism, on the other. He got to know the Dutch and Belgian colonies quite well and definitely did not like what he saw there. So the Netherlandic colonialism, based on naked materialism, would be the dark side of the more idealistic, though certainly not angelic, British colonialism. However, this line of thinking is contradicted by Conrad's insistence that Kurtz is a child of Europe as a whole, not just a small part of it.

Let us now look more closely at the character of Kurtz, who represents this Belgian colonialism, without being himself, strictly speaking, Belgian. His way of thinking in many ways archaic and ritualistic:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity," and so on, and so on. "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," &c., &c. (*Heart of Darkness* 109)

Kurtz then sketches out a possible theoretical basis for Marlow's "idea," and this is an idea of a vast, collective initiation understood, first of all, as a vertical movement for the successful initiates to join up with the gods, or rather with the white fathers acting as an intermediary between the natural and supernatural world. Viewing the natives as children, and thus in need of being brought up, or civilized, also appears in Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden":

Your new-caught sullen peoples,

Half devil and half child. (323)

The whites, in the same poem, are entreated to abandon childish ways themselves, since sticking to them would indeed be highly inappropriate for the masters of initiation:

Take up the White Man's burden—

Have done with childish days— (324)

It is, however, Kurtz who can occasionally display childish behaviour:

Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things. "You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability," he would say. "Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always." (*Heart of Darkness* 133)

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It is easy to identify this form of childishness as an echo of a typical initiatory pattern, described in detail in Campbell's books. Kurtz imagines himself as returning home having accomplished a mission involving a near-death experience and having been given what Campbell calls "the ultimate boon," here referred to as "something that is really profitable," which, in some cases, may be the head of your enemy: "At once the hero Maui took hold of the giant Mahu-ika's head and cut it off, then he possessed himself of the treasure of the flame which he bestowed upon the world" (Campbell, *Hero* 184–85). What makes Kurtz's childishness contemptible is the fact that instead of being a monster slayer or a monster tamer, which is what he no doubt is in his own eyes, he has become a monster himself, a monster who is in need of being slain as a sacrifice. What is presented here seems to be a really radical inversion of the ritual. Not only do the masters of initiation turn into monsters, as in the classical Proppian scheme, but so does the initiate himself, even though at the beginning of his career he had all the features of an ingenu. As such, the natural question should be: who is the hero in this kind of situation, the one who successfully accomplishes the initiatory journey?

There is no such hero in *Heart of Darkness* unless we give this title to Marlow, whose success, as we saw above, can also be put into doubt. He is not a particularly heroic character, but he gives us his account of the trip to Congo and he manages to return from there—that is, from hell, just like Dante returning from his Inferno in *The Divine Comedy* and Aeneas returning from the Underworld. It is interesting to see how he is represented as a quasi-supernatural, semi-divine figure and compared to Buddha:

"Mind," he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower— (*Heart of Darkness* 51)

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. (145)

He is treated, then, as a figure standing for wisdom, which is clearly a privilege for an initiate. His evocation of temporal depth with the help of his Roman parallel is certainly a prerogative of a master of initiation. Marlow is also an English gentleman who, unlike the crude egoist Kurtz, shows quite a lot of consideration for the feelings of others, as can be seen in his dealings with Kurtz's "Intended" after Kurtz's death, even though this gentlemanly quality is achieved at the cost of an outright lie. On the other hand, it should not escape our attention that the force that fulfils the basic heroic role, of getting rid of the monster, that is of Kurtz, in the first place, is Africa and the Black Africans, however undifferentiated and unindividualized they may be in this novel.

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To conclude, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that shows many affinities with the world of ancient myths and rituals, and some of these affinities are curiously adumbrated in the writer's biography. It was one of Dąbrowska's important intuitions to suggest that Conrad, in spite of certain appearances, was a religious writer in a broad sense of the word: "It is amazing that this great painter of visible reality . . . does not ascribe, in fact, any importance to that reality in our life. In this sense, this sceptic, probably religiously indifferent, was one of the deepest romantics and metaphysicians of literature" (Dąbrowska 74–75). The present essay is an attempt to show that the metaphysical dimension of Conrad's work is indeed important. It may be sought, of course, in some transformed version of Christian religious ideas. But I would argue that it initially connected with a more fundamental level of religious thinking, belonging primarily to the world of pagan beliefs and rituals. We should not forget that Conrad was exposed to animistic and magical thinking, for example during his time in the Malay Archipelago, but this is a matter of secondary importance, considering that ancient rituals, and their various patterns and aspects, are deeply engrained in the European mind. What Conrad managed to achieve, both as a man and in his creation of certain literary characters, was the feat of reconciling the initiation thought of as individuation, maturation, and becoming one's own master, with the initiation understood as spiritual unification with the master of initiation, or with some general "unselfish idea" that may have its metaphysical "redemptive" aspect. The character of Kurtz may be regarded as a study

of the consequences which inevitably follow, though certainly not always with the same severity, if you limit yourself only to the former conception of initiation. Kurtz's attempt to achieve mastery, being divorced, unlike Conrad's initiation, from any ambition to broaden his sympathy and understanding, leads eventually to his becoming a slave of his primordial instincts, an object of sacrifice, instead of an initiate, while the ritual initiation becomes here, in many senses, inverted.

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