CONRAD'S AFRICAN TALES: IRONIES OF PROGRESS

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King Leopold, "....It is all the same old thing - tedious repetitions and duplications of shop-worn episodes; mutilations, murders, massacres, and so on, and so on, till one gets drowsy over it."

—Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1207 ed.).

"Before the Congo I was only a simple animal", Conrad had told Edward Garnett.[1] The Congo, certainly, made him think deeply about life But how did the Congo itself, so disturbingly enlightening by his own confession, impinge on his imagination? Let us start, chronologically, with *An Outpost of Progress* and move on to *Heart of Darkness.*

Conrad said: "*An Outpost of Progress* is the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa".[2] The critics concur.[3] Does this lead to an underestimate or not? Consider the description of the trading post of Kayerts and Carlier:

> And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquent silence of mute greatness.[4]

This is the wordy and imprecise rhetoric characteristic of Conrad when he is not a master of his subject. But observe the opening of the story:

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1 G. Jean Aubry, *Joseph Conrad in the Congo* (Boston, 1926), p. 73.

2 Conrad, 'Author's Note' to *Tales of Unrest*: *Almayer's Folly and Tales of Unrest* (1947 ed.), p. vii.

3 E.g., A. J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Massachusetts, 1966), pp. 64 5; J. I. M. Stewart *Joseph Conrad* (1968), pp. 75 7.

4 Conrad, *An Outpost of Progress*; *Almayer's Folly and Tales of Unrest* (1947 ed.), p.94; all later quotations from this tale are from this edition and their page numbers are noted in my text.

> There were two white men in charge of the trading station Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat, Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs. The third man on the staff was a Sierra Leone nigger, who maintained that his name was Henry Price. (p. 86)

Conrad takes the reader directly to his setting and introduces his three chief characters, Kayerts, Carlier and Makola. The ironic stance implies a controlling intelligence, and the terseness of the prose has an immediacy of impact. The ironic humour becomes marked as Conrad moves from the "short and fat" Kayerts to Carlier. The image evoked by "perched" suggests an uneasy comic balance of Carlier's "very broad trunk" on "a long pair of thin legs". The element of ridiculousness suggests the ineptness of the two Europeans. In the introduction of Makola, "maintained" suggests his bland confidence in sticking to his name despite its oddness. It is the kind of language here which is the staple of the tale; there are only traces of the weak style. Notice how the opening continues:

> He (Makola) spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits. His wife was a negress from Loanda, very large and very noisy. Three children rolled about in sunshine before the door of his low, shed-like dwelling. Makola, taciturn and impenetrable, despised the two white men. He had charge of a small clay storehouse with a dried-grass roof, and pretended to keep a correct account of beads, cotton cloth, red kerchiefs, brass wire, and other trade goods it contained. Besides the storehouse and Makola's hut, there was only one large building in the cleared ground of the station. It was built neatly of reeds, with a verandah on all the four sides. There were three rooms in it. The one in the middle was the living-room, and had two rough tables and a few stools in it. The other two were the bedrooms for the white men. Each had a bedstead and a mosquito net for all furniture. The plank floor was littered with the belongings of the white men; open half-empty boxes town wearing apparel, old boots; all the things dirty, and all the things broken, that accumulate mysteriously round untidy men. There was also another dwelling-place some distance away from the buildings. In it, under a tall cross much out of

> the perpendicular, slept the man who had seen the beginning of all this; who had planned and had watched the construction of this outpost of progress. He had been, at home, an unsuccessful painter who weary of pursuing fame on an empty stomach, had gone out there through high protections. He had been the first chief of that station. (pp. 86-7)

Here Conrad is not merely fixing the bearings of his setting. The naturalness of the life of the indigenous people in their own environment is shown in the uninhibited behaviour of Makola's wife and children, and in Makola's self-possession. This contrasts with the alienness of ths Europeans suggested by the "mosquito net" and their isolation from their community, just as Makola's successful dissimulation and adaptability does with their inefficiency implied by their untidiness. Their negligence which is made clear in fair detail, is heightened by the comparative neatness of their house. The gravity of the hazards awaiting them is conveyed by a rather jolting juxtaposition of a view of their predecessor's grave beside the presentation of their house. The grim humour arising from the euphemistic phrasing disturbs us to a keener awareness of the agent's fate. "Outpost of Progress" sounds unmistakably ironic; the irony works by playing off the conventional, lofty associations of the phrase against the squalid, perilous reality. It recurs as a key leitmotiv and suggests Conrad's approach to his subject. The relevance of the fate of "the first chief of that station" is seen to be particularly close when one realizes how his life parallels that of Kayerts and Carlier; it is failure at home and hope of gain that bring all three to Africa; in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's "rather too fleshly" companion on the march from the coastal station to the Central Station[1] belongs to the same category of colonial employees.

Conrad goes on to expose more aspects of petty trading in imperial outposts. The director of the Great Trading Company gives Kayerts and Carlier their job and introduces them to it:

> He made a speech to Kayerts and Carlier, pointing out to them the promising aspect of their station. The nearest trading post was about three hundred miles away. It was an exceptional opportunity for them to distinguish themselves and to

[1] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*: *Youth, Heart of Darkness, End of the Tether* (1956 ed.), p. 71.

earn percentages on the trade. This appointment was a favour done to beginners, (pp. 87-8)

These words are contrasted with his inner thoughts as expressed soon after to the "old servant of the Company":

> "Look at those two imbeciles. They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and fences, and cons truct a landing-stage. I bet nothing will be done! They won't know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station!" (p. 88)

Thus Conrad is suggesting not merely the insincerity of the director but the inhuman pawn-like use of certain employees by imperial companies. He introduces the conventional Western view of imperialism:

> They (Kayerts and Carlier) also found some old copies of a home paper. That print discussed what it was pleased to call "Our Colonial Expansion" in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. (pp. 94-5)

Conrad parodies the language of this view, which was naturally more prominent in the metropolitan countries than in the colonies. Carlier and Kayerts use it to dignify and blind themselves.

Of course, what matters most is Conrad's presentation of the realities at the outpost itself, not their outer connections; his theme is the perils of petty trading on the fringes of an empire. Is the promise of the opening fulfilled? Consider this scene soon after Kayerts and Carlier have been left in charge of their outpost:

> Kayerts and Carlier walked arm in arm, drawing close to one another as children do in the dark; and they had the same, not altogether unpleasant, sense of danger which one half suspects to be imaginary. They chatted persistently in familiar tones. "Our station is prettily situated," said one. The other assented with enthusiasm, enlarging volubly on the beauties of the situation. Then they passed near the grave. "Poor devil !"

> said Kayerts. "He died of fever, didn't he?" muttered Carlier stopping short. "Why," retorted Kayerts with indignation, "I've been told that the fellow exposed himself recklessly to the sun. The climate here, everybody says, is not at all worse than at home, as long as you keep out of the sun. Do you hear that, Carlier? I am chief here, and my orders are that you should not expose yourself to the sun!" He assumed his superiority jocularly, but his meaning was serious. The idea that he would, perhaps, have to bury Carlier and remain alone, gave him an inward shiver. He felt suddenly that this Carlier was more precious to him here, in the centre of Africa, than a brother could be anywhere else. Carlier, entering into the spirit of the thing made a military salute and answered in a brisk tone, "Your orders shall be attended to, chief!" Then he burst out laughing, slapped Keyerts on the back and shouted, "We shall let life run easily here! Just sit still and gather in the ivory those savages will bring. This country has its good points, after all!" They both laughed loudly while Carlier thought: That poor Kayerts; he is so fat and unhealthy. It would be awful if I had to bury him here. He is a man I respect . . . Before they reached the verandah of their house they called one another "my dear fellow." (pp. 89-90)

Conrad brings to life dramatically the excessive rosy talkativeness and camaraderie of Kayerts and Carlier as an attempt to suppress their fears and dissatisfactions. But observe the commentary immediately preceding this scene:

> They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles, every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations - to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the

> unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike. (p.89)

Conrad's analysis is not prejudiced as is Benjamin Kidd's argument:

> In climatic conditions which are a burden to him; in the midst of races in a different and lower stage of development; divorced from the influences which have produced him, from the moral and political environment from which he sprang, the white man does not in the end, in such circumstances, tend so much to raise the level of the races amongst whom he has made his unnatural home, as he tends himself to sink slowly to the level around him.[1]

But Conrad does not go deeper. The over-general, undramatic quality of much of the narrative is partly a consequence of an artistic immaturity: Conrad has not yet developed sufficiently his power to explore psychology without a mediating narrator. Indeed, his theme itself entails heavy demands on this capacity. Kayerts and Carlier are like Almayer and Willems (in Conrad's first two novels) in their self-interested motives, though the latter hoped to 'make their pile' through Lingard's generosity rather than through trade. The African outpost is an isolated, testing environment like Sambir. But Kayerts and Carlier have much less to do with the indigenous people and their psychological condition thus matters more, given Conrad's main emphasis on these European characters who are rather inactive. Moreover, Conrad is faced with the difficulty of portraying them in a remote part of an alien environment about which he knew little. The tale only flickers into drama.

Given their characters and the environment in which they are pleced, the ironic physical and moral deterioration of "the two pioneers of trade and progress" (p. 93)[2] is virtually inevitable. They appear with increasing nakedness what they are; "they become daily more like a pair of accomplices than like a couple of devoted friends" (p. 109). As the tale moves towards the close, the quality of Conrad's irony changes:

[1] Kidd, *The Control of the Tropics* (New York & London, 1898), pp. 50-1.

[2] Conrad's ironic descriptive phrase.

> He had evidently climbed the grave, which was high and narrow, and after tying the end of the strap to the arm, had swung himself off. His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director. (p. 117)

Kayerts, conscious of his guilt in killing Carlier and the predictable condemnation of civilization, commits suicide before the Managing Director gets off the steamer which has arrived too late. He hangs himself from the cross on the grave of the first agent of the station. Moreover, ironically, Carlier seems to have taken revenge on Kayerts, for "early one day Carlier went out and replanted the cross firmly." (p. 95) Thus, the strong association of the cross with a succession of fatalities suggests, symbolically, the doom that awaits "incapable" Europeans in the outposts. But Conrad's irony has become rather callous, as in the treatment of Winnie Verloc's mother in *The Secret Agent.*

The Africans matter in so far as they affect the Europeans and, at the same time, they provide glimpses of indigenous life. Their role is far less important than that of the Malayans in Sambir, Patusan and the Land of the Refuge (in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands, Lord Jim* and *The Rescue).* The African traders and the slave dealers make brief appearances and are referred to in general descriptive terms. Only Gobila and Makola appear as individuals:

> Gobila was the chief of the neighbouring villages. He was a gray-headed savage, thin and black, with a white cloth round his loins and a mangy panther skin hanging over his back. He came up with long strides of his skeleton legs, swinging a staff as tall as himself, and, entering the common room of the station, would squat on his heels to the left of the door.....Gobila's manner was paternal, and he seemed really to love all white men. They all appeared to him very young, indistinguishably alike (except for stature) and he knew that they were all brothers, and also immortal. The death of the artist, who was the first white man whom he knew intimately, did not disturb this belief, because he was firmly convinced that the white stranger had pretended to die and got himself buried for some mysterious purpose of his own, into which it was useless to inquire. Perhaps it was his way of

> going home to his country? At any rate, these were his brothers, and he transferred his absurd affection to them. They returned it in a way. Carlier slapped him on the back, and recklessly struck off matches for his amusement. Kayerts was always ready to let him have a sniff at the ammonia bottle. In short, they behaved just like that other white creature that had hidden itself in a hole in the ground. (pp. 95-6)

Conrad presents accurately, in terms of behaviour seen from the outside, one type of primitive mind which is close to the popular Western notion of such a mind. Makola is a more complex piece of characterization:

> He spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits. (p. 86)

He has come under European influence, but has roots in African culture. He is a clerk, like Cary's Mister Johnson. He belongs to the small class of indigenous people educated by the colonial powers to handle low-grade jobs. It is he who confronts the armed slave dealers, strikes an unscrupulous bargain with them, and gets ivory by selling into slavery the station hands and some of Gobila's men.

> Kayerts nearly burst with indignation. "Why!" he shouted, "I belive you have sold our men for these tusks!" Makola stood impassive and silent. "I - I - will - I," stuttered Kayerts. "You fiend!" he yelled out.
>
> "I did the best for you and the Company," said Makola, imperturbably. "Why you shout so much? Look at this tusk."
>
> "I dismiss you! I will report you - I won't look at the tusk. I forbid you to touch them. I order you to throw them into the river. You - you!"
>
> "You very red, Mr. Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die - like the first chief!" pronounced Makola impressively.
>
> They stood still, contemplating one another with intense eyes, as if they had been looking with effort across immense distances. (p. 104)

Makola speaks a kind of English which suits his character. It is generally not as markedly African English as that of Cary's Johnson, but expressions such as "You very red" are telling. Here Conrad dramatizes Makola's brazen confidence in himself, based on his consciousness of his superior position as 'native' inhabitant and of his superior intelligence. Still, because Conrad has something of the conventional view of the negroes (he calls Makola "a civilized nigger", p. 102) he cannot achieve success on the lines of Cary's portrayal of Johnson.

An Outpost of Progress has its drawbacks and is confined by the limits of petty trading. But it is more than a preliminary exercise; it suggests the kind of talent that, in *Heart of Darkness*, could take on a theme in which the perils of petty trading in an outpost is a minor part.

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In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad presents the imperial entanglements of Western civilization and primitive culture as these are skirted by a certain type of Englishman, Marlow. We can still say, with Conrad, "the subject is of our time distinctly - though not topically treated".[1]

Why use Marlow? Detachment (springing from his Continental literary background, from his aristocratic origins and from his temperament) is the necessary essence of Conrad's technique, and he often achieves it partly with the help of narrators. In *Heart of Darkness*, he uses the same narrator as in *Lord Jim*, but with a difference. In *Lord Jim*, Marlow was relating the experiences of someone else; here he is recounting his own. That is, Conrad is employing the fictional convention of the first-person narrator. He "early Polish readings" in the *gaweda*, the kind of Polish story "told by some clearly defined person",[2] may have influenced Conrad to use this convention. But a more potent influence would have been, probably, the yarns of seamen; his career in the Merchant Service mattered gretly to him as a man and as a

[1] Conrad, letter to William Blackwood, 31 December 1898: William Blackburn (ed.), *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum* (North Carolina, 1958), p. 37.

[2] Zdzislaw Najder, *Conrad's Polish Background* (1964), pp. 16-7.

writer; the narrators of *The Secret* and *The Shadow-Line* are young captains; Marlow himself is a seaman. But Marlow is "a wanderer, too";[2] and in *Heart of Darkness*, it seems to me likely that the most powerful influence on the narrative convention would have been the mode of the sahib recounting his colonial experiences. This mode was established in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*,[3] to which Conrad contributed *Karain*, *Youth*, *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* itself.[4] Marlow talks of his connection with the Belgian Congo because of "his propensity to spin yarns." (p. 48) The "propensity" is released in a situation conducive to this, which appropriately forms the opening of the tale - Marlow on board a yawl in the Thames at dusk with four cronies joined by "the bond of the sea" who were "tolerant of each other's yarns - and even convictions." (pp. 45, 46) Marlow's tale does not spring from the pressure of inner compulsion as, say, the 'Rime' of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. But the experiences in it do matter to him and he relives them as he narrates them.

Marlow's portrayal is part of Conrad's theme and his suitability as a narrative vehicle is crucial to its presentation. These words are Marlow's:

> You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies - which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world - what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do. Temperament, I suppose. (p. 82)

His confession of his honesty and his explanation for it ring true; indeed, his tone always sounds like that of an honest man. Our acceptance of it as such is one reason why we accept his narrative as authentic. That he is a certain type of Englishman

1 *Heart of Darkness: Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (1956 ed.), p. 48; all later quotations from this tale are from this edition and their page-numbers are noted in my text.

2 See, e.g., Sir Hugh Clifford, 'The Quest of the Golden Fleece': *'Blackwood' Tales from the Outposts* (Edinburgh & London, 1933 ed.), Vol. 8; Lord Baden-Powell, 'Jokilobovu' ibid., Vol. 9; J. A. G. Elliot, 'Ngoloko', ibid., Vol. 9; Lieut-Colonel R. L. Kennion, 'A Country Postman', ibid., Vol. 1, Lieut-Colonel F. M. Bailey, 'A Quiet Day in Tibet', ibid., Vol. 1.

3 These works first appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 162; 1897; Vol. 164, 1898; Vol. 166, 1899; and Vol. 165, 1899, respectively.

is also important. These are observations and reflections of his in the waiting-room of the Belgian imperial company:

> Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. (pp. 55-6)

Conrad takes care to see to it that Marlow takes into account all the colonial countries; on the map, the red must stand for the British, the blue for the French, the green for the Portuguese, the orange for the Spanish, the purple for the Germans and the yellow for Belgians. The Empire of his own country evokes a warm response from Marlow which the other empires do not, and he mentions one specific reason for it. But is Marlow a conventional imperial-minded Englishman? Consider his general contemplation of imperialism a little earlier:

> "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago-... But darkness was here yesterday. ...Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga - perhaps too much dice, you know - coming out here in the train of some prefect, or taxgatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him, - all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination - you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."
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> ... 'Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. 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. . . ." (pp. 49-51)

Conrad sees the interaction of imperialism and primitive life historically. Marlow puts the imperialism of the British in line with that of the Romans. It was a prominent and long - standing British imperial tradition to admire the Roman Empire and emulate it: one of Thomas Sprat's arguments in 1667 for "a great Reformation in the manner of our Speaking and Writing" was that "purity of Speech and greatness of Empire have in all Countries still met together" and he cited the Ancients;[1] Cecil Rhodes "liked to picture himself as (Roman) emperor!"[2] But Marlow is humane: he condemns the Romans in a way that reflects the minority critical attitudes towards them of, say, D. H. Lawrence who saw their "brute force" (to use Marlow's words) in wiping out "the Etruscan existence as a nation and a people";[3] Marlow trenchantly criticizes "the conquest of the earth". Still, he finds exculpation for British imperialism in its "efficiency" and its "idea". His language carries suggestions of which he is not aware. Terms such as "some", "saves" and "redeems" imply an uneasy consciousness in him of unsatisfactory features even in British imperialism and in their attempted vindication an unconscious hypocrisy. This is one of the traits

[1] Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (1667): J. E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the 17th Century* (Oxford, 1908), Vol. 2, pp. 112-3.

[2] Rane Maunier, *The Sociology of Colonies:* Robin W. Winks (ed.), *British Imperialism* (New York, 1966), p. 69. Cf. Susanne Howe, *Novels of Empire* (New York, 1949), pp. 101-2.

[3] Lawrence, *Etruscan Places: Mornings in Mexico and Etruscan Places* (1956), p. 1.

which he betrayed in *Lord Jim;* it is so deep - seated that it remains despite his maturing Congo experience. With fine insight, Conrad suggests through the ritual connotations of Marlow's concluding words that an ideal of imperialism is an essentially primitive justification of inhumanity, common to both civilized and primitive societies.[1] The action which follows implicates the British Empire in its exposure of the evils of imperial entanglements. In this context, Conrad is critically projecting Marlow; Marlow is not the kind of "self - dramatization" on the part of the author which Walter Allen takes him to be;[2] in fact, Conrad himself enters this tale as a member of Marlow's company, his audience. Thus, it seems to me wrong to quote Marlow's remark, "There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there", as an expression of an opinion of the author and take it as evidence of Conrad's "loyalty to the British Empire", as Arnold Kettle does.[3] The elegantly spoken and thoughtful side of Marlow, evident in the comparison of Roman and British imperialism, seems to overlap somewhat with Conrad himself; so do the touches of vague elevated language, which from the very beginning enter the tale when Conrad tries to render the deep reaches of the entanglement of cultures. But if we consider Marlow's personality as a whole, we see that Conrad is essentially projecting a character. Indeed, the words that immediately follow those quoted by Kettle reinforce this point; here Conrad is clearly and deliberately rendering the idiom of a character, a rather extravert middle - class Englishman who is Marlow, not his own idiom which is that of an aristocratic European deracine. Marlow's honesty and humanity qualify him to be a suitable narrator. But is his usefulness limited by his imperial - mindedness in respect of Britain? Conrad is able to treat this side of Marlow critically just as he does other traits. Marlow provides one way by which he can bring Britain into his concerns. Moreover, he sends Marlow "into the yellow". He can plausibly employ Marlow to convey his theme as fully as he

1 Charles Kingsley justified Rajah Brooke's extermination of the Dyaks on the grounds that theirs was "beast - life" (Kingsley, letter to J. M. Ludlow, December 1849; his wife (ed.), *Charales Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of his Life* (1877), Vol. 1, p. 222). Cf. 'The Luban, in order to eat man more comfortably, calls outsiders Vahemba; ask him if he eats "man", and he will say, "Oh no! I do not eat man; I only eat Vahemba" (D. Crawford, *Thinking Black* (1912 ed.), p. 95).

2 Allen, *The English Novel* (1962 ed.), p. 306.

3 Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1962 ed.), Vol. 2, p. 81.

understands it partly because Marlow's national sentiment would not be on the defensive, as an hindrance to clear - sightedness and frankness, in confronting the imperial involvements of a foreign country, Belgium.

Marlow is an excellent vehicle partly because he is British and we can appreciate this all the more if we look at him from another angle. All the imperial powers are guilty of atrocities. The French, the Spanish and the Belgians chopped off the hands of indigenous people as a punishment. In France, torture was a legal instrument of justice until First World War, and the French were more callous towards subject people; less than ten years ago, they were using torture on the Algerians to a shocking extent.[1] There was a shattering drop in the African population of the Congo under the Belgians.[2] The early imperial activites of the British were not less inhuman than those of the other countries. Their trade in slaves and in coolies illustrates this. William Knighton's "sketches" bring in the brutal side of British imperialism in mid - 19th century Ceylon:

> "... Every man is a magistrate on his own estate, you know", he (Siggins) continued, "and therefore, as long as the man is working for you, you have a right to do what you like with him - that is, anything short of killing."
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> "A new doctrine, truly," said Mouat, coming as near a laugh as he ever permitted himself, "but one very often acted upon, I believe."[3]

In 1769 and 1770, the English East India Company 'brought about a famine in India by buying up all the rice and by refusing to sell it again except at fabulous prices. In 1866, in the one province of Orissa, more than a million Hindus perished of hunger. Nevertheless an attempt was made to replenish the Indian State treasury out of the price at which necessaries of life were sold to

[1] For an exposure of French atrocities in Algeria, see Piere Vidal - Naquet, *Torture: Cancer of Democracy, France and Algeria 1954 - 62* (1963)

[2] E. D. Morel, *Great Britain and the Congo* (1909), pp. 66 - 7, 109; Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1907 ed.), pp. 24, 27; Roger Casement, *The Congo Report* (1903): P. Singleton - Gates & Maurice Girodias (ed.), Roger Casement: *The Black Diaries* (n.d.), R. Palme Dutt, 'Congo, Cuba and Peace: *Labour Monthly*, September 1960, p. 387.

[3] See Knighton, *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854), Vol. 1, pp. 281 - 3.

the starving people.'[1] But generally by the turn of this century British imperialism had become so experienced and so profitable that it was able to rectify the worst features of imperialism. Thus, Marlow is a spokesman from a country with this imperial tradition. With no adequate sense of the past, the present state of the British Empire tends to confirm his distorted view of it, his racial and cultural prejudices. This sounds perfectly plausible and is also representative: for instance, both T. S. Eliot and George Orwell thought along such lines.[2] Marlow's national blindness is part of Conrad's theme, and he has selected a person from the right imperial country, Britain, who could credibly see clearly and humanely the imperial entanglements of a foreign country whose empire was comparatively recent and whose excesses were uncorrected. Moreover, Conrad has also chosen a kind of imperial environment in which the essentials of his theme would "stand out with particular force and colouring" (to use his own words).[3]

It is important to note that Marlow's journey into imperial involvements begins in Brussels, the headquarters of the Belgian empire, not in the Congo itself. Consider the scene when he bids farewell to his aunt:

> In the course of these confidences it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary, and goodness knows to how many more people besides, as an exceptional and gifted creature - a piece of good fortune for the Company - a man you don't get hold of every day. Good heavens! and I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny 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,

1 Karl Marx, *Capital* (trans. Eden & Cedar Paul, 1928 ed.), p. 834.
2 Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1959), pp. 90 - 1; George Orwell, 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936): *Collected Essays* (1968 ed.), p. 16.
3 Conrad, letter to Henry S. Canby, 7 April 1924: G. Jean - Aubry, *Joseph Conrad; Life and Letters* (1927), Vol. 2, p. 342.

> she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit.
>
> 'You forget, dear Charlie, that the labourer is worthy of his hire,' she said brightly. (p. 59)

Conrad introduces conventional Western notions of imperialism through the aunt; in *An Outpost of Progress,* he did this undramatically through "some old copies of a home paper" found by Kayerts and Carlier.[1] Marlow's sensible honesty becomes clearer as Conrad employs him to expose these conceptions. Marlow can see the difference between the exaggerated view of his job and its real pettiness, between the sentimental idealism and the economic basis of imperialism. Conrad dramatizes the actual working of the head office of an imperial company. There are the memorable figures of the two unconcerned women at the door knitting black wool, who go with such an office. There is the medical examination:

> ... 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he (the doctor) said. 'And when they come back too?' I asked 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous Interesting, too.' He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked, in a matter - of - fact tone. I felt very annoyed. 'Is that question in the interests of science, too?' 'It would be,' he said, without taking notice of my irritation, 'interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but...' 'Are you an alienist?' I interrupted. 'Every doctor should be - a little,' answered that original, imperturbably (p. 58)

The suggestions of callousness in the operations of the company, of possible death and derangement in the colony are potent. The whole city, in fact, seems to Marlow "a whited sepulchre" (p. 55). Its deathlike attributes link up with the inhumanity in the Empire, and Conrad suggests how the attributes of the metropolitan country are founded on imperialism. When Marlow leaves Brussels for the Congo, the realities *en route* are as much an integral part of the portrayal of imperial entanglements as the realities in

[1] *An Outpost of Progress,* p. 94.

Belgium and in the Congo itself. Consider these superbly arranged scenes:

> "Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks - these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight - forward facts; but the feeling would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man - of - war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling 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....
>
> "We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a - day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb;... (pp. 61 - 2)

That the faces of the "black fellows" seem like "grotesque masks" to Marlow suggests that he is a racial - minded foreigner. This stresses, by contrast, their oneness with their own environment. The naturalness and reality of the Africans differ strikingly from the alienness and frightening absurdity of the man - of - war. The juxtaposition illuminates and accounts for Marlow's grave inner disturbance and, at the same time, lights up and gives substance to "the merry dance of death and trade". It is also important to notice that realities outside Marlow are more in the picture than his own reactions. This is typical of these phases.

When the action moves on to the Congo, Conrad presents the imperial entanglements of Western civilization and primitive culture in the 'undeveloped' environment itself. Marlow's condensed view

of imperialism, "a flabby, pretending weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (p. 65), is placed in the thick of these realities and is validated by them dramatically. The physical details are made to typify the whole system. Marlow observes this:

> "I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. " (p. 65)

Then this:

> "... I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled in there There wasn't one that was not broken. It was a wanton smash-up. ..." (p. 65-6)

After that:

> "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die." (p. 66)

Conrad powerfully suggests meaninglessness, costly disorder and gross inhumanity, respectively, by the selection and juxtaposition of these strikingly presented realities rather than by way of commentary on the part of Marlow. The outer realities matter, not Marlow's inner state Conrad's voice rises as he goes on to present the plight of the labourers in a compressed way:

> Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. (p. 66)

The plain prose is charged with anger and pity; the bursting of these feelings is evident in the way several ideas are run together in one long sentence.

> "Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling

> manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone." (p. 67)

This dramatized portion derives its power partly from the metaphorical suggestions of dehumanized beings and partly from the visual exactness. Conrad's realism controls his compassion so that there is no lapsing into sentimentality. This scene is characteristic of Conrad's presentation of the Congolese. He does not go deep into their lives and presents them from the external standpoint of a visitor as anonymous victims of imperialism.

After describing "the grove of death", Marlow speaks of himself:

> I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station. (p. 67)

This is all that he says solely about himself. He quickly gets on to realities outside:

> When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.
>
> "I shook hands with this miracle, and I learned he was the Company's chief accountant, ... (pp. 67-8)

The disorder and horror Marlow has met, becomes more remarkable by forming both a glaring contrast to the juxtaposed figure of the spruce accountant and his books "in apple-pie order" (p. 68), and a telling complement to the "muddle" (p. 68) elsewhere in the station. The presentation of these realities is convincing partly because it is made through a narrator who is describing first-hand experience with an air of casualness. Moreover, the proximity of such incongruities is perfectly natural in a colonial context:

... When I visited the three mud huts which serve the purpose of the native hospital, all of them dilapidated, and 2 with the thatched roofs almost gone, I found 17 sleeping sickness patients, male and female, lying about in the utmost dirt. Most of them were lying on the bare ground - several out on the pathway in front of the houses, and one, a woman, had fallen into the fire just prior to my arrival (while in the final insensible stage of the disease) and had burned herself very badly. She had since been well bandaged, but was still lying out on the ground with her head almost on the fire, and while I sought to speak to her, in turning she upset a pot of scalding water over her shoulder. All the 17 people I saw were near their end, and on my 2nd visit 2 days later. the 19th June, I found one of them lying dead in the open.

In somewhat striking contrast to the neglected state of these people, I found within a couple of 100 yards of them, the Government workshop for repairing and fitting the steamers. Here all was brightness, care, order, and activity, and it was impossible not to admire and commend the industry which had created and maintained in constant working order this useful establishment.[1]

Whereas the action of *An Outpost of Progress* takes place in a single setting, the structure of *Heart of Darkness* is provided by Marlow's journey to and from the heart of Africa. Thus, Conrad can render his much more inclusive theme in terms of a whole range of realities. As Marlow penetrates deeper into the Congo, he observes more aspects of imperial entanglements. He indignantly describes the Eldorado Exploring Expedition as a base private attempt at plunder; Conrad ironically implies his criticism through the euphemism of the designation itself. Through Marlow, he is preoccupied with the key imperial agencies, the public companies and governments, which are shown as essentially no better; the suggested difference is chiefly that they operate on a larger and more organized scale. At the Central Station, Marlow meets a small exclusive society of European traders and agents:

However, they were all waiting - all the sixteen or twenty pilgrims of them - for something; and upon my word it did

[1] Roger Casement, 'The Congo Report' (11 December, 1903): *The Black Diaries*, op. cit., pp. 98-100.

> not seem an uncongenial occupation, from the way they took it, though the only thing that ever came to them was disease - as far as I could see. They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other in a foolish kind of way. There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else - as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading - post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account, - but as to effectually lifting a little finger - oh, no. (pp. 77-8)

In his 'Congo Diary', Conrad had noted: "Prominent characteristic of social life here; people speaking ill of each other".[1] The term "pilgrims", which Marlow uses consistently for them, is a significant leitmotiv; its idealistic associations ironically sound, among other things, their competitive greed. Their senseless dilatoriness is shown as part of their sterile mentality. Amidst the pretences, their desire for ivory is unmistakably real and prominent. Ivory is to the Congo what silver is to Costaguana in *Nostromo*. It is the actual raw wealth which private individuals, colonial companies and imperial powers covet, as well as a symbolic centre for their self - aggrandizing motives. "Ivory" is another leitmotiv. Conrad has more observations about colonial employees to offer through Marlow:

> 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. 76)

The rhythmic prose exposes an aspect of the psychology of acquisitiveness. Its religious implications ironically suggest the intensity and the long duration of the quest for wealth, and the overturning of values. They work with the suggestions of the other-than-human, of death and mental deficiency to convey an impression of men possessed by greed. These observations of Marlow are acute, but they are made from the outside and are

[1] Conrad, 'The Congo Diary': *Tales of Hearsay and Last Essays* (1955 ed.), p. 162.

general. He does not enter as such into colonial society, and does not talk in detail about any named individual. His own predicament figures in a minor way.

Marlow appears in several works of Conrad, but in all of them he is not, to use Virginia Woolf's description, a "subtle, refined, and fastidious analyst".[1] He was that in *Lord Jim*, but it seems to me that in *Heart of Darkness* he is extraordinary in his powers of observation, not in his attempts at analysis. In fact, as we shall notice, Conrad presents Marlow as a semi-comprehending narrator of his experiences. Thus, the most fundamental irony of the tale is that Marlow is narrating experiences whose full import – as it emerges through prose rich in implication, through the fine selection and arrangement of scenes - he is unaware of. Conrad secures the objectivity he needs partly with the help of this ironic method, partly by employing a narrator, and partly by making Marlow relate his tale in retrospect. Conrad's detachment has to be particularly strong in this tale because he is dealing with Congo realities which he found both profoundly disturbing and enlightening, as they would be for a European such as he.

Marlow's journey in the Congo is strictly along the river. He does not penetrate into less accessible areas. But because it is the main highway for the country, Conrad can present an impressive range of imperial involvements and a wealth of more or less fundamental insights into them. He does not systematically organize the realities of the tale to bring out a thesis. They enter the story in a way such that they could be plausibly met with during the kind of journey which Marlow undertakes. They fit in with each other to form a coherent, culturally profound impression of the entanglement of cultures. It has been argued that "the story is primarily concerned with the effect of the country (Africa) and of Kurtz on Marlow," and that "the story is not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials but about Marlow its narrator."[2] But it seems to me that Marlow's role as a character in his own right is of secondary importance; his character does not matter as, say, Fielding's in *A Passage to India*. He is mainly a vehicle through which Conrad conveys the entanglements of Western

[1] Woolf, 'Joseph Conrad' (1924): *Collected Essays* (1966), Vol. 1, p. 304.

[2] Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 18; Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, p. 37.

civilization and primitive culture; this is the main theme. We noticed that Conrad's approach is from the outside; he does pick out specific realities but he does not go deep into any one of them; they are important, not so much in their own right, as in their contribution to his general theme. As in the phases already discussed, the realities outside Marlow bulk much larger than his own role and are more important. And, as we shall see later in more detail, in this tale he is not the subtle psychologist critics have made out.

Let us now discuss Kurtz and go more deeply into Marlow's role: they are the only characters important as individuals in *Heart of Darkness*.

> 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; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. (p. 117)

Kurtz's role takes on an enormous significance as he appears a representative of European civilization as a whole. This is confirmed when Marlow gets to know that a world-wide society had selected him to write a key report. At the end of the tale, Marlow discovers that he was driven to find a colonial job to 'make his pile' (p. 159); in this respect he belongs to the same large category of Europeans as Kayerts and Carlier. But he differs from the latter in important ways: he is more capable; he is less mercenary. Marlow overhears the manager of the Central Station speaking of him not long after his arrival in Africa:

> 'And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk,' continued the other; '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 humanizing, improving, instructing." ...' (p. 91)

Thus, Kurtz at the beginning of his career bears a certain similarity to Marlow and belongs with those Europeans who were imperial-minded

but not inhuman. Conrad places Kurtz's attitudes, which he uses uneasily to play down the profit motive. The brickmaker of the Central Station, in conversation with Marlow, locates the disposition of Kurtz and Marlow in the context of colonial history:

> "You are of the new gang – the gang of virtue." (p. 79)

'High-mindedness' had begun to creep into colonial-company usage by the middle of the 19th century: it is prominent in William Arnold's *Oakfield* (1853). It is the virtuousness of "the new gang" that strikes the hard - headed men of the old tradition, though they are no more than half-altruistic even by their own avowals.

Our interest in Kurtz is kindled before we meet him. The accountant of the Company's station says of him that he:

> 'Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together ...'
>
> ... 'He will be a somebody in the Administration before long. ...' (pp. 69, 70)

It is generally considered that he had done well in his profession and that he has more success in store. But after he had gone to his outpost, there had been "no news" of him, only "strange rumours" (p. 91). This is perfectly natural in the Congo at this time: the colonial depots were far apart and isolated, particularly owing to difficulties of communication. Because there had been no clear suggestion of Kurtz's state before we meet him, because his character is important and our interest excited, his presentation during the last phase of the tale needs special power:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball - an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and - lo! - he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. (p. 115)

Unfortunately, the prose falls short of success. The grotesque images of love convey with some power and concentration what Marlow regards as Kurtz's deterioration and its causes, the wilderness and the ivory. But the rhetorical flourishes and the elevated vagueness are characteristics of Conrad's weak side.

Kurtz is placed in the heart of Africa. His character and European civilization which he stands for, are thus subject to their most severe test. In one way, we see the disintegration of

the European values which he held at the beginning of his career. This is suggested summarily by the immediate utter contrast between his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs ("It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence", p. 118) and his postscriptum ("Exterminate all the brutes!", p. 118). The absolute racialism and savagery of the latter differ shockingly from the extreme theoreticality and romanticism of his humanity in the former. The postscriptum has to be taken very seriously because it figures not merely as a safety-valve of an exhausted, defeated idealist but as a principle of action. But, in other ways, Conrad suggests that Kurtz's case is extremely complex. To his European disciple in the Congo, he is virtually an all-comprehending sage who "could be very terrible" but cannot be judged as "an ordinary man" (p. 128). In a way, he is a contrast to his follower. His kind of maturity makes him vulnerable, whereas the latter is "indestructible" partly (in Marlow's view, "solely") "by virtue of his few years and of his unreflecting audacity" (p. 126). Conrad weaves their relationship even more closely into the texture of the tale; Marlow thinks:

> If it had come to crawling before Mr. Kurtz, he crawled as much as the veriest savage of them all. (p. 132)

Marlow is critical of the adoration of both the disciple and the Africans. But their notions of Kurtz suggest certain worthy qualities in him, though Conrad does not suggest that they are fully sound; their views are not fully discredited or drastically devalued by Marlow's, as we shall notice later. The strain of living in the wilderness makes Kurtz ill twice and saps his strength. But his response to it never becomes simple, as these words of his follower show:

> '...He hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away. When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him And he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people - forget himself - you know.' 'Why! he's mad', I said. He protested indignantly. Mr. Kurtz couldn't be mad. (p.129)

The conventional, race-conscious side of Marlow recoils from the fact of a European 'going native', and here Conrad's sympathies are with the disciple rather than with Marlow. As a European, Kurtz hates the wilderness and, at the same time, is lured by it. The attraction is stronger than the dislike and could at times

even compel him to forget his European identity. This explains his actions during his journey to the Central Station to deliver ivory and take back provisions. After travelling three hundred miles, he sends his clerk ahead and he himself returns to his outpost. In fact, he wishes to remain permanently in innermost Africa. It is he who orders the Africans to attack Marlow's steamer so that no attempt will be made to take him away.

Let us now examine further how Marlow records the entanglements of Western civilization and primitive culture in the interior of the Congo, especially Kurtz's case. He sketches the approach to the outpost:

> But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us - who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign-and no memories. (pp. 95-6)

Conrad uses this kind of rhetoric whenever he deals with the deep reaches of imperial entanglements - and most prominently during the Kurtz phase because it is then that this aspect is central. The first half of the extract above is in lurid imperial prose: by portraying the Africans as if they are constantly in a state of "incomprehensible frenzy", it denies their normal activities; this kind of distortion of indigenous life was commonly employed as a justification of annexation in the name of civilization. This could come from Marlow. But the language soon shades into the vague awe-creating art prose of Conrad rather than the conversational idiom of Marlow. The narrator confesses his incomprehension and this is credible; but Conrad's kind of prose does not convey this effectively. He is one of the Europeans 'cut off from the comprehension of their surroundings' and he describes them thus:

> And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. (p. 93)

This is the same kind of art prose as that in the earlier excerpt.

Now turn to the important human experiences.

> "I looked at him, lost in astonishment. There he was before me, in motley, as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes, enthusiastic, fabulous. His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain - why he did not instantly disappear. (p. 126)

When Marlow here tries to account fundamentally for the condition of Kurtz's disciple, he provides only an insistent succession of negatives which overlaps with Conrad's own deplorable rhetoric. Still, Kurtz matters far more than his follower. At the beginning of the tale Marlow speaks of his encounter:

> It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me - and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too, - and pitiful - not extraordinary in any way - not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (p. 51)

Here Conrad conveys, through an idiom appropriate to Marlow, a convincing impression of his narrator groping to find out the significance of the Kurtz episode for him. Moreover, the phase is a crucial one in the tale, as I have already suggested: it deals with the entanglement of Western civilization and primitive culture in the most remote of places under the most testing conditions. Marlow, in fact, finds himself striking an enduring relationship with Kurtz who appears to him degenerated and demented. We noticed Conrad's suggestion that they have something temperamentally in common. He turns to the "nightmare" of Kurtz "for relief" from that of the other colonial employees because it is more honest though more unsettling. The term suggests appropriately the disturbing unfamiliarity of Marlow's experiences and his inability to come to terms with them. But they themselves have to be satisfactorily defined for us by Conrad. Marlow ponders thus a fundamental problem posed by Kurtz:

> ... I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him - himself - his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. (p. 144)

Conrad is showing that Marlow's European values cannot be extended to enable him to get to grips with it, but his loftily empty phrasing mars his presentation. He probes the fundamental causes of Kurtz's transformation.

> Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain - I am trying to account to myself for - for - Mr. Kurtz - for the shade of Mr. Kurtz. (p. 117)

The narrator's attempt to split hairs suggests that Conrad is uneasily conscious of the inadequacy of his scrutiny.

> You can't understand. How could you? - with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylum - how can you imagine what particular region of first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude - utter solitude without a policeman - by the way of silence - utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (p. 116)

Presumably, the pressures of "utter solitude" and "utter silence" are too much for Kurtz's "inner strength" and "capacity for faithfulness". Marlow's reasoning is bare, general and slanted. It is of a piece with Benjamin Kidd's examination of 'the white man sinking slowly to the level around him'. Conrad, however, does not provide a deeper and specific analysis. Marlow speaks of "the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts" in Kurtz, of "gratified and monstrous passions" (p. 144), of 'certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites which were offered up to Mr. Kurtz' (p. 118). But the objective realities for these African

experiences enter the drama only slightly and unsatisfactorily. One such instance occurs when Marlow's steamer is about to leave the outpost with Kurtz aboard:

> I pulled the string time after time. They broke and ran, they leaped, they crouched, they swerved, they dodged the flying terror of the sound. The three red chaps had fallen flat, face down on the shore, as though they had been shot dead. Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river. (p. 146)

The suggestion for "gratified and monstrous passions" is meagre; the woman's action takes the form of a grand-opera pose.

The element of weakness in Conrad's presentation of African realities can be related to his attitudes towards and knowledge of them. We have noticed that there is something conventional in his view of negroes and he knew little about them and that consequently he cannot portray negroes as Joyce Cary can. If we consider African realities in particular, we see that neither in *An Outpost of Progress* nor in *Heart of Darkness* does he penetrate deep into African culture, as Cary does. Conrad did visit the Congo, and it has been shown that the earlier phases of *Heart of Darkness* are based closely on the author's own Congo journey.[1] Conrad's 'Congo Diary' is sketchy, and covers only the first two months of his four-month stay in the Congo, but it is unlikely that a European of his character would have got to know his carriers or other Africans, let alone African culture. In the Congo during Conrad's visit, there was an agent named Georges Antoine Klein who was reported to be sick and "in the manuscript of the story Conrad starts by writing Klein and then changes to Kurtz; but it is not known how closely Kurtz is modelled on the activities and character of Klein".[2] As for the factual basis of Kurtz's secrets, by 1899 there were available a number of careful and substantial works by eminent anthropologists, such as Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) and Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), which dealt among other things with the kind of realities that occur in the Kurtz phase. Indeed, a critic, using Frazer's

1 See Richard Curle's notes to 'The Congo Diary', op. cit,

2 Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad* (1960 ed.), p. 117.

The Golden Bough, has suggested that "Kurtz's unspeakable rites and secrets concern (with whatever attendant bestiality) human sacrifice and Kurtz's consuming a portion of the sacrificial victim".[1] But this seems to me speculation which is not sufficiently based on Conrad's kind of art. The realities of the Kurtz phase in the tale are far from clear and the main reason for this is probably that Conrad himself had much less first-hand or even second-hand knowledge (though the latter was abundantly available) than his kind of imagination needed. He confessed that he knew much less than Roger Casement:

> He could tell you things! Things I've tried to forget: things I never did know. He has had as many years of Africa as I months - almost.[2]

Though the Kurtz phase is to Marlow "the culminating point" of his experience, it is Kurtz who matters more than Marlow as far as the tale is concerned. The episode reaches a climax with Kurtz's death. His final cry, "The horror! The horror!" (p. 149), is interpreted by Marlow as "complete knowledge" and "a moral victory" (pp. 149, 151), as a rejection of 'going native'. Critics usually follow Marlow's inference; to J. I. M. Stewart, it can signify "an act of contrition".[3] But it seems to me that Kurtz's cry can no less validly be understood as a recoil from the whole mess of European rapacity and brutality in Africa into which he is being taken: it is necessary to remember, first, that Kurtz desires to remain permanently in the heart of Africa and, secondly, that certain aspects of civilized behaviour do, as presented, appear horrors. Both interpretations can stand, just as Marlow's view of Kurtz and his disciple's view of him do not cancel out each other. There is an essential unresolved ambiguity in Conrad's presentation of Kurtz. His ironic first-person narrative mode permits, indeed, lends itself to, this kind of equivocalness and noncommitment.

Now let us pay more attention to Marlow. We noticed his chauvinistic blindness, his degree of conventionality, his honesty and humanity. He is extremely observant, but he is not unflinching. Not long after his arrival at the Central Station, he says:

[1] Stephen A. Reid, 'The "Unspeakable Rites" in *Heart of Darkness*': Marvin Mudrick (ed.), *Conrad, A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey, 1966), p. 45.

[2] Conrad, letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 26 December 1903: Jean-Aubry, *Life and Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 326.

[3] Stewart, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 79.

> "I went to work the next day, turning so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life." (p. 75)

This is characteristic of him. The work of navigation is a telling contrast to the discomposing imperial realities; he turns to this for relief and to help maintain his balance. He adopts the same kind of attitude aboard the steamer as it approaches Kurtz's outpost: he is disturbed by the "suspicion" that the primitive Africans ashore are 'not inhuman' but he soon side-steps this by "helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes" (pp. 26-7). He is not the kind of person whose psyche is liable to be affected in a deep and complex way by his experiences; indeed, he guards against this, though he does find them deeply disturbing and contributing to his maturation. But he himself is mainly a narrative vehicle and his value in this respect is enhanced because he only half understands his experiences; to echo the *Four Quartets*, he had the experience but (at least partially) missed the meaning.

We noted that to Marlow the Kurtz episode is "the culminating point" of his experience, and for a very long time critics have implicitly or explicitly considered it the climax of the tale, too, presumably making here the common error of taking Marlow and Conrad to be one.[1] But it seems to me that the climax of *Conrad's* tale is the final phase in Europe. Marlow's African journey ends at the key place from where he set out - the headquarters of the Congo Empire, Brussels. The section is pitched on a lower key than those in Africa. This is appropriate, perhaps necessary, not merely to a tale drawing to its close, but to convey and underline its final wisdom. When Marlow meets Kurtz's Intended, the presentation is somewhat sentimental, but the conclusion as a whole is not more spoilt than the Kurtz phase. Here is Marlow in Brussels:

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were

1 See, e.g., Hugh Clifford, 'The Art of Mr. Joseph Conrad': *The Spectator*, 29 November 1902, p. 828; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1962 ed.), p. 200; M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius* (New York, 1965 ed.), p. 28; J. I. M. Stewart, op. cit., p. 77.

> intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. (p. 152)

Here he is in the house of the Intended:

> The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. (p. 156)

The prominent suggestions of darkness and death in Europe link up with the same suggestions in the African phases to imply how the prosperity in the metropolitan country is based on inhumanity in the Empire. This effect was achieved in the same way between the opening and the African phases which followed. The parallel makes for emphasis and here there is an added clinching touch. Conrad is showing up, ironically, the unawareness of people in the metropolitan country and that there are even more "things" than Marlow knows. The ironies at the end are of a piece and cohere with those that went before. Here is Marlow talking to Kurtz's Intended:

> . . . 'You knew him well,' she murmured, after a moment of mourning silence.
>
> " 'Intimacy grows quickly out there,' I said. 'I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.'
>
> " 'And you admired him,' she said. 'It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?'
>
> " 'He was a remarkable man,' I said, unsteady. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, 'It was impossible not to-'
>
> " 'Love him,' she finished eagerly, silencing me into an appalled dumbness. 'How true! how true! But when you think that no one knew him so well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best.'
>
> " 'You knew him best,' I repeated. And perhaps she did But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love. (p. 158)

Marlow speaks a deliberately ambiguous language which he mistakenly thinks adequately fits reality and, at the same time, does not destroy what he thinks are the illusions of the woman. The Intended speaks erroneously of Kurtz in Africa purely in terms of her impression of him 'before the Congo'. Conrad's ironic mode implies a criticism of both views and, at the same time, accommodates both. Through Marlow's account of his return to "the sepulchral city" during which he refers to physical details such as the fireplace with "a cold monumental whiteness", a piano like a "sarcophagus", even the woman's perfect yet pallid skin, Conrad is able to suggest, without any forcing of the symbolism, that the secure opulence of Europe is able to maintain itself intact only by a radical ignorance of, an unbridgeable distance from, the raw savageries which ultimately pay for it.

Conrad contemplates the particular imperial entanglements of Belgium and the Congo in a universal light. He does not mention Belgium, Brussels and the Congo (the country and the river) by name; this helps to give his theme the widest possible application. The man-of-war "firing into a continent", which Marlow sees on his voyage to the Congo, is French. We noticed that Kurtz is presented as a representative of European civilization as a whole. Conrad connects Britain, past and present, to his theme by the use of Marlow; by his references to Sir Francis Drake, Sir John Franklin and others (p. 4/); by his suggestion at the opening of the story that the Thames is a symbol of long-standing, far-ranging British imperial activity, ' a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth." (p. 47) We observed that Conrad implicates the Romans, too. The tale ends with a shift of scene to the men on the yawl in the Thames:

> Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb." said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky - seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (p. 162)

Conrad himself takes over the narrative from Marlow. In this final vision, the Thames, the symbol of British imperial activity and, by extension, of world-wide imperial activity, itself appears

to him "to lead into the heart of an immense darkness", to go in the same direction as the Congo. Imperial entanglements are symbolically implied to represent a black tendency in civilization itself.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad is not able to render well the entanglement of Western civilization and primitive culture in its deepest reaches; he is not quite equal to the deepest issues which he raises. But what he achieves in the tale is substantial enough to make it a masterpiece whose relevance extends beyond the Belgian-Congolese involvements at a particular period in history to today's imperial entanglements and permanent cross-cultural problems.