The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad

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> I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more – the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort – to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires – and expires, too soon – before life itself. (36–7)

Marlow's listeners also experience mixed emotions as they remember their own youths, as the frame narrator concludes the story by saying, "our faces marked by toil, by deceptions, by success, by love; our weary eyes looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone – has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash – together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions" (42); and although this story contains none of the bitterness of old age, it faithfully represents the nostalgia and sadness of a lost youth and a clear awareness of an inexorable death.

"Heart of Darkness" is a dark, densely packed, and slow-moving story about a journey up the Congo River, in which Conrad investigates colonialism, self-knowledge, and the groundings of Western civilization. The story is loosely based upon Conrad's own experience in the Congo, and he notes in the "Author's Preface" that the story "is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case" (xi). There is no doubt that Conrad's own experience in the Congo had a profound affect on him; he is reputed to have once told Edward Garnett, "Before the Congo I was just a mere animal," and it is this effect that Conrad tries to transmit to his readers.

The story begins with four men sitting on the deck of the *Nellie*, anchored on the river Thames and waiting for the tide to change. Among them is an unnamed frame narrator, who recounts the tale that Marlow tells them. Marlow had been having trouble finding work when he finally got command of a steamboat on the Congo river and sets off on his journey to Africa. When he arrives at the company's Outer Station, he finds a combination of waste and decay. He leaves shortly thereafter for the company's Central Station to take command of his steamboat. Upon arriving, he finds his steamboat sunk and is forced to wait several months for repairs, after which Marlow and the others finally set off up river for the company's Inner Station to relieve Kurtz, the station manager there. Just below the station, they are attacked by Africans, during which Marlow's African helmsman is killed. Expecting to find the Inner Station destroyed, they are surprised to discover it intact. Marlow meets the Russian there, a disciple of Kurtz, who confidentially informs Marlow that Kurtz has taken a seat as one of the local deities among

the Africans and that he had ordered the attack because he did not want to be taken back down river. Kurtz, who had been ill for some time, dies during the return voyage, his last words being "The horror! The horror!" Marlow also falls ill and barely escapes with his life, after which he is sent back to Europe. Before Kurtz died, a subtle bond had developed between Marlow and Kurtz, and Kurtz entrusted Marlow with some letters and papers. After recovering from his illness, Marlow decides to return a thin packet of letters from Kurtz's fiancée (his Intended). While visiting her, it becomes clear that she knows only the idealistic Kurtz who set out for Africa, not the one who was worshiped like a god. At one point, Marlow lets slip that he had heard Kurtz's last words. Upon learning this, the still grieving woman demands that Marlow tell them to her. After some hesitation, he tells her that Kurtz's last words were her name and then leaves. Marlow concludes by telling his listeners that he could not bring himself to tell her the truth.

"Heart of Darkness" is Conrad's most well-known story, in which he considers such significant issues as the nature of human existence and the nature of the universe. The story is also Conrad's first attempt to implement fully the narrative methods with which he had been experimenting in his previous fiction: frame narrative, multiple narrators, achronological narrative, and delayed decoding. Conrad had already used frame narratives in other stories, but in "Heart of Darkness" he expands the narrator's role such that a disparity arises between Marlow's view of events and the frame narrator's (at least at the beginning of the story). These disparate views provide the impetus for the story, but they also serve to present contrasting points of view. This effect is augmented by Conrad's use of multiple narrators. He would refine this technique in later works, but even in "Heart of Darkness" Conrad presents different information from different sources. Similarly, the narrative chronology Conrad employs is unique. As early as *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad had experimented with narrative chronology, but not until "Heart of Darkness" does he introduce a truly unique variation. The chronology of the story is a direct indirection, in which Marlow appears to tell a chronological tale but in fact does not. The narrative proceeds not according to the sequence of events but according to the sequence of Marlow's thoughts. Almost invariably when Marlow mentions women, for example, it is not when they actually appear in the story but rather when he happens to think of them. Finally, Conrad had used delayed decoding in some of his earlier works, and it appears prominently in "Heart of Darkness," again in a more fully developed form, when during the attack, for instance, Marlow initially sees sticks flying about and only afterwards sees those objects as arrows.

Conrad also returns to a fuller investigation of important ideas that he had considered in his previous works. Early in the story, the frame narrator comments on the famous adventurers and conquerors who had set forth from the Thames. The narrator's laudatory description of these past adventurers causes Marlow to contrast contemporary England with the England that the Romans encountered when they came to conquer it some two thousand years earlier. Thus begins Marlow's inquiry into the basic assumptions about Western civilization of the frame narrator and the other men on board, as well as those of Conrad's reading public. At the time of the story's writing, England was the most wealthy and powerful nation on earth. It was also the epicenter of Western civilization and represented the height of civilized progress, and London, where the *Nellie* is anchored, was the pinnacle of English society as well as the literal and symbolic source from which civilized progress issued forth to the rest of the world. Marlow, however, points out that to the conquering Romans the British would have been mere savages and Britain a mere wilderness. In fact, Marlow's description of the England that the Romans would have encountered seems strikingly similar to the description of the Congo that Marlow gives later in the story. Marlow does suggest a distinction between the Roman conquerors and the European colonizers, arguing that the Romans' rule "was merely a squeeze . . . They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got," while of the Europeans he says, "What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency" (50). Marlow concludes:

> 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. (50–1)

This seemingly contradictory statement forms one of the critical cruxes of the story. If the "conquest of the earth . . . is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much," then can it really be redeemed? Does Marlow accept colonialism, reject colonialism, or reject continental colonialism but accept British colonialism because of its "devotion to efficiency" and "unselfish belief in the idea"? An answer to this question becomes crucial in determining how one interprets "Heart of Darkness." Before answering this question, though, one must first determine what this "unselfish belief in the idea" is. Based upon what occurs later in the story, it seems that this "idea" is the idealistic goal of improving the non-Western world through the dissemination of Western culture, society,

education, technology, and religion. Given Marlow's treatment of the colonial endeavor, as he experiences it in Africa, we can only conclude that he is highly critical of it. The more subtle nuances of this conclusion, though, are less clear. Despite Marlow's withering critique of colonialism, it remains unclear whether colonialism in general is under attack or only continental colonialism – particularly Belgian colonialism. In other words, by insisting that colonialism can be redeemed, Marlow leaves open the possibility that he exempts the British from his otherwise unrelenting indictment.

Leaving this question aside, however, what remains is a clear criticism of Western civilization as Marlow encounters it in Africa. The whole colonial endeavor, at least as it was represented at the time, consisted of an uneasy marriage between commercial colonial trade and an altruistic attempt to improve African life, as Kurtz is quoted as saying: "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" (91). Even if one grants the Eurocentric assumption that the non-Western world needed improving, the difficulty of marrying such incompatible motivations as economics and education seems to have proven to be beyond the abilities of even the most sincere colonizers. Invariably, the colonial endeavor ultimately became one of exploitation, and this exploitation becomes prominent in "Heart of Darkness." The public perception of colonial activities was one of paternalism, as Marlow's aunt demonstrates when she talks of Marlow's "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (59). Marlow discovers, though, that the reality of the colonial experience in Africa is anything but "humanizing, improving, instructing." Marlow's fireman best exemplifies this problem:

> He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler . . . A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam-gauge and at the water-gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity – and he had filed teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks . . . He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this – that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully. (97–8)

Clearly, the fireman's education is merely an expedient one for the colonial officials. They make no real attempt to "improve" him. They simply play upon his own beliefs and replace them with similar ones, and so Marlow

refers to "the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern" (78). The company is only interested in cheap labor, not in educating the Africans about Western values and beliefs.

Further questioning of colonialism appears in the role of Western civilization in Africa. From the moment Marlow steps ashore in Africa, Western civilization appears to be absurd, out of place, or detrimental. Whether it be the "objectless blasting" (64), the chief accountant's attire (67–8), or the grove of death (66–7), Western civilization does not improve Africa or the Africans, and this initial representation only strengthens as the story progresses. If Western civilization is grounded in absolute truth (as most Westerners assumed), then it should thrive wherever disseminated. That it does not thrive in Africa calls into question any absolute quality. Furthermore, Marlow sees that not only does Western civilization not benefit the Africans, it does not benefit the Europeans either. Consistently, he observes that Western values and morals have little or no play in the lives of the Europeans working in the Congo. Instead, Marlow finds "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (65). Far from observing a "devotion to efficiency" (50) or centers "for humanizing, improving, instructing" (91), the Europeans seem generally devoid of Western values. On several occasions, one of the Europeans observes that Western morality does not come into play in Africa, as when the uncle of the Central Station manager says, "Anything – anything can be done in this country" (91). Marlow recognizes this dearth of morality and notes that without external restraints in the form of public opinion and law enforcement the Europeans do whatever they want. They have no "inborn strength" (97) to fight unchecked desires. As a result, the Europeans appear more savage than the Africans, whom the Europeans consider savages. Marlow underscores this point in the incident with the cannibals. In this scene, Marlow shows the cannibals first to be more rational than their European employers and second to be more moral. During the concern over a possible attack, the head cannibal says to Marlow, "Catch 'im . . . Give 'im to us." Marlow replies, "To you, eh? What would you do with them?" to which the cannibal replies, "Eat 'im!" (103). Marlow then continues:

> I would no doubt have been properly horrified, had it not occurred to me that he and his chaps must be very hungry: that they must have been growing increasingly hungry for at least this month past . . . and of course, as long as there was a piece of paper written over in accordance with some farcical law or other made down the river, it didn't enter anybody's head to trouble how they would live . . . they had given them

> every week three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in river-side villages. You can see how *that* worked. There were either no villages, or the people were hostile . . . So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. I must say it was paid with a regularity worthy of a large and honourable trading company. (103–4)

Not only does this incident reveal the absurdity of Western civilization in an African setting (since the Western economic system makes no sense here), but it also shows the cannibals to be more rational than the Europeans. Marlow's point becomes even more emphatic because Europeans considered cannibalism to be the most savage behavior and the furthest removed from civilized behavior. That the cannibals act more rationally than the Europeans makes Conrad's comment on Western civilization that much more telling. Conrad does not stop there, though. Shortly after the above exchange, Marlow very reasonably wonders:

> Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us – they were thirty to five – and have a good tuck-in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. They were big powerful men, with not much capacity to weigh the consequences, with courage, with strength . . . And I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there . . . Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul – than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad, but true. And these chaps, too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. (104–5)

Ironically, the restraint that the cannibals exhibit appears to be the only example of restraint in the story. The Europeans, who are supposed to be civilized, consistently lack any restraint except when confronted with external checks. In this case, the cannibals have no external restraints upon them, and yet they exhibit an internal restraint. Again, the fact that cannibals, whom the

Europeans thought were the most savage of beings, act the most civilized of any of the human beings Marlow encounters emphasizes the utter savagery at the heart of the Europeans when removed from the external restraints of Western civilization.

Experiences like this one, along with the general disorder, waste, and degeneration among the images of Western civilization, serve to erode Marlow's confidence in an orderly and absolute foundation for Western civilization. This erosion culminates in Marlow's experience with Kurtz and the Central Station manager. Kurtz is presented as the high point of Western civilization. Marlow is careful to note that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (117), and that Kurtz is "a prodigy," "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (79), and a "universal genius" (83). He is one of "the gang of virtue" (79), going out into the African wilderness "equipped with moral ideas" (88) and with the purpose of disseminating Western values. Something goes wrong along the way, though. Removed from the external restraints of Western civilization, Kurtz has no internal restraint to keep him from doing whatever he pleases. The result is that rather than exerting "a power for good practically unbounded" (118), Kurtz concludes by presiding "at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which . . . were offered up to him" (118). Far from being an "august Benevolence" (118), he ends up raiding the countryside in quest of more ivory. Marlow clearly disapproves of Kurtz, so it comes as some surprise that Marlow sides with him. It is important to remember, though, that in siding with Kurtz, Marlow is simply choosing one "nightmare" (138) over another. Kurtz represents good intentions gone terribly wrong. He had begun as a moral being with benevolent intentions but ultimately could not maintain his ideals once invested with absolute power. In the end, nothing was at the back of Kurtz – no solid foundation, as Marlow says, "He had kicked himself loose of the earth" (144).

The Central Station manager, however, is another case entirely. He commits none of Kurtz's evil acts and thoroughly disapproves of Kurtz and Kurtz's methods for collecting ivory. Yet, Marlow sides with Kurtz. Marlow does so, though, because of what the Central Station manager represents. In a telling conversation between the two, the manager remarks, "But there is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action . . . The district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole, the trade will suffer . . . Look how precarious the position is – and why? Because the method is unsound" (137). Marlow comments concerning this conversation, "It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief – positively for relief" (138). The relief Marlow

seeks is in the world of morality and immorality that Kurtz represents. In contrast, the manager represents a world of amorality. This world of amorality had been evident for some time in the story. The most glaring example of it appears early in the story in the chief accountant's attitude toward an invalided agent and the African workers. He says of the agent, "The groans of this sick person distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate" (69). Similarly, he remarks of the noise the Africans make, "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages – hate them to the death" (70). The tone of the Central Station manager's comments resembles that of the chief accountant. What Marlow refers to as Kurtz's raiding the country (128) the manager calls "vigorous action" (137), and the manager's objection to Kurtz's actions is not a moral objection but rather an economic one. He is unconcerned with the immorality of Kurtz's actions. Instead, he recognizes that because of Kurtz's methods trade in the area will suffer in the long run. For Marlow, the Central Station manager and so many of the other Europeans associated with the company appear outside morality. They are neither moral nor immoral but rather amoral, concerned only with the economics of the colonial endeavor – divorced from any altruistic feeling. In fact, they scoff at such ideas (e.g., 79, 91). Kurtz is wholly immoral, but his is the story of good morals gone bad. In contrast, the Central Station manager and almost every other European that Marlow encounters in Africa has neither moral nor immoral intentions. Consequently, they seem inhuman and utterly destroy any confidence Marlow might have had concerning the altruism of colonialism.

As a result of his experience in the African wilderness, Marlow's confidence in Western civilization and in any transcendental truths disappears, so much so that he concludes, "Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (150). Marlow has witnessed the stripping away of his civilized values and views, and he discovers that nothing lies beneath. Knowledge of this crucial truth is also exactly what the Europeans lack. Only Kurtz seems to recognize fully the naked truth concerning himself and his ideals when he sums up, "The horror! The horror!" (149). The rest of the Europeans in Africa remain oblivious to the things that Marlow learns. Nor do they seem to care to investigate such issues. When Marlow returns to Europe, he finds it no different:

> 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 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. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. (152)

Marlow sees these people as deluded and criticizes them because they do not know what he knows: that the truths of Western civilization are facades that hide an empty universe and that human existence has no ultimate meaning. While Marlow thinks that one should see the world as it is, at the same time he also wishes to keep such a bleak view at bay. As occurs so often with the characters in Conrad's works, Marlow seeks shelter from such withering knowledge. For him, this shelter seems to exist in the idealistic world of the Intended. Marlow's lie to the Intended has been the subject of some speculation. Clearly, he wishes to protect her and to spare her feelings, but Marlow also wants to protect himself. That his lie is significant is clear from his earlier comment: "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie" (82), and yet he lies to the Intended about Kurtz's last words. Earlier, Marlow had remarked, "We must help them [women] to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (115), and when he comments on his lie he says, "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether . . ." (162). By telling the Intended the truth, Marlow would have shattered the pristine world that she and other women inhabit. By lying to her, he preserves that world of ideals, which acts as a psychological refuge for Marlow from the bleak truths he has discovered outside it.

The story ends with a picture of the Thames that resembles the darkness of the Congo river far more than it does the origins of "the sacred fire" (47) of civilization. Marlow's journey, as well as that of his listeners, has been one of discovery – discovery of the nature of his self, his existence, and his world.

"The End of the Tether" is another tale that investigates moral and psychological dilemmas. Captain Whalley has an almost obsessive devotion to his daughter Ivy and intends to provide for her. After a lifetime of hard work and honorable actions, Captain Whalley loses most of his savings in a bank failure. He sells his ship and sends the money to Ivy so that she can open a boarding house. Whalley then signs on as captain of the *Sephora*, which is owned by Mr. Massy, a notoriously shady individual. Whalley invests his last £500 in the *Sephora* with the understanding that after he has