

Works of Corruption and Redemption in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

[This essay aims at studying aspects of moral corruption and degeneration in relation to the administration of the Belgian empire in Africa in Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness*. Unable to accept truth about these forms of moral degeneration and inefficiency in the administrative services of the empire, Marlow becomes sceptical about the reality and truth in connection with the humanity of the Whiteman and his ability to spread civilisation in Africa.

Keywords: Empire, truth, Civilising mission, Greed, Nepotism .]

Arabic abstract

[يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة جوانب الفساد الأخلاقي والانحطاط الحضاري في إدارة الإمبراطورية البلجيكية بإفريقيا من خلال رواية جوزيف كونراد 'قلب الظلمات'، إذ أصبح مارلو غير قادر على قبول حقيقة الفساد المتفشي بين مختلف المصالح الدارية، وأصبح الشك يهيمن على إدراكه للواقع وللحقائق المرتبطة بإنسانية الرجل الأبيض وقدرته على نشر الحضارة في افريقية. كلمات أساسية: امبراطورية، حقيقة، مهمة حضارية، جشع، المحاباة.]

Introduction

The growing scepticism of Charlie Marlow during his journey to the "inner station" is caused essentially by awareness about the scale of corruption in which he is taking part. Comparing himself to an imposter, he acknowledges the lure of corruption "out there" in the wilderness. The aftermath of his journey leaves him with the double burden of redeeming himself and the whole imperial mission. The purpose of this article is to study Marlow's temptation and salvation from corruption throughout

his imperial journey to the Congo. For the purpose at hand, emphasis will be laid on the dynamics of corruption and their multiple manifestations such as the sabotage of Marlow's ship, the conspiracy against Kurtz and Marlow's use of nepotism in getting his job at the trading company.

The Uses and Abuses of the Idea of Empire

The idea of the civilising mission, when seen through the eyes of those Europeans who have never been to the imperial colonies, would find it quite impossible to distinguish between prejudices, bias and truth in relation to the nature of the European self.¹ For Marlow, the unfolding of the true essence of the European self can be done through work and experience. He believes that most of those people who have never been out there "can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means."² And this is what Conrad meant when he said "before the Congo I was just a mere animal."³ It was not until Conrad felt, heard and above all saw the imperial truth that he became aware about the relativity of his western knowledge.⁴ The controversy of what he witnessed during his journey to Africa, the bias of intellectual judgement and the hypocrisy of the colonizer has intensified his sceptical position vis-a-vis all that has been taught and learnt in Europe. Imperial propagandists have converted anthropological accounts into intellectual thresholds sanctified by all forms of dogmatic absolutisms. Coming to Congo, Marlow has expected to witness the material fulfilment of the idea of civilisation in Africa, the actual triumph of whiteness over blackness, yet the controversial truth he discovers during his journey makes him question the founding principles of western civilisation.

Corruption becomes visible in the paradoxes created by what these people are and what they do. While Conrad did have a chance "to find" himself, the pilgrims are doomed to remain wandering in the wilderness of their corrupt practices, losing all energy at works of human destruction and ivory hunting.. This is why when Marlow expected the arrival of rivets to repair his boat, "there came an invasion, an infliction, a visitation."⁵ The unexpected arrival of caravans of loot and robbery strikes Marlow as an "invasion." These caravans "came in sections during the next three weeks, each section headed by a donkey carrying a white man in new clothes and tan shoes, bowing from

that elevation right and left to the impressed pilgrims.”⁶ The whole scene recalls the story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves who usually come back to their cave loaded with stolen jewelry and money. The use of this oriental archetype is not accidental since the story itself is about stealing stolen treasures. The story of *Heart of Darkness* revolves around the same theme as the agents of the company plan to eliminate Kurtz after stealing all the ivory he has stolen. Mr. Kurtz, we are told by the Company's chief accountant, was “at present in charge of a trading-post, a very important one, in the true ivory-country, at ‘the very bottom of there. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together ...’”⁷ the Ali Baba paradigm is reinforced by the way Marlow describes the stuff they carry:

Five such instalments came, with their absurd air of disorderly flight with the loot of innumerable outfit shops and provision stores, that, one would think, they were lugging, after a raid, into the wilderness for equitable division. It was an inextricable mess of things decent in themselves but that human folly made look like the spoils of thieving.⁸

When it comes to the name of this band, the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, another archetype imposes itself on the thematic structure of the passage in question. The myth of the Eldorado recalls the bloody quest for treasure performed by the Spanish Conquistadors who ended murdering a great number of the Inca people and stealing their gold.

This mythical archetype reinforces the universality of imperial practices in their colonies. The parallelism between the Roman, French, Belgian and the Spanish empires becomes more accurate as Conrad highlights the contiguity of their practices. Like the “roman conquerors” whose “administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more,”⁹ the agents of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition are people whose ultimate wish is “to tear treasure out of the bowels of the land.”¹⁰ This form of violence is often exercised “with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.”¹¹ The impossibility to justify this kind of violence puts the whole imperial enterprise in moral and intellectual quandary. This form

of mercenary practices is part of an organised enterprise sponsored and administered by persons who have probably never put their feet on African lands. Marlow asserts that "Who paid the expenses of the noble enterprise I don't know; but the uncle of our manager was leader of that lot."¹²

The European Self and its Epistemological Predicament

In response to the epistemological crisis in western civilisation, a crisis responsible for the construction of a flawed conception of cultural, historical and prospective identity of Europe, Conrad stresses the pragmatic value of work in confirming, challenging or discovering knowledge about the self. The quest for the true essence of the European identity, an identity theoretically defined as an ideal that stands for "the best that has been thought and known,"¹³ is reconsidered in *Heart of Darkness* in such way as to dismiss all that has been said and believed about the position of the white race in regard to others. Marlow's paradoxical attitude towards work, which is both a subject of hatred and a valuable epistemological source, is an invitation to fight scepticism with an empirical knowledge. In his attempt to discover the truth about the self through work, Conrad becomes an empiricist who denies the universality of truth. Instead, he takes work to be an experimental enterprise that might get you in touch with "your own reality—for yourself, not for others."¹⁴ In his preface to the *Niger of the Narcissus*, Conrad asserts that the only universal truth is subjectivity.¹⁵ In other words, he denies the possibility of objectifying the sensual life of the individual, he refutes the prospect of sharing or conveying the truth of a given life experience. He also believes that the only forms of data that can be faithfully communicated are the resulting impressions. For a novelist to believe that "we live, as we dream, alone" is an implicit belief in the mystical nature of the "inner truth" that can never be apprehended nor disseminated because it is "hidden luckily, luckily."¹⁶

Confronted with a set of contradictory situations, Marlow becomes conscious about "an air of plotting about that station."¹⁷ The steamer supposed to be used in rescuing Kurtz has been sabotaged, a fact that Marlow failed to understand at first, yet to get his steamer out of "the bottom of the river" rivets are need in the work of repair. While there were "cases of them

down at the coast," the agent of the central station refused to provide the necessary rivets in an attempt to slow the rescue journey as long as possible, a delay that may be lethal for Kurtz.

Saving the Idea of the Empire from its corrupt Forms of Fulfilments

At the central station, blatant forms of administrative corruption, elimination plans and threats urge Marlow to become conscious that redemption is an inexorable step in his journey. It is not till the middle of this journey that he becomes aware that salvation and redemption are as much needed by Kurtz as by himself, a seaman who spent all his life sustaining his racial and cultural identity by a knowledge produced by imposters. Take for instance, the frame narrator's glorification of the "knights errant of the sea,"¹⁸ namely Sir Francis Drake, whose contribution to the empire has been acknowledged as decisive, is an invitation to reconsider the history of the empire. It sounds quite ironic to read in history books that Francis Drake has been knighted by the Queen Elizabeth on his ship while high scale murders and genocides have been committed by these agents throughout the colonies. One of Kurtz's last wishes is to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things."¹⁹ His conclusion, after months of psychological and physical torture in the Congo, is that the only redeeming fact is "the idea only."²⁰ The theoretical background of imperialism and the moral dimension in the name of which it has acquired its philanthropic aspirations are still sacred and divine in the eyes of both Conrad and his fictional surrogate Marlow if only the method are sound. The disagreement between the Russian, Marlow and the manager about the aims and means of the imperial enterprise attests to the existing war of methods. While the manger thinks that Kurtz's Method has "ruined the district"²¹, the Russian takes him for an immortal god who deserves to be worshipped blindly, yet, for Marlow, the kind of corruption he witnesses is more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows."²² This point of view is an expression of the relativity of cultural meanings and interpretations. Moreover, an act of savagery is a "positive relief" when performed on savage places and by savage people,

a fact that reflects the strong racial divide that thrills whites to accept the idea that these blacks who “howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces”²³ are just as human as white Europeans.

Kurtz's savage mutilation of the natives and his lust for ivory and power are set against his artistic, political and professional identity. This is how the Empire has attempted to redeem itself, a redemption that allows for a reincarnation of the European self within a countenance of innocence and philanthropy. Marlow's lie to the Intended near the end of the novel is no more a lie than a representation of the ironic situation in which the whole philanthropic pretences of the imperial enterprise are expressed, theorized and performed. On his arrival back to “the sepulchral city” again after his Congo journey, Marlow questions his social membership within a society “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.”²⁴

Conrad identifies the Western imperial impulse with the Original Sin as he impressionistically compares the Kongo River to a snake whose charming powers leads Marlow to follow in the footsteps of Eve. The seduction of Eve is the result of the phallic shape of the snake, a fact that points, comparatively to the effeminacy of Marlow and the whole imperial project, especially when it is administered by a queen like Victoria. The re-enactment of the typology of the Original Sin in *Heart of Darkness* defines Marlow's Odyssey as a theodicy relating the meaning of human destiny to the genesis of evil. This theodicy is also a redemptive journey according to Marlow who restrains himself from stepping over the edge leading to damnation. Marlow, succumbing to the seductive power of the Congo River, describes its mystical nature in a hyperbolic language that hovers over the edge of sea-monsters myths.

The Resurrection of Imperial Evil and ‘Eternal Return’ of Kurtz

Kurtz's promise of return at the end of the story is an instance of the possibility of his resurrection, a ‘second coming’ that would define life, in Mercia Eliade's term, as a “myth of the

eternal return.”²⁵ Furthermore, the Intended of Kurtz confirms the idea of his immortality when she states that “his examples”²⁶ will remain because “men looked up to him.”²⁷ She means that his followers will undertake his projects and fulfil his “vast plans”²⁸ since his words remained.

Marlow's vision of Kurtz on the stretcher, a vision where the latter opens “his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind,”²⁹ is the fulfilment of the prophecy he pronounces before his death. Yet, this return can never be considered as a form of redemption. His gothic apparition marks his return as an avenger who is eager to avenge himself from those who usurped his dream of fame, power and wealth. This is, indeed, a gothic resurrection of the repressed³⁰ or all the forms of crimes and corruption that the empire refuses to acknowledge.

The verbal charisma of Kurtz is invincible not only for the “crowd of obedient worshippers”³¹ but also for white people like the Russian and Marlow. For the Russian, Kurtz is a divinity that should be loved despite his menacing threats; Kurtz almost kills the Russian for hiding a small quantity of ivory he received once from a chief of a tribe. For Marlow, this form of resurrection has already taken place, having a “vision of him in the stretcher.”³² Like Christopher Marlow's Dr. Faustus, whose last prayers of repentance have not been sufficient of his salvation from eternal damnation, Kurtz last cries for salvation have been interrupted by the authority of the evil spirit haunting his soul, a voice that opts for the salvation of ivory and the rest of the plan. The double voice in which he speaks before his death dramatises the moral dilemma of the spiritual wrestling of Kurtz with some sort of an occult power, “an invading and vengeful rush”³³ of the wilderness. The power of the luring temptation of this wilderness fails to drug Marlow towards spiritual perdition. He decides to step back at the last moment.

The moral and physiological metamorphoses to which the doctor at the Company's Administration alluded to are related to some sort of a metaphysical evil, forcing white people like Freslaven, who is “the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs”³⁴ or Kurtz, who is a painter, a musician and a poet, to embrace utter forms of savagery. However, Marlow's

eventual discovery that when the European self, having no "policeman round,"³⁵ loses the sense of "restraint," evil manifests itself like a haunting spirit empowered by immanent as well as transcendental factors. About the moral corruption of the company's agents at the Central Station, Marlow becomes aware about an "air of plotting"³⁶ in the way the journey to the inner station is organised.

When Marlow decides to make recourse to his aunt to get his job as steamboat pilot in that Continental trading Company, he becomes an agent of corruption who latter on is shocked by the level of moral decay and degeneration in regards to "the work" performed by the imperial mission "out there." The use of relatives to get whatsoever privileges is a form of nepotism that abuses the principle of equality of chances in capitalistic society. Marlow gets his job because his aunt knows "the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with"³⁷ this means that the decay of the European soul starts before setting foot on the African continent. This form of decay feeds the administrative practices of the Company, whose administration rejects the job application of a man as experienced in seamanship as Marlow. To redeem this act of corruption, he evokes Freud's "Oedipus complex," where men say 'My dear fellow,' and do nothing, while a women is able to "destroy empires" with a whisper.³⁸ While his aunt "was determined to make no end of fuss to get him [me] appointed skipper of a river steamboat," he describes this form of behaviour as part of the "ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence."³⁹ This idea of predetermination sounds quite theodic in tone and meaning, especially when the narrator defines destiny as a "mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose."⁴⁰

Conclusion

In this work, we have tried to study aspects of corruption inside the imperial enterprise and how Charlie Marlow, the central character in the story, went through a quest journey of redemption. Starting his journey with nepotistic intervention of his aunt, who used her personal influence to get a job for him, he highlights the fact that administrative corruption has already started in Europe. Later on, he becomes aware about his boat has been the subject of an act of sabotage plotted by the

administrative stuff of the outer station for the purpose of aborting the rescue mission of Mr Kurtz. All these forms of corruptions entice Marlow to look for some redemptive fact of life that may allow him to restore some sense of dignity and respect for the idea of empire.

Notes

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- ⁴ Conrad, J., & Stanier, T.. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. Penguin Books. 1968 p. I-Vii
- ⁵ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999 p. 100
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 101
- ⁷ Ibid., , pp. 86-87
- ⁸ Ibid., p.101
- ⁹ Ibid., p.18
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.101
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 101
- ¹² Ibid., p.101
- ¹³ Russell, George William Erskine. *Matthew Arnold*. Germany: tradition GmbH, 1904.p.112
- ¹⁴ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999 p.99
- ¹⁵ Conrad, Joseph, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Read How You Want, 2008 pp. I-Vii
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.105
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.93
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.68
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.147
- ²⁰ Ibid., p.72
- ²¹ Ibid., p.134
- ²² Ibid., p.134
- ²³ Ibid., p.107
- ²⁴ Ibid., p.187
- ²⁵ Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*.USA. Princeton University Press, 2005.
- ²⁶ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999 p.156
- ²⁷ Ibid., 1999 p.156
- ²⁸ Ibid., p.156

²⁹ Ibid., p.89

³⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *Pouvoir de l'horreur*. Paris: Seuil 1980.18

³¹ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999 p.194

³² Ibid., p.194

³³ Ibid., p.153

³⁴ Ibid., p.74

³⁵ Ibid., p.122

³⁶ Ibid., p.93

³⁷ Ibid., p.19

³⁸ Conrad, Joseph. *Joseph Conrad Primary Non-Fictional. Sources*. Sarup & Sons, 2004.p.29

³⁹ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, Canada: Broadview Press, 1999 p.152

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.149