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Imperialism: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Jonah Raskin

Nearly forty years ago and long before the *Heart of Darkness* 'craze', Ford Madox Ford foretold the critical fate of Conrad's novella. He noted that it 'gained when it was written a certain vividness from its fierce lashings at the unspeakable crew that exploited the natives in the Congo,' and predicted that when 'imperialism' vanished, and by imperialism he meant 'spoliation of subject races', the 'masterpiece will then stand by its poetry.'¹ Although imperialism remains, by Ford's criteria if not by Lenin's and Hobson's, literary critics have neglected imperialism and have transformed the novella into a timeless myth about the exploration of the human soul and the metaphysical power of evil. These are only some of the more radical interpretations; there are others which, if they shed some light, still distort the novella, which gives us a concrete record of Belgian colonialism in the Congo and transforms a personal experience into a myth about imperial decadence. Despite D.H. Lawrence's warning, 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale', Conrad's own conception of his tale should not be overlooked. The idea of the novella, he told his publisher in 1899, was the 'criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa', and the 'subject is of our time distinctly,' though 'not topically treated'. The story was intended as a criticism of colonialists in Africa. Many of his friends agreed. Hugh Clifford, writer and colonial administrator, called it a 'study of the Congo', while Edward Garnett described it as 'an impression taken from life, of the conquest by the European whites of a certain portion of Africa, an impression in particular of the civilizing methods of a certain great European Trading Com-

¹ Ford Madox Ford, in *A Conrad Memorial Library: The Collection of George T. Keating* (Garden City, 1929), p. 82.

pany'.² Soon after Conrad's death in 1924 writers and critics began to interpret *Heart of Darkness* (1899) along different lines, focusing on particular images and scenes and not the novella as a whole. T.S. Eliot read it as a work about evil, life's bleak hopelessness, and moral emptiness, neglecting the 'affirmation' and 'moral victory' and transforming the 'horror' which refers particularly to the Belgian Congo to a horror of life in general. Somewhat later Bertrand Russell claimed that Conrad's point of view was 'the antithesis of Rousseau's,' and analysed *Heart of Darkness* as a tale of 'a rather weak idealist . . . driven mad by horror of the tropical forest and loneliness among savages.' The Conrad of Russell's making 'thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths.' Even André Gide, who read *Heart of Darkness* for the fourth time while on his Congo trip, and felt that 'This admirable book still remains profoundly true . . . There is no exaggeration in his picture; it is cruelly exact', was more interested in Conrad's descriptions of primitive culture and the jungle than in his record of Belgian colonialism.³ Eliot, Gide, and Russell, looking at Conrad's novella in the light of their own preoccupations and the concerns of their own time, detected important threads in the narrative and brought it new meaning, but they also transformed the tale and distracted readers from the 'heart of darkness', which was colonialism. As existentialism and Jungian archetypes have become critical tools, the novella has been disfigured; Conrad would hardly recognize his own hand.

Both the colonialism of the turn of the century and Conrad's image of it have been misread. Alberto Moravia, for instance, does both, for he claims that Conrad defined the 'old colonialism' in its 'picturesqueness' and with 'its decadent bungalows, its Victorian hotels, its slave-like bars, its dusty shops'. Yet the old colonialism was in its essentials never like this nor did Conrad describe it in this fashion. *Heart of Darkness* is anything but

² William Blackburn, ed., *Joseph Conrad, Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum* (Durham, 1958), pp. 36-7; Hugh Clifford, 'The Art of Joseph Conrad', *The Spectator*, 29 November 1902; Edward Garnett, 'Mr Conrad's New Book', *The Academy and Literature*, 6 December 1902.

³ Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory* (New York, 1963), p. 87; André Gide, *Travels in the Congo* (New York, 1930), p. 11 and *passim*. The book was dedicated 'To the memory of Joseph Conrad'.

picturesque and the world of colonialism Moravia imagines comes straight from Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un Spahi* (1881), a story of decadent French colonialism. Moravia claims that the colonialism Conrad described is fundamentally different from the 'neo-colonialism' of the world after 1945, but Graham Greene, whose novel *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) has affinities with *Heart of Darkness*, wrote in 1959 from West Africa that much 'had not changed since Conrad's day'. Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, relating Congolese events of the 1960s, finds it instructive to turn to King Leopold's Congo undertaking, recalling that it was 'an exercise in rapacity . . . presented to the public as a humanitarian enterprise'. 'The real tragedy of the missionaries of Katanga' he writes, '. . . is not so very far from the tragedy of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* – Kurtz who, towards the end, scrawled across his careful, high-minded thesis on the eradication of barbaric customs the three words: "Exterminate the brutes".' And finally it is important to see the novella in the context of colonialism, for Conrad believed that 'Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing', that a 'novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience'.⁴

Accounting for the genesis of *Heart of Darkness*, as for most masterpieces, is a complex affair. A number of influences were at work – some personal, some social and political. What is particularly interesting is that Conrad transformed a personal experience into a fiction of general historical and cultural significance. With little sense of strain, he moved from self to society; it was one of his eccentricities to mythologize an historical self, to place his own life at the heart of historical conflicts. He was the 'Polish Englishman', Easterner and Westerner; he saw himself at the centre of rival European nationalisms, and claimed that his 'was the only case of a boy of my nationality and antecedents taking a . . . standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations'. As a sailor he made of himself 'the last seaman of a sailing vessel', and boasted that if he lived long enough he would 'become a bizarre relic of a dead barbarism, a sort of monstrous antiquity, the only seaman . . . who had never gone into steam'. In the Congo he stood in a

⁴ Alberto Moravia, 'Images of Africa', *Partisan Review*, Fall 1963, p. 392; Graham Greene, *In Search of a Character* (London, 1961), pp. 15, 18, 48, 51; Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Mercy and Mercenaries', *The Observer* (London), 6 December 1964; and *To Katanga and Back* (London, 1962), p. 164.

border country which linked the primitive African world with the modern European. Conrad placed himself at and was fascinated by frontiers – mythical frontiers between Poland and England, civilization and savagery, industrialism and pastoralism, and these social and historical tensions were made the tensions of his novels. He believed that ‘the bitterest contradictions and the deadliest conflicts of the world are carried on in every individual breast capable of feeling and passion’. For him the conflicts he witnessed in the Belgian Congo illuminated the conflicts of the modern world; he had only to give them shape and significance, set them down on paper, to chronicle a phase of history. In writing out of his self he was mythologizing the contemporary world.

The times, too, worked on Conrad’s imagination and the memories of the Congo were recalled when the rapacity of Leopold’s enterprise began to be suspected and when both jingoism and anti-imperialism shocked England at the turn of the century. He had written of the colonial scene in his first novels but they convey little sense of its social framework. In 1897, with ‘An Outpost of Progress’, and then in 1899, with *Heart of Darkness*, he drew closer to the colonialism of his day. Beatrice Webb noted in her diary, 25 June 1897: ‘Imperialism in the air! – all classes drunk with sight seeing and hysterical loyalty’, and it was this atmosphere which bent Conrad’s art in the direction of colonialism in Africa, and which somewhat later provoked him to attack the ‘idiotic’ Boer War and to regret that ‘All that’s art, thought, idea will have to step back and hide its head before the intolerable war inanities’. We know from his friends and from his letters that the political issues of 1897–1902 returned him to his own experience with colonialism and impressed him with the belief that English readers needed urgently to see colonialism in Africa.⁵ There was a public interested in tales about the empire, about savages and white traders, and *Heart of Darkness*, written for *Blackwood’s Magazine* which specialized in ‘tales from the outposts’, answers that curiosity and reads in parts like the popular magazine fiction of the day. The descriptions of shouting and frantic blacks attacking Marlow’s steamship and the whites firing back, and of the beautiful Negro mistress of the white colonialist, satisfied readers looking for romance and adventure. But *Heart of Darkness*

⁵ Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership* (London, 1948), p. 140; G. J. Aubry, *Life and Letters of Joseph Conrad* (London, 1927), I, p. 284.

answers the romantic tales about Africa – like Rider Haggard's 'Black Heart and White Heart' – with the actualities of colonialism. It was born in part because there was a public which wanted avidly to read of Africa but it gave them a Congo they knew little about.

Much of what happened to Conrad in the Congo is lost or confused. He gave different versions of his voyage and it is suggested that the actual journey was merged with accounts of other African travellers – those of Mungo Park, Bruce, Burton, Speke, and Livingstone – which Conrad had read and which lingered in his memory. As a child he had read about African explorers and from their stories constructed a romantic world of exploration, but when he finally went to the Congo it put 'an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams!' However, Conrad's *Diary*, which he kept from 13 June to 1 August 1890, and his letters from the Congo give us some hints. The *Diary* has few similarities with the finished story, although both depict a journey up the Congo River, and passages from it which would have depicted the Congo Conrad encountered were omitted from the novella. *Heart of Darkness* has no mention, as the *Diary* has, of Roger Casement, no description of the Hatton and Cookson English factory, no packing of ivory in cases for shipment, no visits to African market towns, plantations, or missions. The Congo Conrad saw in 1890 with its factories, plantations, missionaries, and commercial firms was a more highly organized and 'civilized' region than the Congo of *Heart of Darkness*, which is presented in the rudimentary stages of development. Correspondingly, the *Diary* betrays no horror of the jungle or fascination for the primitive on anything like the scale of *Heart of Darkness*; nor is there the same degree of bitterness and anguish, though occasionally Conrad expressed his hatred of the Congo and the colonial enterprise. On 5 July he wrote, 'Getting jolly well sick of this fun', and on 24 June that the 'Prominent characteristic of the social life here' was 'people speaking ill of each other'. However, he was pleased with many of the representatives of European colonialism and found the Mission of Sutili 'eminently civilized'. Roger Casement, whose reports exposed Belgian atrocities in the Congo and were used by Mark Twain in his satire – *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905) – was highly praised. Nearly fifteen years later he changed his mind about Casement and characterized him as 'a limp personality'. Conrad called him a 'Protestant Irishman, pious too. But so was Pizarro',

and suggested that 'There is a touch of the Conquistador in him', and that 'some particle of Las Casas' soul had found refuge in his indefatigable body'. Conrad interpreted history by drawing analogies between the past and the present; hence the Casement-Las Casas parallel. The empire builders of the twentieth century were the 'modern Conquistadores'; King Leopold was Pizarro and Thys Cortez.⁶ He also believed there was an important analogy between the Roman and modern European empires and the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, which is meant to put us in the appropriate historical and psychological setting, describes the civilized Roman colonialist in England, his confrontation with British savages, and his 'disease, exile, and death'. One of the ironies of *Heart of Darkness* is that the modern colonialist repeats the historical experience of the Roman empire-builder, though his exile and death is enacted in the Congo. The destruction of imperial societies, from the fall of Rome, and perhaps before, was attributed to savage invaders, to the barbarian inroads on civilization, and Conrad gave the myth modern coinage when he depicted the modern *imperium* endangered by African savages. In the Spanish conquest of the Americas, too, he saw parallels with the Belgian conquest of the Congo, and while Conrad in 1903 saw Casement as the modern Las Casas, and suspected him of a ruthlessness camouflaged by piety, in 1890 he thought him straightforward, intelligent, and sympathetic. The earlier Conrad believed the rhetoric of colonialism, while the later suspected that greed and thirst for power lay behind claims to progress and civilization. The novella recreates Conrad's bewildered feelings, his sense that he is kept 'away from the truth of things', and that everything in the Congo is 'unreal' – 'the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern', its 'talk' and 'government'. Belgian colonialism was particularly noted for its outward show of philanthropy; Leopold claimed in 1897 that the task of State agents 'in the Congo is noble and elevated. It is incumbent upon them to carry on the work of . . . civilization'. Many people, as Dr O'Brien reminds us, were taken in until E.D. Morel, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Casement revealed the true state of affairs. Conan Doyle believed that 'the most deadly of all the many evils which has arisen from Leopold's mission to Africa', was that 'the words of piety and philanthropy . . . cloaked . . . dreadful deeds'. Conrad agreed, and in *The*

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 325.

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Inheritors (1901), written in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford, he presented a slightly veiled picture of colonialism in the Congo: 'revolting to see without a mask was that falsehood which had been hiding under the words that for ages had spurred men to noble deeds, to self-sacrifice, to heroism. What was appalling was the sudden perception that all the traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience, had been committed to the upholding of a gigantic and atrocious fraud'. While most Europeans still believed those words, Conrad revealed their hypocrisy in *Heart of Darkness* and removed the 'pretty fictions' surrounding the *Domaine Privé*, well before Casement and Morel.⁷

More enlightening than the *Diary* are Conrad's letters, for most of them were written later than the *Diary* and by that time he had seen through the rhetoric and was disenchanted and depressed. This experience, this discovery of exploitation, commercialism, and inhumanity which lay behind the progressive claims of empire builders, had a profound impact on his understanding of society. He came to believe that the true nature of European society was revealed in the colonies (and also in revolutions) and in his fiction he focuses on men in the tropics and on revolutionaries. It is not accidental but rather the outcome of his total outlook that his best novel, *Nostramo* (1904), in which he presents an image of the modern world, brings these two concerns into focus in its portrayal of revolution in Latin America. The early Marx noted that 'The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes' in the 'colonies, where it goes naked'; more recently Sartre noted that 'the strip-tease of our humanism' took place in the tropics, and that 'In the colonies the truth stood naked'. Conrad is a long way from Marx, Marxism, and Sartre, but he shares the notion that in the colonies one saw the truth about Western society. Many twentieth century writers agreed with Conrad, and the notion that western society was stripped naked in the colonies was expressed by English as well as continental writers. E.M. Forster, Graham Greene, Joyce Cary, and Doris Lessing focused on India and Africa for personal reasons, certainly, but also because they felt that in the colonies the

⁷ Leopold is quoted in Roger Casement, *The Black Diaries*, ed., P. Singleton-Gates and M. Girodias (London, 1959), p. 83; Conan Doyle's statement is in his Introduction to E.D. Morel's *Great Britain and the Congo* (London, 1909).

important dramas of their culture were being enacted. Conrad – and Kipling too – were the literary pathfinders. In a prefatory essay to *The African Witch* Joyce Cary wrote that in Africa ‘powerful, often subconscious motives’, come to the surface. ‘Basic obsessions which in Europe hide themselves under all sorts of decorous scientific or theological or political uniforms, are there seen naked in bold and dramatic action’. V.S. Prichett believes that Conrad’s example is still valid and notes that ‘The great English subject . . . which includes a picture of society, lies outside England, simply because English life itself has for so long been parasitic on life abroad and does not wish to recognize the fact’.⁸ From his Congo experience Conrad also came to believe that it was his task as a novelist to unmask society, to look below its surface to discern its essential character, and when we turn from the *Diary* to the letters we see a Conrad who had discerned a rapacious colonialism. By September 1890 he was sorry he had come to the Congo. ‘Everything is repellent to me here’, he wrote, ‘Men and things, but especially men’. He described the manager as a ‘common ivory-dealer with sordid instincts’, and thought of himself as one of the Congo’s ‘white slaves’. At first he grumbled about the stupidity of packing ivory in crates, but gradually he came to attack the colonial set-up as a whole, and sneered at that ‘big (or fat?) banker who rules the roost at home’.⁹ Some of his letters are lost, but those from his uncle Bobrowski reveal Conrad’s own dilemma. We can deduce what he wrote to his uncle from Bobrowski’s sense that his nephew was ‘on the frontier between civilization and savagery’, and from his remark, ‘I see from your last letter that you feel a deep resentment towards the Belgians for exploiting you so mercilessly’.¹⁰

Although *Heart of Darkness* is rooted in autobiography it goes beyond it. Conrad’s indignation at being a white slave and exploited was channelled into an art which indicted Belgian exploitation in the Congo, and his sense of being on the ‘frontier

⁸ Karl Marx, ‘The Future Results of the British Rule in India’, in *On Colonialism* (Moscow), p. 88; J.P. Sartre, Preface to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, 1963), pp. 7, 21; V.S. Prichett, ‘Conrad’, in *The Working Novelist* (London, 1965), p. 195.

⁹ J.A. Gee, Paul J. Sturm, eds., *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska 1890–1920* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 15–17.

¹⁰ H. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad in the Congo* (Boston, 1926), p. 45; Z. Najder, ed., *Conrad’s Polish Background* (London, 1964), p. 133.

between civilization and savagery' was transformed into a myth about the barbarism of colonialism. In turning experience into art he ignored some of his experiences but focused on others to give significance; a good example of this is the description of the drum in *Heart of Darkness*. On 4 July 1890 Conrad noted in his *Diary*: 'At night when the moon rose I heard shouts and drumming in distant villages. Passed a bad night'. The description of the drumming takes on great import, for Marlow's reaction to the drumming indicates European man's links with primitive man. 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar'. For Conrad's audience the notion was still fairly revolutionary, for Charles Kingsley had supported the colonial exploits of Rajah Brooke – the extermination of the Dyaks – on the ground that theirs was not human life but 'beast-life'. 'These Dyaks,' he wrote, 'have put on the image of the beast, and they must take the consequences'. Through similar glasses Thackeray looked at the Negro and wrote, 'They are not my men & brethren, these strange people . . . Sambo is not my man & my brother'.¹¹ Conrad's assertion – quite startling for most Victorians – that European man was linked with African man had more than psychological implications. When Marlow responds to the African drums and acclaims his kinship he asks us to remember that the Africans are human beings and not criminals, enemies, or beasts. With this understanding Belgian exploitation would be seen for what it was, man's inhumanity to man, not, as many believed, to a sub-human species. One of Conrad's characters who acts as his spokesman tells us that when you realize that dark-skinned peoples are 'human beings . . . you see the injustice and cruel folly of what before, appeared just and wise'. It is a mark of the maturity of Conrad's art that he awakened his readers to the horrors of Belgian colonialism on the basis of broad emotional feelings – portraying that colonialism as inhumanity to man and as a quest for wealth which destroyed life. The epigraph to the *Heart of Darkness* volume, '. . . but the Dwarf answered: "No, something human is dearer to me than the wealth of the world"', indicates the sentiment pervading *Heart of Darkness*.

The drum image demonstrates how parts of the *Diary* were

¹¹ R.B. Martin, unpublished Oxford thesis, *An Edition of the Correspondence and Private Papers of Charles Kingsley 1819–1856*, p. 189; Gordon N. Ray, *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom* (London, 1958), p. 216.

incorporated in the tale, and also how Conrad found concrete images to express the important aspects of and provide a critique of Belgian colonialism. Henry James affirmed in an essay which Conrad admired and referred to, that 'the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel', and that 'Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive'. The finest parts of *Heart of Darkness* exemplify this, for Conrad creates 'the air of reality' with images which are at once concrete and typical. 'This art of vivid essential record', which offers a 'whole wide context of particularities', gives us a comprehensive picture of colonialism.¹² We see the trading company's European offices dominating the city and imbuing the population with pride in 'an over-sea empire' which will 'make no end of coin by trade'. Marlow's aunt, infected with the rhetoric of colonialism, tells him that he will be 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'. In Europe, too, there is the scientific and cultural apparatus which accompanied colonialism, anthropologists riding the coat-tails of trading companies, and the societies concerned with savage customs.

On his way to the Congo, Marlow sees a man-of-war shelling the African coast. In earlier novels Conrad had used the image of the gunboat firing into the jungle, but without the significance that it achieves here. One Polish reader asked Conrad why the ship was French and he replied: 'If I say that the ship which bombarded the coast was French, it is simply because she was French. I remember her name: le Seignelay. It happened during the war (!) in Dahomey. What follows could refer just as well to a ship of a different country'. The image is compelling because it is a particular ship and because, as Conrad understood, 'it could refer just as well to a ship of a different country'. Rimbaud, who spent eleven years as an African trader and shared Conrad's feelings about the colonial world, spoke of the European governments which 'squandered millions on these infernal and desolate shores', of the 'millions flung away' which 'brought nothing but wars and disasters of all kinds'; it is the same attitude which informs Conrad's image of the man-of-war.¹³ The conflict between man and

¹² Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The House of Fiction*, Leon Edel, ed. (London, 1957), pp. 33, 38; F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York, 1963), pp. 174, 176.

¹³ Najder, *op. cit.*, p. 242; Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud in Abyssinia* (Oxford, 1937), p. 105.

nature to 'tear treasure out of the bowels of the land' is central to the novella and the man-of-war incident gives it a specific reference. On the shores of Africa the 'French had one of their wars going on', and 'In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water', the ship is 'incomprehensible, firing into a continent'. Marlow tells us that 'There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding', and he feels the same as he watches the building of the Congo railroad. Work on this railroad was in progress when Conrad was in the Congo but was not completed until 1898, when he began to write *Heart of Darkness*. It is likely that news of its completion awakened memories of its early stages. The Congo *Diary* contains no mention of the railroad, which follows the route Conrad took, and its prominent place in the novella indicates his increased social and political understanding. Gide saw the railroad in the 1920s and claimed that although it had cost much human life it was a worthwhile and noble accomplishment. The mid- and late Victorians did not seem to realize that human beings were involved in building railroads; a writer for *The Quarterly Review* claimed in 1898 that 'In Africa, as in all half-savage countries, the railroad is the best instrument for the introduction of civilization'. Earlier, Froude had claimed that 'Civilization spreads with railroad speed', and that notion was widely expressed and believed. In 1889, the year the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Congo* was founded, Thys asserted: 'friends of humanity will find that the Congo railway is the means *par excellence* of allowing civilization to penetrate rapidly and surely into the unknown depths of Africa'. In focusing on the building of the railroad, 'the revolutionary machine of the age', Conrad depicted one of the most important aspects of colonialism, for the railroad, as Roger Casement noted, was central to exploitation of the Belgian Congo.¹⁴ To Froude, Thys, and the magazine writers who celebrated the railroad as an instrument of progress and civilization, Conrad gave a fierce reply. For Conrad the railroad was a destroyer of nature, an instrument for exploitation and oppression, for the violent destruction of primitive communities. Like the gunboat shelling the African continent, the building of the railroad is depicted as a

¹⁴ Unsigned article, 'England and the Soudan', *The Quarterly Review*, 1898, p. 572; James A. Froude, 'England and Her Colonies', in *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, vol. II (London, 1871), p. 160; Ruth Slade, *King Leopold's Congo* (London, 1962), p. 75; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964), p. 180.

struggle between the white man and nature which slowly destroys the African. Conrad tells us of the black labourers: '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 allowed to crawl away and rest'. We see the railroad chain-gang at close range: 'Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets of full earth on their heads . . . I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain'.

It isn't only gunboats and railroads that we see but the people involved in Belgian colonialism, from the chain-gang to the company manager. The Africans portrayed in this early section are real individuals and not merely noble savages or devils. Marlow meets an armed African in uniform watching over labourers, a primitive rebel stubbornly resisting the white colonialists by sabotaging their efforts, and a surly young African whose master allows him to insult other whites. It is a world in which Belgians and Africans are both victims and victimizers, corrupting and corrupted. There is the company accountant in starched collar and clean linen who tells Marlow: 'When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages - hate them to the death'. We follow the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, its grimy explorers, Negro carriers and mangy donkeys going into the wilderness to look for ivory on the pretext of exploration. The relationship between scientific exploration and the quest for wealth fascinated Conrad; he noted that 'The voyages of the early explorers were prompted by an acquisitive spirit, the idea of lucre in some form, the desire of trade or the desire of loot, disguised in more or less fine words'. And in fact he envisaged history as an interweaving of the noble and ignoble, exploration linked with exploitation, progress and civilization tied to reaction and savagery.

Having provided this wealth of detail, these concrete images which generalize about Belgian colonialism, Conrad created Kurtz to symbolize the fundamental conflicts and the decadence of colonialism. 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz', who is, in Professor Lionel Trilling's words, 'a progressive and a liberal . . . at once the most idealistic and the most practically successful of all

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the agents of the Belgian exploitation of the Congo'.¹⁵ Kurtz had come to Africa as 'an emissary of pity, and science, and progress', but in his quest for ivory he is corrupted, his humane values abandoned. Furthermore, his depravity is described in terms of his savage atrocities, his participation in primitive rituals, and his deification in African society. With Kurtz we leave in large part the actual world and enter the mythic world Conrad created about the Belgian Congo.

Conrad's myth about moribund colonialism rested on the notion that there was, as in the case of Rome, an inescapable and critical relationship between imperial decadence and savagery. The colonial power confronted and infected by barbarism becomes decivilized and disintegrated; this myth developed from Conrad's sense that he was in 1890 on the frontier between civilization and savagery, and from his scrutiny of the pervasive and endless struggle between blacks and whites, on chain-gangs and in jungle outposts. It is a moral myth, too, for it details the evils which befall the civilized man when he transgresses against barbarism, when he exploits primitive man and nature. Kurtz has robbed the wilderness of ivory, has 'kicked the very earth to pieces', and in turn 'the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion'. He has exploited and exterminated primitive man (primitive in the sense of natural and pre-social as well as specifically Congolese), and they avenge themselves by working his corruption: the torturer becomes victim.

Conrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski wrote in his memoirs that 'The history of mankind is a history of the struggle between barbarism and civilization', and Conrad interpreted history in similar fashion. His father had used the concept with particular reference to Poland and Russia, designating Russia, of course, as the barbarian. Conrad himself first used it in reference to colonialism, but in the twentieth century he saw European politics too as a conflict between barbarism and civilization. He traced many similarities between the Congo and Poland, for both the struggle of Polish nationalists against Russians and Germans and the war between Belgian colonialists and Congo blacks were seen as part of the continual struggle between barbarism and civilization. Conrad's Polish nationalism, his hatred of Russian 'imperialists',

¹⁵ Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture* (London, 1966), p. 20.

shaped his hostility to colonialism, and his experience in the Congo stiffened his belief in the need for Poland's independence from the Empires of Germany and Russia. He described Poland as a distant outpost of western civilization placed in the midst of hostile camps, whose historical role was 'defender of civilization against the dangers of barbarism'. The Germans were a 'race planted in the middle of Europe, assuming in grotesque vanity the attitude of Europeans amongst effete Asiatics or barbarous niggers; and, with a consciousness of superiority, freeing their hands from all moral bonds'. Conrad's anti-colonialism derived in large measure from his nineteenth-century nationalism, from his feeling that Poland was victimized by European empires; he sympathized with 'barbarous niggers' like the Congolese because of his experience as a Pole. And he looked at continental political and economic issues with the insight of a man who had seen colonialism in Africa.¹⁶

There were, as well, other elements in Conrad's myth about civilization and barbarism. He believed that 'There are some situations where the barbarian and the, so-called, civilized man meet upon the same ground,' and whether one lived in the tropics or in Western Europe one saw 'the same manifestations of love and hate and sordid greed chasing the uncertain dollar in all its multifarious and vanishing shapes'. In all cultures, social inequality was maintained by physical force, and Conrad spoke of that 'toleration of strength, that exists, infamous and irremediable, at the bottom of all hearts, in all societies; whenever men congregate'

Central to the analogies between barbarian, savage, and civilized communities was the concept of fetishism. Anthropologists of the time were concerned with 'savage survivals' and Conrad similarly looked for the fetishes of modern society. Although he believed that 'there is no real religion without a little fetishism', religion was relatively unimportant for him as a fetish, for he believed that Christianity was dying and that new secular religions were taking its place. As the old gods died man made new ones and this process was common to primitive and civilized men. In *Nostramo* the Indians who work the San Tomé mine 'invested it with a protecting and invincible virtue as though it were a fetish made by their own hands', and Conrad adds that the Indians in this respect 'did not

¹⁶ Najder, *op. cit.*, p. 8; Aubry, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 237; Joseph Conrad, 'The Crime of Partition', 'A Note on the Polish Problem', and 'Poland Revisited', in *Notes on Life and Letters* (London, 1949).

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differ appreciably from the rest of mankind which puts infinite trust in its own creations'. There is a wide variety of fetishes in this book: an Italian revolutionary does not believe in saints or in 'priest's religion', but 'Liberty and Garibaldi were his divinities'; an American financier 'looks upon his own God as a sort of influential partner, who gets his share of the profits in the endowment of churches', and that too, Conrad says, is a 'sort of idolatry'. And most important is the 'religion of silver and iron', for in modern society wealth was the ultimate fetish. The deification of wealth, political power, and secular values was an indication that man's creations assumed power over him, that man was estranged from the world around him. The notion is important in other novels and is decisive in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad focuses on the fetishes of empire and on the deification of 'efficiency'.

In *Heart of Darkness* there is the religion of ivory as well, the ivory to which the white traders pray. In Kurtz the notion of fetishism is transformed into a symbol, for having worshipped ivory he is turned into 'an animated image of death carved out of old ivory'. Kurtz stands at the 'heart of darkness' for he has become a god worshipped by the Africans and thus totally dehumanized. This is a direct comment on the colonialist world, for many had written, as Kurtz did, that whites must appear 'in the nature of supernatural beings . . . with the might as of a deity', to 'exert a power for good'.

Kurtz is also a decadent colonialist because he takes part in the rituals of savage society. Conrad attempts to distinguish Kurtz's savagery from that of the Africans, and feels that theirs 'was a positive relief' and 'had a right to exist', while Kurtz's is abominable: savages have a right to be savage but not civilized men. However, he fails to distinguish successfully between the two, and the implication of the tale is that the colonialist becomes decadent and corrupt because of contact with savages. Kurtz is decadent literally because he becomes like the Africans, and figuratively because 'powers of darkness' control him and his is the 'heart of darkness'. Conrad held this notion at the same time that he sympathized with and identified with the Africans, and this conflict links up with a central ambiguity of the novella, for it describes evil both in terms of society and in terms of racial and pre-social forces. In fact, Conrad believed that blacks were a corrupting force, and in his earlier novels he described savage women and

Negroes demoralizing white men. He knew little about Negroes and one unfortunate experience in particular framed his notion of evil blacks, for he always remembered 'an enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti' who crystallized his 'conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, manifested in the human animal'. Such notions were in part derived from books and probably from conceptions widespread of the time. In 1898 he was reading Max Nordau, who suggested in *Degeneration* (1895) that the degenerate 'renews intellectually the type of the primitive man of the most remote Stone Age'.¹⁷ Conrad did not agree with Nordau that symbolist artists were decadent, but he did agree that savagery and decadence in the modern world went together. Both writers criticized evils by identifying them as barbaric. In *The Secret Agent* (1907), where the concept of degenerates plays an important part and the characters discuss Professor Lombroso, the Italian criminologist to whom *Degeneration* was dedicated, Conrad indicates the depravity of an anarchist by describing 'the negro type of his face'. And in *Nostramo* he used the suggestion of Negro features to indicate the baseness of the revolutionaries, informing us that their appearance argued 'the presence of some negro blood'. In these novels the fault is slight – in *Heart of Darkness* it is critical. Contemporary reviewers saw the novella as a realistic and not a mythic account of the fall of the colonialist, and praised Conrad's portrait of 'demoralization', 'degeneracy', and 'decivilization'. Very few quarrelled with his sociology of colonialism, his notion that men's very lives were 'rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds', that society permitted men 'to live on condition of being machines', but that when man was freed from society in the tropics and confronted 'primitive man and primitive nature', his life was disrupted and demoralized. Society was necessary to keep in check man's barbarism – without it, as in the presence of Africans in the tropics, his innate savagery would be rekindled. G.P. Gooch in *The Heart of the Empire* (1901) claimed that 'Neo-Imperialism' demonstrated that 'when men are far from civilized society and can do what they like, they tend to do their worst rather than their best', and he urged those who wanted verification to read 'Stevenson's vivid stories of Samoan life'. Not only did colonial man do his worst but he became a savage too; Benjamin Kidd in *The Control of the Tropics* (1898) argued that

¹⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London, 1895), p. 556.

when the white man was separated from society and placed in the jungle 'he tends to sink slowly to the level around him'. The argument was used in disputes about colonial policy, about the possibility of colonizing Central Africa. Those who predicted man's decivilization said 'no' to plans for settling the heart of Africa, and there were frequent magazine articles with such titles as 'Is Central Africa Worth Having?' Edward Dicey, arguing against colonialism, wrote that since there was 'no better evidence than that to be found in Mr Rider Haggard's romances for the belief that Central Africa contains vestiges of any civilization', England should stay out.¹⁸ Political writers and economists relied on novels and tales, like those of Haggard and Stevenson, for political arguments. Edward Tylor noted that 'In our time, West Africa is still a world of fetishes . . . So strong is the pervading influence, that the European in Africa is apt to catch it from the Negro, and himself, as the saying is "become black".' The author of the popular *Thinking Black* suggested that 'the fearful fact must be faced that all things European degenerate in Central Africa', and that 'Africa invades you . . . the Dark Continent flooding your insular English being at every pore'.¹⁹ *Heart of Darkness* could have provided as strong a case as any against colonizing Central Africa.

The argument was not confined to Central Africa. In 1899 Herbert Spencer indicted empire-building as a whole when he claimed that 'the white savages of Europe are overrunning the dark savages everywhere . . . the European nations are vying with one another in political burglaries'; and that Europe had 'entered upon an era of social cannibalism in which the stronger nations are devouring the weaker'. Spencer expanded his ideas in an essay, 'Re-Barbarization', asserting that in the war atmosphere of the late 1890s the 'partially dormant instincts of the savage' were aroused. He felt that 'savage tribes' and modern *empires* 'show that the cardinal trait of fighting peoples is the subjection of man to man and group to group'. Spencer was particularly interested in the function of culture in the savage imperial society and noted that 'Literature, journalism, and art, have all been aiding in this process of re-barbarization'. Popular fiction appealed to 'latent savagery' and the poet laureate and Rudyard Kipling were

¹⁸ Edward Dicey in *The Nineteenth Century*, September 1890, p. 494.

¹⁹ *Primitive Culture*, vol. II (London, 1871), p. 145; Daniel Crawford, *Thinking Black* (London, 1912), pp. xv, 94.

especially guilty in his eyes for the 'recrudescence of barbaric ambitions, ideas and sentiments'. He concluded that 're-barbarization' went hand in hand with 'the movement towards Imperialism'.²⁰ J.A. Hobson also singled out Kipling for attack, claiming that his poetry 'expresses honestly the savage passion of the mob-spirit of this country'. In *The Psychology of Jingoism* (1901), Hobson examined the cultural climate in England at the time of the Boer War: 'Jingoism is a particular form of . . . primitive passion'. The 'Jingo spirit . . . disables a nation from getting outside itself', and this trait was the 'quintessence of savagery'. He distinguished jingoism from primitive lust, writing that 'Jingoism is essentially a product of "civilized" communities', but claimed that 'For purposes of the present study . . . the hypothesis of reversion to a savage type of nature is distinctly profitable'. He noted a fetishism in English society, for there was a 'reversion to belief in England's God, a barbarian tribal deity who fights with and for our big battalions'. H.G. Wells saw a similar trait in figures like 'Britannia' whom he called the English 'tribal gods' of the nineteenth century.²¹

The notion that colonialism and imperialism were barbarisms and jingoism a savage survival was not the property of social theorists and sociologists alone. Like Spencer, the novelist George Gissing believed that a time of re-barbarization was coming and he noted in 1900 that 'A period of struggle for existence between the nations seems to have begun', and that it might 'very well result in a long period of semi-barbarism'. Earlier, in 1885, he had written that the 'throat-cutting in Africa' was 'hateful' and that the 'way in which it is written about, shows the completest barbarism still existing under the surface . . . The masses of men are still living in a state of partially varnished savagery'. In *The Whirlpool* (1897) and *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894), he attacked the savagery of jingoism and colonialism.²²

Heart of Darkness was written when these ideas were wide-

²⁰ H. Spencer, quoted in H. Ausubel, *In Hard Times* (London, 1960), p. 255; 'Re-Barbarization', and 'Barbaric Art' in Spencer's *Facts and Comments* (London, 1902), pp. 122-33, 187.

²¹ J.A. Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism* (London, 1901), pp. 40, 2, 12, 20, 78, 79; H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, revised edition (London, 1961), p. 978.

²² Arthur C. Young, ed., *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz 1887-1903* (London, 1961), p. 284; Algernon and Ellen Gissing, eds. *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family* (London, 1927), p. 152.

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spread, and Conrad used them to show the decadence of Belgian colonialism in the Congo. In portraying Kurtz worshipping ivory, being worshipped as a god, taking part in savage rituals, and controlled by Africans, he translated a body of commonly shared knowledge into a myth. Like Hobson, who claimed that Jingoism was a particular form of primitive passion, Conrad defined Belgian colonialism as a savage force. At a time when Kipling, in the short story 'At the Tomb of his Ancestors', for example, celebrated the white man as a god before native populations, and believed that tribal values were important for the modern empire, Conrad revealed the bankruptcy of these notions. It is in this sense that he takes his place beside anti-colonialists like Hobson and Spencer, for although he did not share their sociology or economics, he too saw jingoism and colonialism as re-barbarization. As a concrete record of Belgian colonialism, *Heart of Darkness* takes its place alongside the works of E.D. Morel and Roger Casement. As a myth it rallies moral indignation against colonialism.

At times Conrad's myth gets out of hand and he would have done well to remember Hobson's point that the colonialist was not corrupted by the native, but by the colonial situation, through contact with 'merchants, planters, engineers, and overseers'. And this, of course, is the sort of corruption we see in the early section of the novella. As fiction, Conrad's myth was harmless, but in the political world, where many arguments rested on the notion that in Africa the white man became savage, it could be dangerous. Perhaps, too, Conrad was not careful enough with his analogies between civilization and savagery and his myth had its distorting effect. Edward Tylor spoke to this point when he wrote of comparisons between civilized and savage standards and criticized those who claimed that the evils of civilization were savage. 'But it is not savagery', he wrote, but rather 'broken-down civilization'.²³

If myth gets out of hand and if Conrad was at times unsure about the nature of imperial decadence, he provided a detailed and comprehensive picture of the Belgian Congo. *Heart of Darkness* deserves, certainly, to be read for its poetry, but it demands to be read for its images of Africa, its moral condemnation of a colonialism which was, in Conrad's own words, 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'.

²³ Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. I (New York, 1833), p. 42.