3

CEDRIC WATTS

'Heart of Darkness'

Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' is a rich, vivid, layered, paradoxical, and problematic novella or long tale; a mixture of oblique autobiography, traveller's yarn, adventure story, psychological odyssey, political satire, symbolic prose-poem, black comedy, spiritual melodrama, and sceptical meditation. It has proved to be 'ahead of its times': an exceptionally proleptic text. First published in 1899 as a serial in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, it became extensively influential during subsequent decades, and reached a zenith of critical acclaim in the period 1950–75. During the final quarter of the twentieth century, however, while its influence became even more pervasive, the tale was vigorously assailed on political grounds by various feminist critics and by some left-wing and Third World commentators.[1] In this essay, I discuss the novella's changing fortunes in 'the whirligig of time' (Feste's phrase from *Twelfth Night*) and argue that even now it retains some capacity to criticize its critics.

I

The phrase 'ahead of its times' first needs defence. What put it *ahead* of them was that it was intelligently *of* them: Conrad addressed issues of the day with such alert adroitness and ambiguity that he anticipated many twentieth-century preoccupations.

In some obvious respects, 'Heart of Darkness' belongs to the late nineteenth century. This is a tale of travel, of adventurous exploration, of an 'outpost of progress'. It draws on the kind of material made popular by Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, R. L. Stevenson, and numerous lesser writers: appropriate fiction for the heyday of imperialism. It is a story of a journey into 'darkest Africa', a region given publicity not only by the explorations of H. M. Stanley but also by the Berlin Conference of 1885, which had recognized the existence of the 'Congo Free State' as the personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium. It was an era of intense inter-

national rivalry for colonial possessions. There was widespread interest in the political, moral, and psychological challenges afforded to Europeans by African colonization. The tale dealt with atavism and decadence, at a time when these topics had been given currency by Zola and the 'Naturalists', by Cesare Lombroso (the criminologist) and Max Nordau (author of *Degeneration*), and by the controversies over the Aesthetic Movement. Nordau, for instance, claimed that civilization was being corrupted by the influence of people who were morally degenerate; and his account of the 'highly-gifted degenerate', the charismatic yet depraved genius, may have influenced Conrad's depiction of Kurtz. A larger matter still was that the popularization of Darwin's theory of evolution had raised widespread anxieties about human nature, its origins, and its future. Finally, the popularization of Lord Kelvin's Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy, had suggested that eventually, as the sun cooled in the heavens, life would become utterly extinct on this planet, which would be doomed to ultimate darkness. In his tale, Conrad addressed or alluded to all these issues.[2] Characteristically, he had combined popular elements with highly sophisticated analysis. The popular elements included topical allusions, an adventurous narrative, and a range of exotic material. The treatment was challengingly versatile and oblique.

In 'Heart of Darkness', a story is told by a British gentleman to other British gentlemen. The convention of 'the tale within the tale' was familiar and, at that time, particularly appropriate. Among writers of the era whose works Conrad appreciated, it was used by Turgenev, Maupassant, James, Kipling, Crane, Cunninghame Graham, and Wells. This convention was not only a reflection of the social customs of an age of gentlemen's clubs and semi-formal social gatherings at which travellers would meet to compare notes and exchange yarns about foreign experiences. It also emphasized the interplay of personal and social experience, perhaps dramatizing relativism of perception, limitations of knowledge, or conflicts between private and public codes. From its very title onwards ('Heart of Darkness' invokes contradictory notions), the tale is full of paradoxes. And the 1890s were a decade in which paradoxes, whether small or large, abounded in literature. They occurred not merely in the quotable epigrams of Oscar Wilde but in the large-scale paradoxes in the works of, for instance, Samuel Butler, Edward Carpenter, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, and Wilde again (in his essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', for example). Here ideological contradiction gained rhetorical compression. Previously, Baudelaire had declared that nature provided 'forests of symbols',[3] and, in an era when symbolism in prose and verse commanded fresh interest, Conrad was able to voice his paradoxes not only through explicit statement but also

through ambiguous images and many-faceted symbols. The narrative of 'Heart of Darkness' offers, for example, the following paradoxes:

> Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement to be vigilantly guarded.
>
> Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt.
>
> Imperialism may be redeemed by 'an idea at the back of it', but imperialism, irredeemably, is 'robbery with violence'.
>
> Brotherhood transcends racial differences, but 'we live, as we dream – alone'.
>
> The truth should be communicated, but women should be denied it. Communication of the essential is impossible.
>
> Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans.
>
> Awareness is better than unawareness. We may become aware that it is better to be unaware, and we may even learn that ignorance is bliss.
>
> A person who sells his soul does at least have a soul to sell, and may gain a significance denied to the mediocre.

Repeatedly, images prove paradoxical. The customary associations of white and black, of light and dark, are variously exploited and subverted. The city is 'sepulchral'; London is associated with 'brooding gloom'; and the very title of the tale refers not only to the heart of 'darkest Africa' but also to Kurtz's corruption, to benighted London, and to innumerable kinds of darkness and obscurity, physical, moral, and ontological.

Few prominent features of 'Heart of Darkness' could not be traced back through the nineteenth century into the distant past. Its satiric treatment of imperialism had precedents in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), and in Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24). The charismatic Kurtz, brilliant yet depraved, corrupted yet fascinating, descends from the 'hero-villains' of Gothic fiction, the most notable of these being Emily Brontë's Heathcliff (who, like Ann Radcliffe's Montoni, is in turn a literary descendant of Milton's Satan, regarded by the Romantics as a sublime rebel). Furthermore, the tale's imagery suggests, Kurtz is a modern Faust, who has sold his soul for power and gratification; so perhaps Charlie Marlow owes a debt to Christopher Marlowe.[4] Even that oblique narrative convention that was so popular in the 1890s can be related to the poetic convention of the dramatic monologue, exploited by Browning and Tennyson, and to the sophisticated employment of multiple narrators in Brontë's

Wuthering Heights. And the method could be traced via Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' back to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and ultimately to the inset narratives of the Homeric epics. Marlow's nightmarish journey is explicitly likened to Dante's imaginary journey in *The Inferno*; and the allusions to ancient Rome help to recall *The Aeneid*, particularly Book VI, in which Aeneas, the legendary imperialist, travels through the underworld.[5]

Of course, the novella also has a diversity of sources in Conrad's personal experience. His scepticism about 'the imperial mission' can be related to the facts that he was born into a Poland which (having been partitioned by Austria, Prussia, and Russia) had vanished from the map of Europe, and that his parents were redoubtable patriots who were exiled by the Russian authorities as punishment for their conspiratorial patriotism. Partly as a result of his parents' political struggle against Russian oppression, both of them died when Conrad was still a boy. Hence his keen sense of the price in human terms exacted by political idealism, and, indeed, by idealism of various kinds. Hence, too, his marked sense of isolation. The contrast between the romanticism of his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, and the astutely sceptical advice of his uncle and guardian, Tadeusz Bobrowski, helped to develop his sense of paradox and ethical conflict.[6] Then Conrad's many years at sea nurtured a respect for the ethical implications of seamanship – for an ethic of work and duty. This is an ethic that Marlow finds sustaining and of which the tale's marine boiler-maker is a modest exemplar, and it is made incongruously tangible in that manual of seamanship, by 'Tower, Towson – some such name', found in the heart of the jungle.

'Heart of Darkness' was prompted mainly by Conrad's own journey into the Congo in 1890. During this journey, he noted evidence of atrocities, exploitation, inefficiency, and hypocrisy, and it fully convinced him of the disparity between imperialism's rhetoric and the harsh reality of 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience' (*LE*, p. 17).[7] That experience provided a basis for the knowledgeable indignation of 'Heart of Darkness'. Certainly, however, the combination of that indignation and a visionary-symbolic intention results in satiric exaggeration: the inefficiency and incompetence displayed in the tale are so widespread as to make it seem unlikely that the imperialists in Africa could ever establish viable railways, road systems, or towns. Similarly, as Norman Sherry has shown, the real-life counterpart to Kurtz, Georges Antoine Klein, was a counterpart only in the fact that he was an ailing trader in the Congo who had to be transported back downstream on Conrad's vessel and who died on the voyage. There is no evidence at all that he shared Kurtz's brilliance and depravity.[8]

Other, more intimate, personal factors also provided materials for the tale. Conrad was a lively raconteur who used to swap yarns with G. F. W. Hope, W. B. Keen, and C. H. Mears on Hope's yawl, the *Nellie*, anchored in the Thames. Hence, the setting and manner of the tale's opening. Hope was a company director, like the host in the tale; Keen an accountant; Mears a solicitor. Conrad went to Brussels to gain employment with the Belgian company that organized trade in the Congo; Marlow travels to the 'sepulchral city', identifiably Brussels, for his interview. Conrad, like Marlow, gained the interview through the influence exerted by an aunt (though in Conrad's case the person he addressed as 'Aunt' – Marguerite Poradowska – was the wife of a distant cousin). Madame Poradowska was in mourning when Conrad called on her after his journey to the Congo, for her husband had recently died; and, since Conrad was emotionally attracted to her, she evidently provided a model for the bereaved Intended, for whom Marlow feels incipient love.[9] If Marlow has various features in common with Conrad, the depiction of Kurtz was probably inflected by the author's sense of similarity between Kurtz's plight and that of the dedicated creative writer. In a passage of the autobiographical work *A Personal Record* that offers reflections on his own aims as an author, Conrad says:

> In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds. Who then is going to say Nay to his temptations if not his conscience? (p. xviii)

If, therefore, the tale can be so clearly related to Conrad's own prior experience, to various concerns of the 1890s, and to a diversity of long literary traditions, what makes it proleptic? How did it come to be 'ahead of its times'? The answer lies in the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The intrinsic factors include: its satiric verve and sceptical boldness; its suggestive density and ambiguity – the layered narrations, ironic meanings, symbolic suggestions; its radical paradoxicality; and its designed opacities. The extrinsic factors include the following. The burgeoning of what became known as cultural Modernism, and the consequent readiness of numerous critics to appreciate and commend the features they recognized as Modernist.[10] The related development of critical procedures that were particularly responsive to ambiguity, irony, and symbolic multiplicity within a work. The increase of scepticism concerning religion, history, civilization, and human nature; though complicated by some religious nostalgia, by surviving modes of faith, and by some humanistic hopes. The general development of antipathy to imperialism: an antipathy that, for many readers, the text seemed to echo (though in course of time other

readers disputed this). 'Heart of Darkness' was abundantly suggestive and remarkable quotable. Repeatedly it seemed, prophetically, to sum up areas of experience that gained new prominence in the light of historical events in the twentieth century. If offered a concise iconography of modern corruption and disorder. The tale became an anthology of epitomes.

The First World War showed how men could be engulfed, diminished, and destroyed by man-made organizations and technology. Conrad seemed to have anticipated this in his depiction of the ways in which men in Africa served, and died for, a remorseless organization. He portrays men dwarfed by the system that dominates them and by an alien environment. Hitlerism and the Holocaust seemed to have been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz's charismatic depravity: Kurtz, potentially ' a splendid leader of an extreme party', celebrated for his intoxicating eloquence, is the persuasive genius whose grandiose ambitions are reduced to the exclamation 'Exterminate all the brutes!'[11] During the century, there was increasing recognition of a vast disparity between the (often religious or idealistic) propaganda of imperialism and its harshly exploitative realities. This too served to vindicate much of the tale, which declared: 'The conquest of the earth ... mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves' (*HD*, p. 140). That 'Heart of Darkness' even seemed to have offered a critical commentary on the Vietnam War was recognized by Francis Ford Coppola's spectacular film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which simultaneously generated the film *Hearts of Darkness*, a record of the making of *Apocalypse Now* that was a testament to Kurtzian corruption and decadence in real life. Later, Nicolas Roeg directed another version for the cinema. It seemed that the sombre, sceptical aspects of the tale had been amply vindicated by the follies and brutalities of twentieth-century history.

In 1902, Edward Garnett, Conrad's friend and sometime literary mentor, wrote: ' "Heart of Darkness" in the subtlety of its criticism of life is the high-water mark of the author's talent' (Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, p. 133). By 1974, C. B Cox could confidently declare: 'This masterpiece has become one of those amazing modern fictions, such as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* or Kafka's *The Trial*, which throw light on the whole nature of twentieth-century art, its problems and achievements' (Introduction, p. vii). Repeatedly, the tale seemed to have heralded twentieth-century cultural preoccupations. Sigmund Freud's emphasis on the divided self, on the striving, lustful, anarchic id seeking gratification despite the countervailing pressure of the ego or super-ego, had been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz's ferocious fulfilments in the Congo. C. G. Jung, in turn, seemed almost to be recalling Kurtz and the tale's

imagery of light and darkness when he emphasized that the 'visionary mode of artistic creation' is

> a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind – that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding, and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing.
>
> (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 180)

The interest of Freud and Jung (and later of Northrop Frye, Joseph Campbell, and Claude Lévi-Strauss) in the importance of myth was shared by numerous Modernist writers, and here again Conrad seemed to have anticipated them. In 1923, T. S. Eliot praised James Joyce for developing in *Ulysses* the 'mythic method', whereby references to ancient myths could coordinate works which addressed 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' ('*Ulysses*, order and myth', p. 483). But that readiness to stage ironic contrasts between the mythic past and the materialistic present, a readiness so marked in Eliot's *The Waste Land* itself, was already a feature of 'Heart of Darkness', which, while describing present-day confusion, invoked memories of the Faust myth, *The Divine Comedy*, and *The Aeneid*. Indeed, Eliot acknowledged a debt to Conrad: the original epigraph of *The Waste Land* was a passage from 'Heart of Darkness' that concludes with Kurtz's words, 'The horror! The horror!', and the descriptions of the Thames in 'The Fire Sermon' draw details from the opening of Conrad's tale.[12] More importantly, 'Heart of Darkness' had suggested the appalling paradox that whereas the majority of men who lead secular lives are heading for a death which is extinction, Kurtz has at least the significance granted by the intensity of his evil. If he has sold his soul, at least he had a soul to sell. And this paradox, too, Eliot developed in *The Waste Land* and in his critical essays: '[D]amnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living ... The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors ... is that they are not men enough to be damned' (*Selected Essays*, pp. 427, 429). Graham Greene exploited the same paradox in *Brighton Rock* (1938), and Greene often acknowledged his debt to Conrad. In the film *The Third Man* (1949), written by Greene and directed by Carol Reed, the villain, Harry Lime, has a Kurtzian charisma, and one of his henchmen is called 'Baron Kurtz'. Lime was played by Orson Welles, who had himself attempted to make a film of 'Heart of Darkness'. In 1899, in its vividly graphic techniques, particularly the rapid montage, the overlapping images, and the symbolic use of colour and *chiaroscuro*,

'Heart of Darkness' had been adventurously cinematic at a time when film – rudimentary then – was not.

Familiar characteristics of Modernist texts are the sense of absurdity or meaninglessness, of human isolation, and of the problematic nature of communication. Eliot, Kafka, Woolf, and Beckett are among the writers who grappled with these matters, all of which had been sharply depicted in 'Heart of Darkness'. The sense of the defilement of the natural environment by man's technology, another powerful feature of the narrative, was later to be addressed by Eliot, Lawrence, Greene, and numerous subsequent writers. Kurtz's words 'The horror! The horror!' were eventually repeated by Colonel Kurtz, played by a mumbling Marlon Brando, in *Apocalypse Now*; but before repeating them, he quoted a few lines from Eliot's poem, 'The Hollow Men'. This made a neat cultural irony, since 'The Hollow Men' takes as its epigraph 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead' and develops the Conradian theme of the absurdity of secular existence.

The tale's cultural echoes extend through time and across continents. Kurtz is a literary father of Thompson, the demoralized imperial idealist in the acclaimed novel of Kenya in the 1950s, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Kurtz's report for 'The Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs' has its counterpart in Thompson's essay, 'Prospero in Africa'. Kurtz concludes: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'; Thompson reflects: 'Eliminate the vermin' (pp. 48–50, 117). A radically different novel, Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1975), a prize-winning thriller depicting drug-driven corruption and brutality in the United States, took as its apt epigraph the following lines from Conrad's tale:

> 'I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men – men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly.'
>
> (p. 155)[13]

II

By the 1970s, 'Heart of Darkness' had accumulated extensive critical acclaim and been widely disseminated as a 'set text' in colleges and universities. It was now 'canonical'. Even if it had flaws (perhaps 'adjectival insistence'),[14] its strengths far exceeded its weaknesses. Its cultural influence was clearly pervasive. This novella served as a reference-point, an anthology of scenes and passages that in various ways epitomized twentieth-century problems and particularly twentieth-century modes of exploitation, cor-

ruption, and decadence. Yet, as Feste says in *Twelfth Night*, 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges', and in the 1970s radical critical attacks on 'Heart of Darkness' developed. For Terry Eagleton, a Marxist, Conrad's art was an art of ideological contradiction resulting in stalemate:

> Conrad neither believes in the cultural superiority of the colonialist nations, nor rejects colonialism outright. The 'message' of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society – a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them. (*Criticism and Ideology*, p. 135)

But already a far more damaging political attack had been made. In a 1975 lecture, the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, declared that Conrad was 'a bloody racist' ('An image of Africa', p. 788). Achebe asserted that 'Heart of Darkness' depicts Africa as 'a place of negations ... in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest' (p. 783). The Africans are dehumanized and degraded, seen as grotesques or as a howling mob. They are denied speech, or are granted speech only to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. We see 'Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril' (p. 788). The result, he says, is 'an offensive and totally deplorable book' that promotes racial intolerance and is therefore to be condemned.

Achebe's lecture had a powerful impact, and its text was repeatedly reprinted and widely discussed. 'Heart of Darkness', which had seemed to be bold and astute in its attacks on imperialism, was now revealed as a work that, in the opinion of a leading African writer, was actually pro-imperialist in its endorsement of racial prejudice. The next onslaught came from feminist critics and had a similar basis. While Achebe had seen the Africans as marginalized and demeaningly stereotyped, various feminist critics felt that the tale similarly belittled women. Nina Pelikan Straus, Bette London, Johanna M. Smith, and Elaine Showalter were among those who claimed that 'Heart of Darkness' was not only imperialist but also 'sexist'. Straus declared that male critics had repeatedly become accomplices of Marlow, who 'brings truth to men by virtue of his bringing falsehood to women' ('The exclusion of the Intended', p. 130). Kurtz's Intended, denied a name, is also denied access to truth so as to maintain the dominative brotherhood of males:

> The woman reader ... is in the position to insist that Marlow's cowardice consists of his inability to face the dangerous self that is the form of his own

> masculinist vulnerability: his own complicity in the racist, sexist, imperialist, and finally libidinally satisfying world he has shared with Kurtz. (p. 135)

Smith, similarly, alleged that the tale 'reveals the collusion of imperialism and patriarchy: Marlow's narrative aims to "colonize" and "pacify" both savage darkness and women' ('Too beautiful altogether', p. 180).

In short, a text that had once appeared to be 'ahead of its times', a nineteenth-century tale that anticipated twentieth-century cultural developments and epitomized twentieth-century concerns, now seemed to be dated – outstripped by recent advances. A text that had so often been praised for its political radicalism now looked politically reactionary. The problems raised by the controversy over the merits of 'Heart of Darkness' were now problems not merely about the reading of details but also about the very basis of evaluation of literary texts, about the relationship between literary appreciation and moral/political judgement.

III

If we re-read 'Heart of Darkness' in the light of Achebe's comments, various disturbing features soon gain prominence. For example, although the Europeans manifest various kinds of corruption and turpitude, the Faustian theme associates supernatural evil with the African wilderness. The dying Kurtz crawls ashore towards some ritual ceremony, and Marlow tries to head him off:

> 'I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations'. (p. 234)

And within the wilderness:

> 'A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns – antelope horns, I think – on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough'. (p. 233)

In religious matters, Marlow seems usually a sceptic. Certainly there is an atheistic implication in his remark that life is 'that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose'. Yet, where Kurtz's depravity is concerned, Marlow seems willing to endorse a belief in supernatural evil – and that evil is specifically associated with the people of the African jungle. A sceptical reader today might conclude that we are being offered not only a

mystification of corruption, but also a racist mystification. One problem here, however, is that the observations quoted are Marlow's, and they thus lack the authority that would be granted by an 'omniscient narrator'. Achebe says that Conrad 'neglects to hint however subtly or tentatively at an alternative frame of reference ... Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence' (p. 787). Against this, however, one might object that Conrad has deliberately opted for doubly oblique narration. Marlow's tale, which is interrupted by dissenting comments by his hearers, is being reported to us by an anonymous character. Marlow himself has explicitly drawn attention to the difficulty of seeing truly and reporting correctly, and he is known for his 'inconclusive' narratives. His tone when describing Kurtz's last hours is more insistently rhetorical and less observantly acute than at other times. The general effect of the oblique procedures may be to make us think: 'Marlow can probably be trusted most of the time, but we need to keep up our guard. He isn't fully reliable'. Indeed, Conrad took greater pains than did most users of the oblique narrative convention to preserve the possibility of critical distance between the reader and the fictional narrator.

Nevertheless, Achebe forcefully exposed the text's temporality. A number of features, including Marlow's casual use of the term 'nigger', clearly reveal the tale's Victorian provenance. Its defenders now ran the risk of using a suspect logic. When Marlow said things of which they approved, they might give Conrad credit; when he said things that embarrassed them, they might cite the oblique convention, blame Marlow, and exonerate Conrad. Clearly, such logic could be neatly reversed by their opponents.

Achebe's telling attack was fierce and sweeping, and deliberately polemical; and he later moderated its ferocity.[15] Other Third World writers, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wilson Harris, Frances B. Singh, and C. P. Sarvan, argued that while Conrad was certainly ambivalent on racial matters, 'Heart of Darkness' was progressive in its satiric accounts of the colonialists. Singh noted that though 'Heart of Darkness' was vulnerable in several respects, including the association of Africans with supernatural evil, the story should remain in 'the canon of works indicting colonialism'. Sarvan concluded: 'Conrad was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free'.[16] To be fair to 'Heart of Darkness', as to any literary text, we need to take account of its date. As Sarvan indicates, relative to the standards prevailing in the 1890s, the heyday of Victorian imperialism, 'Heart of Darkness' was indeed progressive in its criticism of imperialist activities in Africa, and, implicitly, of imperialist activities generally. Conrad was writing at a time when most British people, including many socialists,

would have regarded imperialism as an admirable enterprise. He was also helping the cause of Africans in the Congo by drawing attention to their ill-treatment. In practice, the tale contributed to the international protest campaign that strove to curb Belgian excesses there. E. D. Morel, leader of the Congo Reform Association, stated that 'Heart of Darkness' was 'the most powerful thing ever written on the subject'. Conrad sent encouraging letters to his acquaintance (and Morel's collaborator in the campaign), Roger Casement, who in 1904 published a parliamentary report documenting atrocities committed by Belgian administrators.[17] Achebe says that 'Heart of Darkness' marginalizes the Africans, but Marlow gives them prominence when he describes, with telling vividness, the plight of the chain-gang and of the exploited workers dying in the grove. What the other Europeans choose to ignore, Marlow observes with sardonic indignation. Relegation, which is criticized, is a theme of the narrative.

That the tale appeared in 1899 offers some defence against feminists' attacks, too, though it is defence and not vindication. Marlow's patronizing views of women, which might well have been quite widely shared by men of that time, are problematized by the text in ways that yield ironies that feminist critics could exploit. Marlow, who says that women are 'out of touch with truth ... in a world of their own' (p. 148), depends on his aunt for a job, and therefore her world is also his. Furthermore, Marlow's lie to the Intended – the cause of so much critical debate – is presented in a debate-provoking way. Marlow registers confusion ('It seemed ... that the heavens would fall'; 'The heavens do not fall for such a trifle'), and he had previously said 'I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie', so his own words expose a double standard by which women are (a) culpably ignorant of truth, and (b) in need of falsehood supplied by males. In any case, characteristically 'virile' activities of men – colonial warfare and the conquest of the 'wilderness' – have been depicted by Marlow as virtually deranged in their destructive futility.

A larger question is raised by these political criticisms of 'Heart of Darkness'. A standard procedure, illustrated by Achebe and Straus, is to judge the tale according to whether its inferred political outlook tallies with that of the critic: to the extent that the critic's views are reflected, the tale is commended; to the extent that they are not, the tale is condemned. This procedure is familiar but odd. It assumes the general validity of the critic's outlook; but different people have different outlooks. Moreover, the critic's outlook may not remain constant, but may be modified by experience, including encounters with literary works. In this respect, 'Heart of Darkness' seems to ambush its adversaries. Marlow has been changed by his experience of Africa, and is still being changed. One of the subtlest features

of the text is the dramatization of his uncertainties, of his tentativeness, of his groping for affirmations that his own narrative subsequently questions. Through Marlow, this liminal and protean novella renders the process of teaching and learning, and of negotiating alternative viewpoints. To take an obvious example: he offers conflicting interpretations of Kurtz's cry, 'The horror! The horror!'. Perhaps they refer to Kurtz's corruption, perhaps to the horror of a senseless universe. But there may be another meaning: no final resolution is offered. Marlow addresses a group of friends on a vessel. They may not share his views; and, indeed, they voice dissent – 'Try to be civil'; 'Absurd'. A commentator who declares Conrad 'racist' or 'sexist' may be imposing on Conrad readily available stereotypes, but, at its best, the tale questions the process of imposing stereotypes. Such phrases as 'weaning those ignorant millions', 'enemies, criminals, workers ... rebels', 'unsound method' or 'leader of an extreme party' are invested with sardonic irony. In addition, a political commentator on the text may seem imperialistic in seeking to incorporate literary terrain within the territory of his or her own personal value-system. If we abolished all those past texts that, to our fallible understandings, failed to endorse present values or prejudices, few works would survive. A literary work may have a diversity of political implications and consequences, but it is not a political manifesto. It is an imaginative work that offers a voluntary and hypothetical experience. Its linguistic texture may be progressive when its readily paraphrasable content may not. All its implications remain within the invisible quotation marks of the fictional. In other works, the same author could, of course, deploy quite different materials with contrasting implications. In 'Heart of Darkness', Marlow says that women are out of touch with truth; but in *Chance*, he says that women see 'the whole truth', whereas men live in a 'fool's paradise' (p. 144). Meanwhile, in 1910, Conrad signed a formal letter to the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, advocating votes for women (*Letters*, IV, p. 327).[18] Awareness of Conrad's complexity may entail recognition of a currently widespread critical habit: the reductive falsification of the past in an attempt to vindicate the political gestures of the present. 'Heart of Darkness' reminds us that this habit resembles an earlier one: the adoption of a demeaning attitude to colonized people in the attempt to vindicate the exploitative actions of the colonizer. The 'pilgrims' in the tale have fathered some of the pundits of today.

We read fiction for pleasures of diverse kinds; and Conrad earned his living as an entertainer, not as a writer of religious or political tracts. The pleasures generated by 'Heart of Darkness' have many sources. They lie in part in its evocative vividness, its modes of suspense, its originality, and its power to provoke thought. Paraphrase is a necessary critical tool, but

paraphrase is never an equivalent of the original, whose vitality lies in its combination of particular and general, of rational and emotional. A political scansion of the work is not the only mode of scansion, nor is it necessarily the most illuminating. Literary criticism has an identity distinct from political advocacy, just as creative writing is distinct from political non-fiction. As the text moves through time, the changing historical and cultural circumstances will variously increase and reduce its cogency. Texts may thus apparently die for a period and then regain their vitality. Shakespeare's *King Lear* vanished from the stage for about 150 years, and audiences seeing *King Lear* in the eighteenth century saw Nahum Tate's play, not Shakespeare's. May Sinclair's fine novel, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), was neglected for decades until Virago Press republished it. The reputation of 'Heart of Darkness' is now a matter of controversy, and its standing may decline; but its complexity guarantees that it will prove fruitful to many readers for a long time yet.

As we have seen, the very ambiguity of that title, 'Heart of Darkness' (originally 'The Heart of Darkness'), heralded that complexity. The titular phrase then evoked the interior of 'darkest Africa'; but it also portended the corruption of Kurtz, and the tale begins with visual reminders of ways in which London, centre of the empire 'on which the sun never sets', can itself be a heart of darkness – palled in 'brooding gloom'. So, from the outset, the narrative probes, questions, and subverts familiar contrasts between the far and the near, between the 'savage' and the 'civilized', between the tropical and the urban. Repeatedly, the tale's descriptions gain vividness by Conrad's use of delayed decoding, a technique whereby effect precedes cause.[19] He presents first the impact of an event, and only after a delay does he offer its explanation. This is exemplified by the descriptions of, for example, the chaos at the Outer Station, eventually explained as railway-building, or of the exploited Africans in the chain-gang, who 'were called criminals'. The technique lends graphic vividness and psychological realism to the process of perception, but it also emphasizes an ironic disparity, or possible disparity, between the events that occur and their conventional interpretation. Delayed decoding is used in numerous ways: in the treatment of small details, of large events, and even of plot sequences within the tale. Sometimes the irony lies in the fact that the interpretation is tardy, or inadequate, or constitutes a reductive falsification. And here lies a warning for commentators on 'Heart of Darkness'. One of the features that made it outstanding among texts of the 1890s was its recognition of the disparities between the realities of experience and the inadequacies of conventional interpretations of it. The tale repeatedly implies an irreducible excess that eludes summary. It may thus warn commentators that they, confined to the limited discourse

of rational non-fictional prose, are likely to be outdistanced by the multiple resources of the fictional text. The anonymous narrator speaks with romantic eloquence of all the great men who have sailed forth on the Thames, but Marlow interjects 'And this also ... has been one of the dark places of the earth', and proceeds to remind him that Britain would once have seemed as savage a wilderness to Roman colonizers as Africa now seems to Europeans. This is a rebuke to empire-builders and to believers in the durability of civilization; it invokes a humiliating chronological perspective; and it may jolt the reader into circumspection.

Reflections on this passage might induce caution in any commentator who initially fails to relate 'Heart of Darkness' fairly to the time of its writing, or who assumes the superiority of a present-day viewpoint that is itself a product of the times: 'We live in the flicker'. As 'Heart of Darkness' repeatedly implies, a value judgement cannot, in logic, be deduced from a statement of fact. The narrative is partly about the struggle to maintain a humane morality when that morality no longer seems to bear guaranteed validity. In this respect, 'Heart of Darkness' remains cogent and may teach circumspection to its critics. The tale has sombre implications, and so has the story of its reception over the years, but the eloquence, virtuosity, and intensity with which 'Heart of Darkness' addressed its era were exemplary, and seem likely to ensure its longevity.

NOTES

1 This novella's critical fortunes may be traced in Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, Harkness, ed., *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics*, Murfin, ed., *Joseph Conrad: 'Heart of Darkness': A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, Bloom, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, Carabine, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*, Kimbrough's Norton volumes of 1963, 1971, and 1988, and Burden, *'Heart of Darkness': An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism*. Fothergill's *Heart of Darkness* provides a useful introductory summary.

2 Documents concerning the history of the 'Congo Free State' and Conrad's journey in that region are reprinted in *Heart of Darkness*, Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 78–192. For the cultural background, see Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. On Nordau and Kelvin, see Watts, *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': A Critical and Contextual Discussion*, pp. 132–4, 14–15. (Nordau had written to Conrad to congratulate him on *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*.)

3 Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 17–18.

4 See Watts, *The Deceptive Text*, pp. 74–82.

5 See Evans, 'Conrad's underworld', and Feder 'Marlow's descent into hell'.

6 On the Polish background, see Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, pp. 2–53 *et passim*.

7 See 'The Congo Diary' in Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 159–66.
8 Ch. 1–12 of Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* deal with the fictional transformation of factual materials concerning Africa. Klein is discussed on pp. 72–8.
9 Conrad said that there was 'a mere shadow of love interest just in the last pages' (*Letters*, II, pp. 145–6).
10 On Conrad's relation to Modernism, see Graham, ch. 11 of this volume, and Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 32–3 *et passim*.
11 This link was recognized in George Steiner's novel, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (1981), in which the Kurtzian role is taken by an aged but still eloquent Adolf Hitler, discovered in the depths of the jungle.
12 See Eliot, *The Waste Lane*, pp. 3, 125.
13 The version in Stone (p. vii) has minor misquotations.
14 'So we have an adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on "unspeakable rites", "unspeakable secrets", "monstrous passions", "inconceivable mystery", and so on ... Conrad ... is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means', Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, pp. 198–9.
15 For example, the revised version in Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 251–62, deletes a passage linking Conrad to 'men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism', and concedes that 'Heart of Darkness' has 'memorably good passages and moments'. The phrase 'a bloody racist' became 'a thoroughgoing racist'. Carabine, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*, II, also prints the revised version although erroneously identifying it as the 1977 text.
16 Sarvan in Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'* p. 285. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is cited on p. 285; articles by Harris and Singh are reprinted, pp. 262–80. Carabine, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*, II, pp. 405–80, also offers a range of responses to Achebe.
17 On Morel, see Hawkins, 'Conrad's critique of imperialism', p. 293. On Casement, see *Letters*, III, pp. 87, 95–7, 101–3.
18 See also Davies, 'Conrad, *Chance*, and women readers'.
19 On delayed decoding, see Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 175–9, 270–1, 357, and Watts, *The Deceptive Text*, pp. 43–6, and *A Preface to Conrad*, pp. 114–17.

WORKS CITED

Achebe, Chinua. 'An image of Africa: racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"'. *Massachusetts Review* 17.4 (1977), 782–94. Reprinted (revised) in Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 251–62

Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du mal*. 1857. Paris: Aux quais de Paris, 1957

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987

Burden, Robert. *'Heart of Darkness': An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1991

Carabine, Keith, ed. *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*. 4 vols. Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1992

Conrad, Joseph. *Chance*. 1914. Ed. Martin Ray. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988

'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales. Ed. Cedric Watts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

'A Familiar Preface'. *'The Mirror of the Sea' and 'A Personal Record'*. 1906 and 1912. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. xi–xxi

'Geography and some explorers'. 1924. *Last Essays*. Ed. Richard Curle. London: Dent, 1926. Reprinted 1955, pp. 1–22

Cox, C. B. Introduction. *Youth: A Narrative/Heart of Darkness/The End of the Tether*. London: Dent; Vermont: Tuttle, 1974

Davies, Laurence. 'Conrad, *Chance*, and women readers'. *The Conradian* 17.1 (1993), 75–88

Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: Verso, 1976

Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*. Ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber & Faber, 1971

Selected Essays. London: Faber & Faber, 1951

'*Ulysses*, order and myth'. *The Dial* 75 (1923), 480–3

Evans, Robert O. 'Conrad's underworld'. *Modern Fiction Studies* 2.2 (1956), 56–92

Feder, Lillian. 'Marlow's descent into hell'. *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 9.4 (1955), 280–92

Fothergill, Anthony. *Heart of Darkness*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989

Harkness, Bruce, ed. *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and the Critics*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1960

Harris, Wilson. 'The frontier on which "Heart of Darkness" stands'. *Research on African Literatures* 12 (1981), 86–92. Reprinted Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 262–8

Hawkins, Hunt. 'Conrad's critique of imperialism'. *PMLA* 94 (1979), 286–99

Jung, C. B. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933. Reprinted 1966

Kimbrough, Robert, ed. *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*. 3rd edn. New York: Norton, 1988

Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. London: Chatto & Windus; New York: G. W. Stewart, 1948. Reprinted Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962

London, Bette. *The Appropriated Voice: Narrative Authority in Conrad, Forster, and Woolf*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990

Murfin, Ross C., ed. *Joseph Conrad: 'Heart of Darkness': A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press, 1989

Najder, Zdzisław. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. Tr. Halina Carroll-Najder. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983

Sarvan, C. P. 'Racism and the 'Heart of Darkness'. *International Fiction Review* 7 (1980), 6–10. Reprinted Kimbrough, ed., *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, pp. 280–5

Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Western World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971

Sherry, Norman, ed. *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973

Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991

Smith, Johanna M. '"Too beautiful altogether": patriarchal ideology in "Heart of Darkness"'. In *Joseph Conrad: 'Heart of Darkness': A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Ross C. Murfin. New York: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press, 1989, pp. 179–95

Steiner, George. *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* London: Faber & Faber, 1981

Stone, Robert. *Dog Soldiers*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1975. Reprinted London: Pan Books, 1988

Straus, Nina Pelikan. 'The exclusion of the Intended from secret sharing in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"'. *Novel* 20.2 (1987), 123–37

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967. Reset 1975

Watt, Ian. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979; London: Chatto & Windus, 1980

Watts, Cedric. *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': A Critical and Contextual Discussion*. Milan: Mursia, 1977

The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots. Brighton: Harvester; Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1984

A Preface to Conrad. 2nd edn. London: Longman, 1993

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO JOSEPH CONRAD

EDITED BY

J. H. STAPE

Japan Women's University, Tokyo

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1996
Fourth printing 2004

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data applied for

ISBN 0 521 44391 1 hardback
ISBN 0 521 48484 7 paperback