

A HISTORICAL SENSE IN "HEART OF DARKNESS"

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In the history of the human spirit I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent. (Martin Buber, "What is Man?")

"Heart of Darkness" deals, in a sense, with the problem of civilization from its own angle. As in some of D. H. Lawrence's novels, civilization here does not mean the mere subject of sociological interest, but is connected more directly and deeply with a question of human existence in the modern world. Marlow, the central character and narrator on the *Nellie* on the Thames, says just before opening the tale of his own experience:

And this also... has been one of the dark places of the earth.... I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day.... Light came out of this river since—you say Knights?... But darkness was here yesterday.¹

No doubt Marlow thinks of the confrontation of the whole civilization in Western world with the darkness of nature or the darkness of human heart. So he continues:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

1. Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* ("Collected Edition of The Works of Joseph Conrad"; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946), pp. 48-49.

What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifices to. . . .²

Then what is the 'idea' is, it seems, very important and becomes the very theme in this short novel.

"Heart of Darkness," particularly, pursues some moral discovery in the story of Marlow's experience. Marlow says, "It was . . . the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts" but he also says, "It was . . . not very clear. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light."³ Truly the meaning of actual experience is usually not very clear. But Marlow through his keen sensibility gets aware of the confrontation of civilization with the darkness of nature and gropes its true meaning. Here we can see a very characteristic method of penetrating the deep meaning of experiences. Marlow describes his actual experiences, the concrete facts, the real feeling for things seen or done and it reveals some inner phases of the world. So this story comes to bear very symbolical meaning.

The very title of "Heart of Darkness" suggests both the center of the dark natural world—the distant interior of Africa far away from the civilized society here in this story—and the inmost depths of human existence, the deep core of the human being under the fine clothes of civilization. In fact Marlow describes his "going up the river" deep into Africa, like this:

"Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. . . . The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

.....
 The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . .

"The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. . . .

They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. . . . a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—
 —you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.⁴

So it is not only in space, but in time that Marlow, going upstream into the wilderness of Africa, gets far away from civilization. And remoteness from civilization in space and in time is also two aspects of going down to such an inner world of human mind as is free from a crust of any protections of the civilized society. Nature is not here conquered in "the shackled form," but, on the contrary, Marlow feels its "mysterious stillness watching" him at his "monkey trick"⁵ of human activities. He thinks himself and his members on the ship as "wanerers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet." But there are also a sudden "burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs . . . under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage."⁶ And there is "a meaning" in "your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar." There is "truth stripped of its cloak of time"⁷ in the deep stillness of nature and the wild and passionate uproar of savages resonating in the bottom of the hearts of the civilized men. And this kind of nature comes to reveal the serious confrontation with civilization, which reaches its climax in Marlow's experience of Kurtz's agony or Kurtz's madness in the very heart of darkness.

But in this story there is also another actual aspect of civiliza-

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93, 95-96.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

tion. Marlow observes and feels many absurdities, filthy rapacity, self-deception and emptiness of life in the various activities of white men. And such an aspect of civilization which reveals itself through Marlow's experience quite related to the confrontation of civilization with the dark nature is nothing but the real condition of human being in the modern world. Marlow, who is a sensible and, in a sense, very naïve, idealistic young seaman, wants to go to Africa, longing for seeing the unknown world or for unknown experience of true life out of a kind of ennui or dissatisfaction of the youth.⁸ He leaves the European city, which makes him think of "a whited sepulchre,"⁹ wanting a more real world. On his voyage he sees nature and negroes as quite real and positive things in contrast to his weary feeling of "a mournful and senseless delusion."

The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure . . . It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration . . . they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there.¹⁰

But he meets another scene, a French man of war shelling the jungle of continent where there is not even a shed to be seen. He feels not only absurdity but also "a touch of insanity,"¹¹ seeing this warship which is one of the excellent products of civilization in Europe. His own ship stopped in every port, and lands solidiers and custom-house officers there, which causes Marlow to fancy "the merry dance of death and trade"¹² going on at these ports. But these seemingly two kinds of experiences of Marlow are, it seems, not of different things, but only of two sides of the same phase of human existence.

8. Later, in "The Shadow-Line" (1916) Conrad describes the unreasonable ennui of the youth as the very important moment of life for its status of uneasiness and untested.

9. "Heart of Darkness," p. 55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Many commentators refer, distinctly or incidentally, to two phases of this short novel and tend to divide the novel into two parts—the first half in which Marlow, on traveling to his new post in Africa or arriving there, sees absurd and, sometimes, cruel activities or inactivities of filthy avarice or flabbiness of white men, and criticizes bitterly all these things through reacting to them sensitively, and the latter half where Kurtz appears, first chiefly in talks of various men and then by Marlow's meeting him, accompanied with Marlow's awareness of the force and spell of nature in Africa. And usually this latter part is mainly esteemed, though the vivid description and sensitive criticism in the former part is admitted to heighten the dramatic effect of the most somber theme of the latter half by giving the concrete background and the significant prelude to the whole theme. Douglas Hewitt, for instance, says as follows:

the reactions of the originally rather naïve Marlow to his meeting with Kurtz and to the strange country should hold our attention rather than what in 'Geography and Some Explorers' [in the volume *Last Essays*] Conrad describes as: '... the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.'¹³

It is true that "the reactions of the originally rather naïve Marlow" is the focus of the whole stories, but it is not only Marlow's "reactions to his meeting with Kurtz and to the strange country" but also his reactions to "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience" that is important in this story. There is a thorough investigation into the meaning of civilization and a deep probing into human existence closely related to each other in this whole story. Hewitt, too, refers to Marlow's reactions to such things as the warship shelling the coast of Africa or the "merry dance of death and trade," but his angle is different from mine and rather limited. He says:

We cannot fail to observe . . . that in almost all his [*i.e.* Conrad's] earlier books a penetrating scrutiny is directed against the simple virtues of honesty, courage, pity and fidelity to an unquestioned ideal

13. Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Bows & Bows, 1952), p. 18.

of conduct. . . . In particular we notice the recurrence of one situation which . . . dominates many [*i.e.* Conrad's many earlier works]—the situation in which a man who relies on these simple virtues is confronted by a partially apprehended sense of evil against which they seem powerless. The mere realization of the existence of this evil overwhelms him with a sense of insecurity and casts doubt on the supposedly secure foundations of the ideals themselves; the virtues at last become suspect. . . .

we feel him [*i.e.* Marlow in "Heart of Darkness"] to represent, in his dealings with the Company, all forces of straightforwardness and honesty. He is confronted by incidents which combine the horrible, the wicked and the farcical as he progresses towards the highest point of navigation on the Congo.¹⁴

So, according to Hewitt, this story is purely concerned with Marlow's awareness of the "evil" against which the simple virtues of Marlow are powerless. Marlow can well resist or criticize all the corruptions of superficial world or "the vilest scramble for foot" through asserting his difference from others, his difference as a man of incorruptible simple virtue. But finally he is confronted by the nightmares of Kurtz, the moral decay of "a remarkable man" who had once some true ideal, and he gets aware of the bond between himself and Kurtz. In this interpretation the meaning of "evil here manifested chiefly in Kurtz is not so clear, though Hewitt explains it as a certain "transcendental evil, embodying itself in individuals—a sense of evil just as great as that of any avowedly Catholic or Calvinist writer."¹⁵ And he comes to say:

It is useless to ask what is the quality in Kurtz which is absent in the pilgrims [*i.e.* other traders who travel in Africa in search of ivory]. In one sense he is no more than the logical culmination of the hollowness of them all. The difference lies in this—that Marlow can defend himself against the others, he can deny all kinship with them; but just as the manager lumps him along with Kurtz, so he himself feels the link.¹⁶

A certain "transcendental evil" is a rather vague and weak explanation for Kurtz's case here.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17, 19.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

In "Heart of Darkness" there is the scrutiny of the basis of humanity in much wider scope. Kurtz here represents the fatal "hollowness" of a great character in our times, and it seems to reveal all the deceptive feature of any ideal, any virtues, any principle in the modern civilization. In this sense only, he is "the logical culmination of the hollowness of them all." But the greatness and strength in his character is very important. His hard struggle or 'extremity' in his confrontation with the true status of human being "stripped of its cloak of time" distinguishes himself from all other flabby fellows. He represents a pattern of all the nations and all the virtues in European history of progressivism.

The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz.¹⁷

So the two phases of the story—Marlow's reactions to "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" and his "reactions to his meeting with Kurtz and to the strange country" of Africa—make one experience in Marlow's mind, and Kurtz is "the culminating point" of Marlow's experience and "it seemed somehow to throw a kind of light." Hewitt says in conclusion :

By the end of the story the darkness which exists in the breast of Kurtz and in the dark continent and in the manager and the pilgrims—seems to cover the whole world. The inhabitants of the continental capital seem to him [i.e. Marlow] to be foolishly unaware of the omnipresent evil.

.....
what Marlow finds in the heart of the African continent is a darkness which every man may be forced to meet within himself. His faith in fidelity and courage is enough to defend him against the pilgrims and their imbecile rapacity, but it is powerless when confronted by the darkness of Kurtz.¹⁸

Hewitt's interpretation of this story seems to be rather partial or one-

17. "Heart of Darkness," p. 117.

18. Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment*, pp. 26-27.

sided. So he misses the more significant meaning of the influence of "the vilest scramble for loot" upon Marlow. Hewitt sees in Kurtz "a transcendental evil, embodying itself in individuals"—and he regards Marlow's awareness of this vague "omnipresent evil" as the theme of the story.

Albert Guerard, too, mentions the two phases of this story, and attaching importance to the phase of Marlow's awareness of "evil" he says, "this is Conrad's longest journey into self."¹⁹ And he comments on the rather superficial phase of the first half of this story like this:

"Heart of Darkness" . . . has its important public side, as an angry document on absurd and brutal exploitation.

"Heart of Darkness" is a record of things seen and done. But also Conrad was reacting to the humanitarian pretenses of some of the looters precisely as the novelist today reacts to the moralisms of cold-war propaganda. Then it was ivory that poured from the heart of darkness; now it is uranium. Conrad shrewdly recognized—an intuition amply developed in *Nostromo*—that deception is most sinister when it becomes self-deception . . . Kurtz "could get himself to believe anything-anything. The benevolent rhetoric of his seventeen-page report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs was meant sincerely enough. But a deeper sincerity spoke through his scrawled postscript: "Exterminate all the brutal!" . . .

Conrad, again like many novelists today, was both drawn to idealism and repelled by its hypocritical abuse.²⁰

And about Marlow's choice of Kurtz's nightmare he says:

Marlow commits himself to the yet unseen agent partly because Kurtz "had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort." Anything would seem preferable to the demoralized greed and total cynicism of the others, "the flabby devil" of the Central Station. Later, when he discovers what has happened to Kurtz's moral ideas, he remains faithful to the "nightmare of my choice." In *Under Western Eyes* Sophia Antonovna makes a distinction between those who burn and those who rot, and remarks that it is sometimes preferable to burn.

19. Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 33.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

The Kurtz who had made himself literally one of the devils of the land, and who in solitude had kicked himself loose of the earth, burns while the others rot. Through violent not flabby evil he exists in the moral universe even before pronouncing judgment on himself with his dying breath.²¹

Guerard rightly points out Conrad's shrewd recognition of the sinister aspect of self-deception and also Kurtz's spiritual strength in his extremism. But he, too, misses the true unity of "Heart of Darkness." He sees in one phase of this short novel "an angry document on absurd and brutal exploitation," but this side of the story cannot have so important a meaning in the story merely as "an angry document." The problem is how Marlow reacts to those absurdities or brutalities and what meaning his reactions have in relation to the main theme of the story. As for the theme of this story he says, "its introspective bias [is] obvious; this is Conrad longest journey into self." And he regards Kurtz as Marlow's "double," Marlow's other self. Marlow gets aware of his own truth, the dark depths in his own self, through exposing himself to Kurtz's darkness. And then Guerard says about Kurtz's condition, "The hollow man, whose evil is the evil of *vacancy*, succumbs."²² And he continues:

Perhaps the chief contradiction of "Heart of Darkness" is that it suggests and dramatizes evil as an active energy (Kurtz and his unspeakable lusts) but defines evil as vacancy. . . . Of the two menaces—the unspeakable desires and the apathy—apathy surely seemed the greater to Conrad.²³

In this way Guerard seems to read in this story only a deep pessimism.

But actually Marlow's words above quoted suggests something more positive, though it seems a very subtle one. Moreover, Marlow finally reflects on Kurtz's extremity, his last cry 'The horror!' and says, "After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief. . . . It was an affirmation, a moral victory."²⁴ Marlow seeks for some true basis of human existence, both throughout his own experience and in his whole meditation. In this way the two phases of "Heart

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

24. "Heart of Darkness," p. 151.

of Darkness" are very closely related and make one complete experience of Marlow.

The confrontation of civilization with the darkness of nature reaches its culminating point in Kurtz's undaunted extremism, in his bold challenge to the dark wilderness in Africa. Marlow says:

The wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.²⁵

Kurtz faces arrogantly and all alone the "truth stripped of its cloak of time," which Marlow feels in the deep stillness of nature and the wild uproar of savages. Marlow manages to resist the great force of the darkness of nature with his well sane practicality, his very "monkey trick" of worldly affairs or his rather compromising strength of restraint. But Kurtz ventures to go straight into the very heart of darkness, into the darkness of the African inland of pre-civilization or into the darkness of pre-consciousness. Marlow reports what he has overheard about Kurtz's going back all alone into the interior and says:

The other explained . . . that Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself, the station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers, leaving the half-caste [clerk] to continue down the river with the ivory. The two fellows there seemed astounded at anybody attempting such a thing. They were at a loss for an adequate motive. As to me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages and *the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the head-quarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station.* [Italics are mine.]²⁶

The image of Kurtz gradually comes to enter Marlow's mind through other agents' talks on Kurtz's genius, and through the small

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

sketch in oils of his own painting in the Central Station. The picture very symbolically represents "a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black."²⁷ At first Marlow has "turned to the wilderness, not to Kurtz."²⁸ But he seeks for something real—rather unconsciously longs for some truth of life in the natural world of Africa—far away from the world of "a whited sepulchre" in Europe. Indeed he can feel, on his voyage to Africa, "a momentary contact with reality," "a positive pleasure," in seeing and hearing nature on the sea—the voice of the surf and the negroes paddling out a small boat from the shore, their shouts and their wild vitality. But all this positive feeling comes from his rather superficial glimpse of nature. He begins to feel, after reaching his position in the inland of Africa, the real great force of nature, but it is somewhat in a different way:

I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well.²⁹

And at last nature is revealed as the wild, enigmatic and, moreover, destructive element to civilized men, to their absurd activities and to Kurtz. Going up the river into the farther inland, Marlow feels "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention."³⁰ He gets aware of the earth appearing unearthly and nature as a thing monstrous and free, its mysterious stillness watching him at his "monkey trick." And the shout of savages are now really wild, passionate and ugly:

Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were men enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And way not? The mind of

27. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.³¹

There is not a romantic nature, nor “the noble savage.” Marlow, from the first, does not expect such a simply romantic nature; he wants to seek for the real life in the natural world. But truth is far beyond his rather simple-minded expectation. He is in fact not a savage, and never wants to be. He subtly feels an anxiety or dreadfulness of emptiness in life and more subtly an anxiety of guilt or condemnation in the background of European civilization.

He well resists all the follies and filthy avarice of other white men there, and also resists the menacing darkness and stillness of true nature and the wild and passionate uproar, a black frenzy of savages. He protects himself from all these evil things only by engaging in his own work, repairing the wrecked steamboat, or busying himself about various practical tasks while going upstream afterward. He feels only in this way that he could keep his “hold on the redeeming facts of life.”³² He says:

It was a great comfort to turn from that chap [*i.e.* a first-class agent in the Central Station] to my influential friend, the battered, twisted, ruined, tin-pot steamboat. . . . I had expended enough hard work on her to make me love her. . . . No, I don't like work. . . . I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know.³³

This is surely the seaman's feeling of reality, longing for the simple virtue of the ancient adventurers. But, at the same time, he is well conscious of the weakness of his own virtues of practicality and honesty, his powerlessness both to the world of “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience” and to the implacable dark phase of natural forces external and internal. Thus both nature and civilization are revealed as negative elements. So Marlow turns to Kurtz for his earnest wish for some positive relief. He hears that Kurtz “is a prodigy . . . an emissary of pity, and

31. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

science, and progress.”³⁴ At first he merely thinks of “this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideal of some sort,” and wants to know “how he would set about his work when there.”³⁵ But after he sees Kurtz for the first time most distinctly in his imagination—“the lone white man” turning his back on all the things outside the wilderness and “setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness,” Marlow’s only hope in going upstream is to meet him or hear his voice not too late rather than to rescue the sick Kurtz himself.

So in this story what Kurtz represents becomes the most important question. At first he comes to the dark continent of Africa as a bearer of light. He says to the manager of the Central Station, “Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.”³⁶ He writes a seventeen-page report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. And he is, in a sense, the product of all Europe, born by half-French father and half-English mother, educated partly in England.

But when Marlow actually reaches the inner station he sees the skulls on the posts in a row near his station house.

These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky. . . . I returned deliberately to the first I had seen—and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,—a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.³⁷

There is “death” again. And he also finds Kurtz’s eloquently idealistic report on the ‘Suppression of Savage Customs.’ “It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you. . . . ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’”³⁸

34. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

What change has happened on Kurtz, who has come as a bearer of light, as an idealist with his universal genius? Has he been quite deceptive to himself, too? The difference between Kurtz and other white men is obviously in his very extremity, in his absolute faithfulness to his own ego or to self at the deep bottom of humanity. The seriously sick Kurtz creeps out of the cabin of the steamer and crawls on all-fours to the savage rites in the wilderness. Marlow has to wrestle with soul—Kurtz is now purely a soul. Marlow describes:

There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.³⁹

And Marlow feels the terror:

I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation.⁴⁰

Kurtz is alone, all alone, "turning his back on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home." And "he had kicked himself loose of the earth . . . he kicked the very earth to pieces." He knows no laws. He has no ruler. He himself is his only ruler. He is the king of everything. He is God, to himself and to all others. In this way Kurtz comes to resemble Faust in Renaissance period, who believes in his own infinite self and, wanting to grasp everything in the universe, says:

Und was der ganzen Menschheit zugeteilt ist,
Will ich in meinem innern Selbst genießen,
Mit meinem Geist das Höchst' und Tiefste greifen,
Ihr Wohl und Weh auf meinen Busen häufen,
Und so mein eigen Selbst zu ihrem Selbst erweitern,
Und, wie sie selbst, am End' auch ich zerscheitern.⁴¹

This is the very culminating point of whole European civilization—an indefinite expansion of self. Modern individualism together with

39. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

41. Goethe, *Faust* (Christian Wegner Verlag, 1966), p. 59.

modern materialism which knows no purpose but to progress forever, no moral laws, no God, is the very result of this "idea" of infinite self-expansion. Kurtz, like Faust in the very starting point of modern ages, has strength in his character to push things to the furthest point. No doubt his original idealism also comes from his heroism. From the first he distinguishes himself from others strictly, and behaves very arrogantly in planning or carrying out his idea. So both his idealism and individualism are two phases of the same strong belief in self. This belief is the "idea" which has appeared throughout the progressive current of European thought. And Kurtz is not an inhabitant in Renaissance, a cradle period of modern ego, but his age presents the very sinister phase in human history with the high development of natural science and full awareness of human ego. So Kurtz is tragically the very representative of modern European civilization, standing all alone in the "open field" with the most strong awareness of ego. Marlow is quite conscious of this. He feels himself as "Mr. Kurtz's friend—in a way."⁴² He understands Kurtz's case in the bottom of his heart. He says:

Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear. . . .

But his soul was mad. *Being alone in the wilderness*, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. . . . No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it,—I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. [*Italics are mine.*]⁴³

Marlow sees Kurtz's hollowness at the core, and he is now really aware of the hollowness in all the mind of Europe through Kurtz.

The darkness of African nature stands still and shows the very hollowness of civilized men who challenge the darkness of their own existence. In Kurtz's last agony in the very moment of his death, Marlow

saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless

42. "Heart of Darkness," p. 138.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

power, of craven terror—or an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

“The horror! The horror!”⁴⁴

Marlow understands Kurtz really and partakes in Kurtz's horrible experience, but he survives and returns to Europe. Kurtz is tragic in his extremism. But Marlow has a kind of strength—a kind of restraint—something different from Kurtz's strength. And his posture like Buddha, in telling his story on the *Nellie* on the Thames, somehow suggests the direction of his thought which is toward some Eastern idea quite different from that of European civilization. But it does not seem so strongly positive relief in the story as W. B. Stein suggests in his “The Lotus Posture and the ‘Heart of Darkness’.”⁴⁵ Marlow's awareness of the twilight—or the very crisis—of Western thought through his whole experience is the main theme of this short novel.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

45. cf. William Bysshe Stein, “The Lotus Posture and the ‘Heart of Darkness’” (originally in *Modern Fiction Studies*, II (Winter, 1956-57). reprinted in *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium* ed. R. W. Stallman (Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 179-181.