

Voice and Heart of Darkness: Centrality and Discourse in Colonialism

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My essay on *Heart of Darkness* explores Conrad's dramatization of the voice and heart dynamic in the novella as a penetration of the deep-lying rationale of colonial operation and more generally the human condition at the turn of the 20th century. Three different forms of assumed centrality in the novella—capital, Eurocentrism, and the African interior as detrimental void symbolized by the heart of darkness form concentric circles that interconnect and work in concert as the core colonial ideology and produce a sense of incongruity and absurdity. The voice of this colonial ideological apparatus disguised as the universal subject of humanity and rationality finds its best expression in the eloquence of Kurtz, the specimen of culture seduced by its very opposite—the wilderness—right in the heart of darkness. “The horror”, as his final verdict of life as a European with real intent of living on his own terms at the turn of the 20th century, sums up the predicament of a civilization with too much culture and self-absorption for its own good.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, colonialism, centrality, discourse

Introduction

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad presents his tale of “a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa” (Conrad, 1958, p. 154) as a text where one voice is nestled in another—we hear Kurtz through Marlow and Marlow through the anonymous first-person narrator. The novella has since been labeled “racist” and “anti-colonialism” by critics with emphatic arguments from both sides. The story is autobiographical to a great extent, based on Conrad's journey to the Congo in a steamboat around 1890, but the specific names that have historical bearings like the Conge and Brussels are carefully effaced, giving us a deliberate distance between the real history and the fictional world of art (Page, 1995, pp. xi-xii). The motifs of the voice and the heart, in my opinion, hold the major weight in the revelation of Conrad's artistic vision of the tale. The struggles of the voices under the clutch of a powerful colonial discourse accompanying the empty and horrified state of the heart given in to the then central colonial ideology are what makes *Heart of Darkness* a classic text on colonialism. Therefore, rather than considering it from a pro/against-colonialism perspective, the author's essay explores Conrad's dramatization of the voice and heart dynamic in the novella as a penetration of the deep-lying rationale of colonial operation and more generally the human condition at the turn of the 20th century.

The Heart as the Central Void of Ideology

The “Heart” in *Heart of Darkness* variously refers to the African interior (“[w]e penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (Conrad, 1995, p. 41)¹), Kurtz’s heart (“It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his *heart*” (1995, p. 80)), and the general human heart (“I understand better the meaning of his stare [...] piercing enough to penetrate all the *hearts* that beat in the darkness” (1995, p. 82)). It is a common reading that the title denotes simultaneously the unknown and unknowable quality of this virgin land, the moral corruption of western men under colonialism, and the impenetrability of the inner life of men. The multiple interpretations of this key symbol in fact do not run parallel to each other but have underlying connections.

“Heart” implies centrality or interiority, a governing ideological archetype with inveterate history in the West. The center emanates, sustains, and governs the periphery. The Christian ideology with its trinity and incarnation promises an absolute center and human access. Though Nietzsche pronounced the death of the Christian God in the late 19th century, its rein still held dying power when Conrad wrote the novella in 1899. However as post-structuralists would argue the structure “has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida, 2007, p. 915), the origin or the center is always retrospectively constructed by the gendered language. An idea like the “omnipotent God” disguises itself as the timeless origin by eliminating the historical traces of its material relevance, saying the specific stage of human epistemic development and the unifying need of the expanding Roman Empire. A historical concept born out of human activities thus turns the table and acquires dominating force, what Foucault dubs power-knowledge, in the human psyche. The symbolic’s rule amounts to being tyrannical, especially when it claims supreme legality. This has been the fate of men since their “ascent” into the realm of the symbolic—alienation from their own creation and dependence upon an empty center.

Marlow embarks upon his journey feeling as if he is heading toward “the centre of the earth”. This perceived center appears to sustain the operation of the trading company and of the whole Europe at the time of colonial expansion since all the activity and discourse, explicitly or not, point toward it. Yet the sense of centrality is only thus constructed by layering multiple discourses that justify and organize different motivations. It is the land of chaos, of savages, of good-doing and the land of material abundance. The center is actually outside the fabric as Derrida suggests, it is in fact the other. All those categories combine to make Africa central and incomprehensible—the heart of darkness. And absurdity sets in when the navigating symbolic order is in disorder when encountering the other.

The Absurd and Colonialism

Marlow comes into contact with the deadening absurdity brewing among the colonial undertakings when he witnesses the company’s futile business of endlessly “landing soldiers” and “landing custom-house clerks” and later the imbecility of its avid employees—the “pilgrims”:

It was as unreal as everything else—as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account—but as to effectually lifting a little finger—oh, no. By heavens! There is something after all in the world allowing one man to steal a

¹The following quotations of the novella are extracted from the same edition with the page number indicated in parentheses.

horse while another must not look at a halter. Steal a horse straight out. Very well. He had done it. Perhaps he can ride. But there is a way of looking at a halter that would provoke the most charitable of saints into a kick. (1995, p. 28)

The sense of absurdity felt by Marlow was widely felt by people in the 20th century. It is not simply occasioned by the absence of definitive symbolic gridding but by the realization of the inscrutable and random logic of any symbolic system. Marlow's venting about the absurd logic of stealing horses and looking at halters have something to do with his bewilderment, or actually indignation, about the definition and treatment of the native people by the invading Europeans. To some French man-of-war "firing into a continent", the black people are the invisible "enemies"; to the hypocritical pilgrims, they are the "criminals" to be pitied and transformed into the "workers"; and to Kurtz, the "rebels" whose heads belong to the stake outside his station. Marlow becomes somewhat hysterical at Kurtz's brutality: "Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels" (1995, pp. 68-69). The native people were in turn designated to the inferior in the linguistic binary, to the speaking subject's advantage. Language, specifically signifier, becomes not the illuminating light but the tool of subjugation. To define someone is to wield power over him. The inherent rules of language are never impartial and this rends Marlow's sense of firm ground and straightforward facts to pieces. Examining himself one after another, he finds the definitions inadequate, sham, or cruel. The substitution of signifiers only defers the real embrace between the supposed subject, Marlow in this case, and the object and engenders a sense of unreality and uncanniness.

To the subject, the meaning can only be stayed by a master signifier. This is what Marlow refers to when he talks about the "idea" behind their activities:

What redeems it is the *idea* only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to... (1995, p. 7)

The master signifier refers only to itself, and thus stops the sliding meaning from one signifier to the next in the signifying chain. It is exactly the empty center in any discourse. A set of signifiers make up an enclosed structure, a field of ideological discourse, where the subject enters when interpellated and his libido can only traverse the designated course arranged according to the master signifier, what Marlow calls "offer a sacrifice"—life sacrifice to be exact. Nietzsche had already speculated on the possible ideological ensnarement after the death of God. The 20th-century history of totalitarian regimes and the destruction they wrought substantiated his fear. The chief instrument of such subjection is language at its rhetorical essence—think about the incendiary speech of Adolf Hitler. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz's voice somehow approaches the instigating force of a dictator. The reason may be that he is so attenuated as an individual person that his utterance is the idea incarnate, pure, and powerful.

It comes to what exactly is the idea—the master signifier—that structures colonialism. The advent of modernity in Europe is characterized by capitalism replacing Christianity as the sweeping force that centers and organizes human activities. The shift falls upon the reification of the idea of the center. Whereas Christianity emphasizes the authority of the Scriptures, capitalism abolishes such bondage of the soul just to place in its stead a secular anchor—the capital of course—money not in service to human exchange but in love with itself to multiply itself. It is because of the discovery of the center as a void that it came to earth not as Christ but as Sign. Monetary unit as the universal sign marks everything and regulates human relations. Colonialism as a phase of capitalism no doubt revolves around the capital. The much revered "ivory" is only one of its derivatives. The everything and nothing nature of the capital as the Sign make it the seat of moral degeneration, the heart of

darkness, from which seemingly diverse voices issue though underpinned by the same vibration—"My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—" (1995, p. 57) and the fatal "my plans" (1995, p. 72). A subject wrought out of the homogenizing and possessive force of the selfsame principle of the elemental Sign.

The Voice as the Struggle

Marlow despises the pilgrims for their treacherous nature concerning the philanthropic idea of western civilization. To him personally, the idea means "efficiency" (1995, p. 7) or "the right way of going to work" (1995, p. 44). In a sense, it is the pilgrims' hypocrisy that engenders chaos and darkness. And it is for the hope of seeing the idea upheld that Marlow yearns to meet the sensational prodigy of Kurtz as he confesses: "I was curious to see whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there" (1995, p. 35). But what subconsciously draws Marlow toward Kurtz is not as much the wish to see how he set to work according to his ideas as the obsession to hear him talk:

I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing. [...] The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words. (1995, p. 55)

Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* often presents people as "voices" like "I heard voices approaching" (1995, p. 36) or "growled a voice" (1995, p. 40). It is as if the narrator's perception is so muffled by the darkness that he can only discern through sound. This effect should be credited to the age of mechanical invention. The voice used to be unquestioningly linked to the human body and personhood. Yet in 1877, the invention of the phonograph broke the link and threw human subjectivity into doubt (Kreilkamp, 1997). It turns out that the voice does not solely issues from the divine source of the human heart, but is liable to be subjected to recording, reproduction, and manipulation. The voice seems to gain its own independent existence, but unlike writing which consists of impersonal signs, the recording with its ability to preserve the texture and the tone of human voices must hint at subdued personhood almost uncannily to its first audience like disembodied wraith. That is exactly the state of Kurtz whom Marlow at last comes to meet. He has hollowed himself out with avid ambition and becomes the device echoing eloquence about "love, justice, conduct of life—or what not" (1995, p. 68) that he as the "original Kurtz" has absorbed for "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of [him]" (1995, p. 58). He does this in a forceful charismatic way that wins for him devout disciples (Seeber, 2008). His ambition is that of Nietzsche's will to power—"There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth" (1995, p. 77). His eloquence is powered by the wilderness in himself that has dawned upon and embraced by him. But the Nietzschean superman has not come; Kurtz's eloquence is nothing but over-energized clichés of colonial propaganda with its arrogance and cruelty bared—"we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings" (1995, p. 58) and "Exterminate all the brutes!" (1995, p. 58) No new moral ideals are born out of him as Marlow has anticipated, that is he yields no new form of subjectivity, except his disheartening final pronouncement on human life: "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!'" (1995, p. 81). Ellis (1976) works out a coherent scheme that the final image Kurtz sees is that of his intended and Kurtz with high likelihood sets out for Africa to better provide for her in the first place. The author agrees with him. Kurtz's "exaltation" departs from the place of personal love and concludes with a return to it.

This is why Marlow affirms that he is remarkable for his last whisper of truth—"the strange commingling of desire and hate" (1995, p. 82)—Eros and Thanatos. The conventionality of his desires—love for a conventional Victorian "angel" with other-worldly moral ideals² and later for wealth and distinction, and the failure to integrate his shadow is what lacks for him to transcend the human predicament and achieve greatness in a true sense.

Conclusion

In *Heart of Darkness*, the African interior is made into the displaced and reified center of the Eurocentric colonial ideology—the heart of plenty, chaos, and darkness that reconciles its incongruity of civil appearance and savage intention—the European heart of moral darkness. European colonial activities such as the ivory trade are driven by the pursuit of capital. Their degenerating ethics has its roots in the surrender to the capitalist logic—a homogenizing sign as the fundamental scale of every activity in the human society, also an empty heart that broods darkness. Thus, the three different forms of centrality as detrimental void symbolized by the heart of darkness form concentric circles that interconnect. The African people are relegated to the peripheral position of the other by the intertwining and contradictory colonial discourses, that is the ideology's interpellating voices. And the subjects like the pilgrims that answer the call of the ivory deity are recruited into the colonial apparatus' mindless reproduction. While Marlow, with a split consciousness and responding to the higher call of professional ethics in the colonial ideology, acutely feels the absurdity of the actual colonial operations and its intrinsic savage logic of the powerful dominating the weak, a power is derived from having a language. This language disguises itself as the neutral voice of enlightenment—the pinnacle of human civilization. The voice of this universal subject of humanity and rationality finds its best expression in the eloquence of Kurtz, the specimen of culture seduced by its very opposite—the wilderness—right in the heart of darkness. "The horror", as his final verdict of life as a European with real intent of living on his own terms at the turn of the 20th century, sums up the predicament of a civilization with too much culture and self-absorption for its own good.

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²The European women in the novella like Kurtz's intended and Marlow's aunt are characterized by Conrad's as living in an unreal world and serve as his symbol for ungrounded idealism fueled by false colonial propaganda. But it should be noted that this is a problematic portrayal of women on Conrad's part.