

# Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in a Kantian Light

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Is *Heart of Darkness* a representation of philosophical scepticism? In 1924 Ford Madox Ford thought of Conrad as a fellow *Impressionist* (1924, 6), and impressionism traces back to David Hume, who was a sceptic. (For a fuller discussion of this matter and, in general, of the roots of impressionism, see Watt 1979, 178-80.) There is some doubt about categorizing Conrad as an impressionist, however, since he himself expressed distaste for the style in painting, at least, and he was dead when Ford published that view of him (Watt 1979, 172-73). But it is certainly not unreasonable to connect the novel with the epistemology of Hume. For it is a record of Marlow's flow of experiences as he sails up and down the Congo, etc, and the experiences are described in terms of sense experience, for the most part. Indeed there are attempts to describe an underlying reality that would explain the flow of sense impressions, but these fail, typically falling into the word play with adjectives of the incomprehensible that has been much criticized. It should, however, be noticed that this fall actually represents the failure of the primary narrator, Marlow; therefore it can be seen, not as a failure on Conrad's part, but as indicating the essential meaninglessness of such attempts as Marlow's to get behind the facts of sense impression. In the darkest moments of his journey Marlow finds truth in his routine of work on the steamer and in a book on such things. His ordinary descriptions of the passing scene, both non-human and human, shimmer with the light of

truth; it is only when he tries to go beyond that Humean level of reality that the light of impressions is replaced by the darkness of transcendental metaphysics (as it were). Thus it is in fact possible to see the novel as representing a fundamentally Humean scepticism.

Possible but not necessary. I shall argue that it is also possible, and perhaps better, to see the novel as Kantian, in a sense that I shall explain. This reading makes quite good sense of the facts (upon which Watt lucidly comments in the essay cited above) of apparently mixed European and British influences on the novel. For Kant was the last great philosopher to have a profound influence on both European and British philosophy. That is to say, it is quite possible to see Hume's influence, such as it may be, as reaching Conrad through Kant; and also to see Kant's influence, such as I shall maintain that it is, as reaching him through the European Impressionists and Symbolists mentioned by Watt (1979, 184). But speculation on this historical path, or cluster of paths, is not my main purpose. I mention its possibility only to soften the ground for explicitly philosophical speculation on the novel itself.

Hume's scepticism was *only* philosophical. He knew that in life we have no choice but to accept the reality of the external world and the inner minds that it provides bodies for. We cannot logically or philosophically justify our beliefs in such things on the basis of sense impressions, which, according to Hume, is the only basis for rational belief that we have. Therefore Hume thought that our beliefs in an external world and other minds within it, and also our belief in our own mind as a transcendent reality are not rational. Yet human nature compels us to believe, in spite of what a sound philosophy of reason tells us. These beliefs are not rational, they are, in Wittgenstein's haunting phrase, "something animal" (1969, remark 359). To that extent, therefore, it

misrepresents Hume to represent him, as John Rogers did (quoted by Watt 1979, 171), as one “who would have no mind.” Hume *would* have mind, and world too, but not on the basis of reason. The welter of impressions that arise in perception cause us to believe — against reason. That is Hume in a nutshell.

The trouble is that causation allows gaps even where they affront reason. Nothing in fact causes Marlow to hold any determinate belief about Kurtz's mind. Rather Marlow is drawn this way and that, attracted, repelled, but ever unable to rest or settle on a definite view of Kurtz's mind. Marlow's natural reason is unsettled by this situation, this haze of indeterminacy where reason demands fact. But Hume would not have objected. He would have said, I think, that the mind of any person exists as an object of belief, but not of the perfectly formed belief demanded by reason. The resulting view is that the mind of Kurtz is there before Marlow, but it has holes, as it were. On this Humean view, the charm of the novel is its stark depiction of Marlow's fall between the unfulfillable demands of reason (both his and ours) and the *animal* mechanisms of belief formation (again both ours and his).

Kant criticized Hume's conception of experience. For Kant (roughly speaking) experience is not merely the passing show of sense impressions, for that alone would not point to an objective reality of which the passing show comprises the subjective impression. Hume wished to fall back on the mechanisms within the human animal that causally generate its beliefs (in spite of reason), but Kant found more in the animal than impressions of sense and the causes of belief. Kant found, or posited, the human mind, with its given capacity to experience *objective* reality, reality, that is to say, as something over-and-against the impressions that flow in upon the subject. We cannot, according to Kant, separate what

we see from what we know, *pace* the Impressionists as Gombrich represents their aim in painting (Gombrich, 406). On the contrary, perceptual experience is replete with understanding. Normal perception presents the object itself; not (of course) the *Ding an sich*, and not the associated cluster of sense impressions either, but the empirical object (boat, man, tree, river, etc). What remains is then to try to understand the relations (e.g. causal) among such given objects. Kant saw the intellectual-perceptual capacity for objective experience as essential to our being as subjects of knowledge. I have indicated how Hume might have read Conrad's novel; how might Kant?

First, I think Kant would have applauded the novel's assertion of the fact of an underlying human nature. As a point of Kant scholarship, it should be noted that questions, both conceptual and empirical, might have arisen concerning the extension of the predicate "is a person," but the point is that the extension of that predicate, whatever it may be, is identical with the range of the variable of universal quantification which is implicit in Kant's generalization from his own case to *ours* throughout his metaphysics and ethics. Conrad simply shares our modern conception of that predicate, taking it as applying *at least* to any member of our species. Further questions naturally arise concerning what is to count as *normal*, as opposed to insane, etc; but these questions do not concern us here. What is important for us in the Kantian conception is just the following point. The flow of sense experience does not force us to a seamless and complete web of beliefs about the external world or the minds within it; but within the limits set by a critique of reason, we can be sure that the world is out there, and the mind within the person, intact and seamless within those limits. Both the external world and the mind are therefore legitimate subjects for inquiry, rational and scientific.

Here, then, is the Kantian motive for the proper (i.e. critically sound) application of reason, within the bounds of sense. We should not, that is to say, try to apply reason to questions beyond the natural world (to questions about God or the limits of time and space, or to the transcendental self, for example). But the mind of man, regarded as a subject of empirical psychology, is a proper field for rational inquiry.

A life informed by experience and reason teaches us that there are fundamental features common to all human beings. That is one of the themes of this novel, as Marlow confronts the savagery of the European pilgrims and the cannibals, and its opposite in the African woman and the Intended, or the cruelty of both African rituals and European bureaucracy. Watt (1979, 191–92) supposes that the knitters represent the *nonhuman* or the *dehumanized*, but I disagree: they represent an aspect of universal *humanity*, whether we like it or not. It would be a mistake, a kind of upside-down racism in fact, to see the darkness in the story as essentially European, or to say of the Africans, with Watt (2000, 88), that “we must surely make them superior as human beings to their white masters,” or with Singh (1978, 49) that theirs is “a simpler and more honest way of life”; since we (who recognize that they are human) may be sure the Africans share in our (all too human) darkness. But as their virtues are hidden from *us*, so too are many, if not all, of their vices. All of this is, of course, just to say that Kant would have applauded the Enlightenment themes implicit in *Heart of Darkness*. His categorical imperatives are, or should be, of genuinely *universal* application across our species, not restricted to one division of humankind; Kant would not have shrunk, as postmodern relativists will shrink, in what a Kantian might well regard as their well-meaning confusion, their inverted racism, from finding both virtues and *vices* in another culture (cf. McLauchlin,

387).

According to Watt (2000, 90–91) Marlow thinks of Kurtz as having no “innate strength” or “capacity for faithfulness” and “hollow to the core,” as if we are not all essentially similar in this regard (whether our case is correctly described as one of hollowness or not). But the Kantian view is that we are fundamentally similar in the matter of hollowness — or its opposite, which we might call *moral sense*. And it is not clear that Marlow thinks otherwise. After all, if, as Marlow might be taken to suggest (*Heart of Darkness*, 49–50), human moral sense in practice depends upon the eyes of neighbours and butchers and policemen, then it is not entirely innate. In that case, Kurtz needs the policemen, and so do we. The danger of leaving him in Africa, in that case, is not “only because staying would mean staying with everything he has done,” which would cause him to continue “his appalling career,” as Watt suggests (2000, 91); the danger lies in his being away from the neighbours and policemen of his own culture. For at this point in his storytelling, Marlow seems to believe that Kurtz, and all of us, may in practice depend upon them for moral direction. But it is only at this point in his storytelling that Marlow seems to believe that. As his story unfolds, so too does his understanding of the story and of being human. Saunders (1991, xxviii) said of Ford’s *The Good Soldier* that it “is a profound investigation, not only into why, and how, people deceive each other sexually and socially, but also into why people tell stories, and listen to them, or read them.” Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a similar investigation. The stories that are told may well give us the most direct access conceivable (one that God himself could not improve upon) into the developing mind of the storyteller.

The Africans have no language that Marlow knows, but inexorably

he is led to see that they are like him. Kurtz, on the other hand, speaks Marlow's language, but that is of no use to Marlow in trying to see into Kurtz's soul, to find some common spiritual ground with him. The same point could be made with regard to the bureaucrats, the harlequin, and others who speak Marlow's language: they too transcend his powers of empathy, whereas the natives whose language is completely unknown to Marlow do not, or at least not so completely. The novel thus deals with our capacity to know other minds, and *therefore* to know our own, insofar as there are universals of human mentation or emotion at all (as this novel seems to posit).

One central point made is that language is essential for a reasonably complete grasp of a mind, but it is not sufficient. Kurtz cannot say what it is like to be him, and neither can Marlow say what it is like to be *him* — not even to himself. Nevertheless we do know, as does Marlow, that there are facts about Kurtz's private inner life: there is *something that it is like to be him* (cf. Nagel 1974). He cannot or will not, or should not, tell us, but knowledge that the facts are *there*, tantalizes us, as it does Marlow. On this Kantian view, Marlow falls not between improper demands of reason (i.e. for knowledge where there is no truth at all) and human tendencies to believe nevertheless, which is the Humean conception, but rather between knowledge that truth is indeed there (e.g. that Kurtz's experience was indeed thus-and-so) and the sense that nevertheless it cannot, or should not, be completely known.

Applied to Kurtz, this theoretical distinction, which hinges on that between unknowable reality and non-reality, may seem pointless. Applied to the Africans, however, the point is sharp. Commonly the novel is read as being about *Kurtz as one of us*. It is supposed that the Africans shed light (or meaningful darkness) on him, and therefore

indirectly on *us*. The Kantian reading suggests inverting this order of illumination. Kurtz's reality is there, although unspoken, perhaps unspeakable (in one sense or another), and so is the reality of the Africans, although here the gap between us, as represented by Marlow, and the elusive reality is wider. We cannot form a seamless and gap-less conception of what it is like to be him or them; but we know that at some deep level of description *it is what it is like to be us*. Behind the veil, beyond the gap, the Africans are essentially like us (that is to say, at the level of human nature). Marlow hints at the disturbing nature of this thought of common humanity between them and us. Kurtz has seen the common humanity. What is profoundly disturbing for Marlow is the final *horror* for Kurtz.

The novel is sometimes said to be racist (see e.g. Achebe), in that it dismisses the Africans as mere savages without intelligible language. On the contrary, the Kantian belief in common human nature implies that we too are savage *if they are*. The novel then emerges as a commentary on the superficiality of all culture in comparison to the depths of human nature. The unintelligibility of the native's language is only unintelligibility for us who do not speak it. It represents *our* ignorance. Kurtz, however, shows us that sharing a language is not as important as we may suppose. What is most important is the human reality about which we may not be able to speak at all, but know, to some extent although not completely, in ourselves, and therefore suppose to be present in others, independently of any shared language (or culture).

*Heart of Darkness* seems at first to be largely, if not exclusively, concerned with the horrible aspects of human reality. Until, that is, the encounter with the Intended. She displays another aspect of human nature, another aspect common to all, including of course Kurtz, as she is



concerned to assert (in her claim that he too was noble in a way). Marlow's final lie is, he says, a way of "bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness" (*Heart of Darkness*, 74). True, he immediately adds to these words the following: "in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her — from which I could not even defend myself." Yet there is, in that *triumphant darkness*, the light of the *saving illusion*. In what sense is the darkness triumphant if the illusion saves? Marlow does not explain. For here he is indulging in his penchant for adjectives when experience fails him. Nevertheless, he has seen the *glow* despite the darkness *that seems at times to conquer*. In that glow he has the inkling of value. McLauchlan (379–80) puts the point well; she writes that "the great and 'saving illusion' *even though illusory*, must be allowed to survive . . . illusions are not enough to live by, but humanity cannot live without them . . ." I would add that one cannot be human without such saving illusions: they are of our very essence. Perhaps they should not be labeled as *illusory* at all; insofar as they are intersubjective, they might better be called *appearances* (to adopt a term from Kant's metaphysics). Certainly they do not suffice to render the person who has them "deluded and bloodless," contrary to Watt's opinion of the Intended (2000, 88). Therefore I disagree also with Watt's view (2000, 93) that "Conrad's story ends horribly enough . . . with the lie to the Intended"; for the lie saves both her and Marlow.

Marlow's journey thus teaches him the fundamental Kantian principle of universal humanity, with its horrors and its redemption. His personal distaste for lies, which is one of the social conventions that he had made his own, is, he ultimately realizes, relatively unimportant. Far more important is the community of human existence that he recognizes

in his encounter with the Intended. This too casts further light on what might be taken as the true subject of this novel on this reading: the Africans. (Here I invert the reading proposed by Kibera; see Hawkins 1982, 164.) For Marlow sees in the image of the European woman the image also of the African woman; Watt (2000, 88) is quite wrong, according to the Kantian reading, to see an intended contrast between these women. On the Kantian reading that I recommend, this seeing of the one in the other acquires deeper poignancy. In ourselves, in Kurtz, in the Intended, and in the bureaucrats too perhaps, although the novel does not explore this theme, we see the Africans, and this is to see humanity itself, with its darkness and its light.

The image of darkness triumphing over light that had pervaded the novel up to the final incident is, in my opinion, thus inverted in that incident; in this way (to use Conrad's own words), "in the light of the final incident, the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into place — acquire its value and its significance" (Conrad, Letter to Mr. Blackwood). It is only because there is light that there is darkness, in this metaphor: only where there are ideals can there be horror (cf. McLauchlan, 382).

In the ways I have indicated, the Kantian reading makes sense of the novel. It does so without attributing to Conrad either questionable Impressionist or questionable Symbolist leanings. (See Watt 1979, 171 ff., 184 ff.) Whether Conrad is located in the European or the British stream of philosophical writing, he could not have escaped influence from Kant. In a letter, Conrad wrote that the African "shares with us the consciousness of the universe in which we live," a remark with a keen Kantian flavour (see Najder 1983, 295; cf. Watt 2000, 92). I do not mean to say that Conrad's novel should be seen as symbolizing themes from Kant, but

only that it was written in a culture, or cultures, alive to such themes (of the Enlightenment). Therefore, while it would (of course) be wrong to impose a *closed* Kantian reading on the text (see Watt 1979, 191), it may be best to see the text as *open* to interpretation within the context of this philosophical influence, diffuse as it was (and remains).

In that case, to return to our opening question, is *Heart of Darkness* sceptical or not? It is not. For while Kant taught us to limit the range of reason and understanding, he clearly included empirical psychology within that range. As I read it, the novel is precisely a fictional study of the empirical mind, with no vestige of myth or religion or transcendental inclinations beyond those into which Marlow descends in his bad moments. The gaps and holes are only epistemic, not ontological. They are *at most* epistemic. They are not necessarily gaps in our understanding that we cannot hope to overcome. Indeed, on the contrary, I have said how the novel helps us to overcome the gaps, to fill in the holes, to some degree. For instance, Kurtz was known to the Intended, in her particular way of knowing him; he was not "a sham whom she never really knew" (as Watt claims; 1979, 246): her point of view is not complete, but it is a view of Kurtz, one that perhaps Marlow had not had access to until he met her. The picture of the man is filled in as the point of view shifts and new aspects are seen: the Intended's view is not in conflict with Kurtz's; nor is it in any way refuted by it. Although we may want to believe that her Kurtz could not possibly be the man that Marlow knew, he was. That is one common way in which the gaps in our knowledge of others are filled in (i.e. through such intersubjective perceptions, as it were); it gives us a sense of the complexity of persons. Another way, one that is less easily achieved, is by seeing in one person an image of another. If we can see in ourselves (in Kurtz of course, but

also in the Intended and perhaps in Marlow too) the Africans, what might at first seem to be imponderable gaps in our knowledge of men diminish.

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