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Tragic Pattern in Conrad's "The Heart of Darkness"

LEONARD F. DEAN¹

THE thing I can never understand, complains Aldous Huxley's cynical Miss Penny, is why "you literary men think yourselves so important—particularly if you write tragedies. It's all very queer, very queer indeed." Miss Penny might well be commenting on the published criticisms of Conrad, for the arguments about his importance lead finally to this question: Is his best work truly tragic? A typical affirmative answer is Baker's:

And to him, as to all the great ones, tragedy is not a sad thing, but exhilarating, vitalizing, dynamic. . . . [His chief characters, like] Lear and Cordelia, have reached a spiritual plane above all the evil in the world. The outcome in prosperity or failure is nothing; it is the ripeness of human personality which is the enduring consummation. . . .²

Other writers have used the comparison with *Lear* to explain or prove their conviction that a story like "The Heart of Darkness" achieves an effect which is profoundly affirmative rather than despairing and that Conrad therefore belongs at his best in the great tragic tradition. The comparison is suggestive, however, rather than precise. It is important to try to see how its truth is limited.

"The Heart of Darkness" is obviously symbolic. It is another of Marlow's

¹ Tulane University.

² E. A. Baker, *The History of the English Novel* (London, 1939), X, 42-43.

"inconclusive experiences"; inconclusive, he suggests, in the sense that it is perhaps finally "impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's experience—that which makes its truth, its meaning"; but also inconclusive, we are made to feel, in the more important sense that it embodies a central problem which all men must face and which is therefore never concluded. The journey is, of course, not merely into the heart of Africa but into the mind of man, which "is capable of everything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future." Essentially the problem is the relation and the disparity between appearance and reality, and hence the nature, the need, and the value of illusion.

It is first stated in the commonplace terms of the conquest of savagery by civilization. The philosophic mood of the discussion is established by the opening twilight scene in which the four men wait for the tide on the lower Thames, with the monstrous city on the one hand and the darkness on the other. They reflect that down this waterway have gone explorers to all the dark places of the earth, that even England was once one of those dark places. But admiration for the courage of the Roman and Elizabethan colonizers is quickly qualified

by admission of their greed. The problem is complicated, Marlow suggests. "The conquest of the earth . . . is not a pretty thing when you look into it"; and yet it is somehow redeemed by an ideal behind it. It is to illuminate this statement that Marlow tells his story.

From the outset he is increasingly critical of the vulgar belief in progress and in the superiority of European civilization. "The jolly pioneers of progress" in the home office talk hypocritically about being emissaries of light to ignorant millions. Trading posts clinging to the dark coast of Africa, a French warship firing into the bush, make him feel that the whole affair is stupid, ineffectual, and arrogant. The feeling is strengthened by his experiences ashore. The whites, driven by a hysterical greed, abuse the blacks and plot against each other. In the midst of all this feverishness and demoralization, a simple clerk who keeps his books methodically and who still dresses with European neatness seems somehow worthy of enormous respect. The effect to this point is one of nearly complete cynicism. Apparently the only redeeming ideal behind the conquest of the earth is a business-like efficiency. A man can find relief only in preoccupation with routine details. "When you have to attend to things of that sort, the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily." Otherwise, human actions are felt to be no better than "monkey tricks." And here Marlow, as if he were carried away by his old cynicism, strikes at his listeners. Their actions, too, he suggests, are merely acrobatic performances on "tight-ropes—for what is it? half-a-crown a tumble—" "Try to be civil, Marlow," one of them growls. "I beg your pardon," he answers. "I forgot

the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed what does the price matter, if the trick be well done?"

The request to be civil comes to us now charged with added meaning. It is a request not for mere politeness but for protection from reality, for illusion. To be civilized is to play-act, to pretend that there is no heartache beneath the surface, to make believe that routine efficiency is an adequate end in itself. This is one defense against cynicism and despair, but, of course, it is not a radical cure. It is merely to substitute an athletic devil for the flabby one which was everywhere in the Congo. It is to find a really radical cure that Marlow is eager to meet Kurtz. He "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." Kurtz, from all reports, was superior to the little men; he was something of a genius; and, above all, he was articulate—an eloquent voice. The suspense engendered by the prolonged trip upriver is dependent upon theme even more than upon action. The meeting with Kurtz will be the climax of the plot; but, more important, we feel that it will be the moment of illumination.

Before we arrive, however, the issue is drawn more sharply, and the conditions of the illumination are clarified. First, there is the sight of savages dancing. "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 passionate uproar." Any solution to man's dilemma, that is, must be based on this ugly truth.

Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as those on

the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief.

Illusion may finally be necessary, but it must be consciously and knowingly adopted after one has understood his savage heritage, his basic imperfection.

That savage heritage, as a matter of fact, may contain good as well as evil. This thought comes to Marlow when he tries to explain the extraordinary restraint of the starving cannibals who constituted the crew. They had no earthly reason to refrain from killing and eating the whites. But they did. Certainly their restraint was more admirable than that of the pilgrims, which was nothing more than the desire to keep up appearances. When the policeman and public opinion are withdrawn, then the quality of one's restraint is revealed: "You must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your capacity for faithfulness." Unless, of course, you are "too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness." The illumination cannot come in these terms. To be a true illumination there must be a full awareness of the issue, of the consequences involved. The absence of this awareness is illustrated by the Russian follower of Kurtz. He is immune and indestructible because of his very innocence and simplicity. For him there is no problem; consequently he has nothing to offer. Marlow "almost envied him the possession of his modest and clear flame," but it could not lighten the darkness for others.

When we at last reach Kurtz, it seems that he, too, has nothing to offer. He has dispensed with illusion, but on terms that we cannot accept. "Pure, uncomplicated savagery" is a positive relief compared to the unnatural horror of his

degradation. And yet Marlow is forced to prefer him to the evil hypocrisy of the pilgrims, who judge that Kurtz's methods are unsound only because the time is not yet ripe for them. "Exterminate all the brutes!" Kurtz had penciled at the end of his eloquent and noble report on the Suppression of Savage Customs; and Marlow perceived that this was the brutally logical conclusion to efficiency uninformed by moral idealism. "It was something to have at least a choice of nightmares"; and the nightmare of Kurtz's end was paradoxically lightened by his final awareness of its horror. It was something to face the savagery within himself to which he had succumbed. The pilgrims lacked even that insight and, indeed, unconsciously preened themselves on their blindness. When Marlow returns home, the people he sees on the streets are like the pilgrims. "Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend."

But, though we prefer Kurtz's final honesty and self-knowledge, we cannot endure to live in a nightmare. This is what Marlow discovers when he faces Kurtz's Intended. He is filled with despair "before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness. . . ." And so he lies about Kurtz's last words. Otherwise "it would have been too dark—too dark altogether. . . ." Thus the true philosopher, Conrad seems to say, is the one who has seen reality but who then, filled with a kind of wise humility, has returned and accepted the illusion which has now become a saving ideal.

An analysis like the one above does

seem to reveal a tragic pattern which is comparable to that in *Lear*. It is evident in the first scene of the play that the King has taken certain conventional moral and political ideals to be absolutely descriptive of reality. For him, what may or should be, is: All children do love their parents; all subordinates do reverence their superiors; and so on. This illusion or misapprehension dooms him to tragic consequences. But if the final tragic effect, as described by Baker and others, is to be achieved, the opening must prepare not only for disillusionment but also for affirmation. The traditional ideals which in distorted form constitute the King's original illusion are not to be denied, but purified and reaffirmed. Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent, who must for a time remain at a distance or in disguise, are, of course, the chief symbols of good, the promise that actuality may become ideal. In addition, Edmund the Bastard helps to provide for the final insight in a negative fashion. Directly after the first scene comes his vigorous denial of social and natural order, of legitimacy and the influence of the stars. His penetration of hypocrisy and rationalizing seems at first to mark him as the opposite of Lear, as a man wholly free from disabling illusions. His ultimate philosophical function, however, is to demonstrate that traditional ideals cannot be completely denied. Since the final insight is to be an affirmation, it cannot come in his cynical terms; but if it is an enlightened, rather than a sentimental, affirmation, it must hear and evaluate his argument. Lear and Gloucester do, of course, hear in Act IV, where life is reduced to aimless copulation and men are equated with flies that the gods kill for their sport. This point in the play is comparable to the heart of darkness, to Kurtz's final horror. The chief difference between the story and

the play is to be found in their conclusions, in the quality of the symbolism there employed, and in the limitations imposed by the use of Marlow. When Lear awakens near the end of the play, he is shown to be purged of his initial arrogance. Cordelia addresses him as royal lord and majesty, and we are persuaded that at last through his suffering he has reached a true understanding of "the specialty of rule." The breach between cynicism and naïveté is seen to be healed; the exhilaration of his informed innocence is transmitted to us in traditional imagery as he cries: "We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage"; and he dies asserting in the face of Cordelia's death that what she stands for still lives.

The conclusion of "The Heart of Darkness" produces a far different effect, although the intention is the same. The symbolism is melodramatic. The Intended has not earned the quality which she is meant to represent, and her effect is further weakened by the Hollywood set in which she is placed. When she extends her arms, the pose and the calculated manipulation of light, shadow, and black drapery recall too obviously the earlier mechanical symbol of the savage queen on the banks of the Congo. These lapses may be explained in part by reference to limitations in Conrad's artistic resources. The conclusion of the story, unlike the Congo experiences, was probably invented. Conrad's weakness in invention has often been noticed. It is implied by his preoccupation with the importance of reading symbolic meaning into actual experience. A wider explanation, however, is to be reached through a study of his use of Marlow. This fictitious narrator is usually explained as a device for securing aesthetic distance between the reader and the plot, thus reducing the impact of Conrad's roman-

tic material. In "The Heart of Darkness" Marlow does serve to interest us in meaning rather than in brute action, but he also prevents Conrad and the reader from fully experiencing the final tragic effect. It is Marlow rather than Kurtz who returns to affirm his faith in the Intended. This is unsatisfactory because Marlow has only observed Kurtz's horror. His somewhat parallel sickness is an inadequate substitute for Kurtz's complete disillusionment. In fact, Marlow's moral insight appears to be nearly as penetrating at the beginning of his journey as at the end. It was perhaps inevitable, given his artistic function, that he should be a static character.

Even more suggestive is the quality of Marlow's attitude toward the Intended. It contains a hint of gallantry, or at least of considerateness and pity. Certainly, it is not Lear's exhilarating other-worldliness. Much, of course, had intervened between Shakespeare and Conrad to weaken the Platonic-Christian myth of which the traditional tragic pattern is a particular and secular representation. It had been weakened not only by scientific skepticism but also by the worldly ethics arising from the puritan dilemma.

Puritanism sees illusion in the visible universe; it requires men as long as they are in the flesh, to act as though the illusion were real; it punishes them if they take illusion for reality. . . . The irony of man's predicament is that in his present condition he is not released from natural necessities, and yet he is incapable of satisfying them without adding to the enormity of his sin.³

This recalls the predicament of the honest Marlow as he lies to the Intended. The quality of his attitude toward her suggests, furthermore, the exaggerated value put upon small virtues by those who sought to escape from the puritan dilemma. They wished to persuade themselves that it is possible to mollify a stern deity by behaving admirably within the illusion. Conrad exhibits something of the same reliance upon duty, loyalty, decency, and "the steeled heart." This is obviously not the "exhilarating, vitalizing, dynamic" quality of *Lear*. Nevertheless, Conrad, in purpose if not always in execution, is still far from Miss Penny and the Hollow Men. It is not surprising, therefore, that he is prized above his contemporaries by Eliot and other searchers for a new affirmative myth.

³ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (New York, 1939), pp. 42, 157.

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