

White Lies and Whited Sepulchres in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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In his novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad through his principal narrator, Marlow, reflects upon the evils of the human condition as he has experienced it in Africa and Europe. Seen from the perspective of Conrad's nameless, objective persona, the evils that Marlow encountered on the expedition to the "heart of darkness," Kurtz's Inner Station on the banks of the snake-like Congo River, fall into two categories: the petty misdemeanors and trivial lies that are common- place, and the greater evils — the grotesque acts society attributes to madmen. That the first class of malefaction is connected to the second is illustrated in the downfall of the story's secondary protagonist, the tragically deluded and hubristic Mr. Kurtz. The European idealist, believing the lies of his Company and of the economic imperialism that supports it, is unprepared for the test of character that the Congo imposes, and succumbs to the potential for the diabolical latent within every human consciousness.

Although numerous critics (including Johanna M. Smith, Peter Hyland, Herbert Klein, and Garrett Stewart) have drawn attention to how Marlow's lie to the Intended informs the whole preceding text and how that culminating scene with the Intended is connected to Marlow's initial impression of Brussels as a whited sepulchre (how appropriate in light of Belgian King Leopold II's hypocritical defense of his private company's rapacious exploitation of the ludicrously- named Congo Free State!), few have until recently focussed on how the lie affects the reader's reaction to Marlow as the protagonist and narrator of Conrad's Congo tale.

Answering questions which the dead man's Intended poses him regarding the remarkable Mr. Kurtz, Marlow does what he most despises. To protect both the integrity of Kurtz's visions and the Intended's guileless love for the quondam humanitarian Marlow acquiesces in her statements of faith ("his goodness shone in every act" [Murfin ed. 92]), prevaricates with double meaning ("His end . . . was in every way worthy of his life" [93]), and ultimately lies. "There is a taint of death," the death of moral integrity, "a flavour of mortality in lies — which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world — what I want to forget" (41). Marlow has returned to Brussels "hoping to surrender to her the memory of Kurtz. She instead maneuvers him into telling her a lie: that Kurtz's last words were not 'The horror,' but her name" (Moser 79). Ironically, Marlow finishes his story of African adventure at the point where Kurtz's career in crimes against humanity in all likelihood began, with a rationalization, a justified lie. In fact, it is the lie that renders this another of Charlie Marlow's "inconclusive experiences" (21).

What if the Company's real objective were wealth derived from a trade in bones? — the fragile veneer of western civilisation, the great white lie of the White Man's Burden with its implicit, pseudo-altruism, must be accepted if the natives of the dark continent are to be improved, enlightened, and transformed into white people with black skins. Such a parcel of lies, exposed in their naked contumely through the course of the narrative, Marlow has found "appalling," yet he now countenances his own untruth to the Intended on similar grounds, to preserve an ideal image that should be revealed as hollow. To tell Kurtz's fiancée the truth "would have opened the bleakness of his heart to her view; and she would have known the depths to which he had sunk" (Dowden 82).

The countenancing of the greater evil, the lies like rainbow colours on the \ Company's map veiling the real motives of European imperialism in Africa, is behind both the thoughtless misbehaviour of those "jolly pioneers of progress" (24) and "emissaries of light," the ironically-dubbed "pilgrims," and the calculated reign of terror that Kurtz directs against the neighbouring tribes. Enthralled by their own money-lust (which, as Lionel Trilling observes of late nineteenth-century American society, is "the father of ultimate illusion and lies" [110]), the Europeans disregard both the natives' interests and their own moral well-being as they monopolize the ivory trade. The very air seems to sigh "ivory," and the only earthly reason Europeans in the Congo can give for being out there is "To make money, of course" (35).

However, it is not corporate profits but the welfare of the natives that Kurtz's Company has used back in Europe to justify its presence and activities in central Africa. Before he came face to face with his own base passions and atavistic drives there, Kurtz the journalist espoused those same altruistic ideals (which Marlow satirizes as "the noble cause" [23] and "the cause of progress" [24]) that his employers have mouthed in order to mitigate enslaving the natives to facilitate their obsessive quest for gain.

As in Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" (1896) the manager's lofty intentions for his work at the jungle station were quickly perverted by the Darwinian ethos of the unfamiliar climate and environment, which shattered Kurtz's shallow European principles, leaving him the mere hollow shell of a civilized, rational being. "In the wilderness Kurtz's integrity collapses; only the extremes of appetite and intellect, of savagery and idealism survive" (Lynn 22). Conrad makes plain the moral bankruptcy of the system for which Kurtz stands by connecting him with Brussels, the "city of the dead" (25) that in Marlow's reminiscence epitomizes European civilisation: "a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre" (24).

In the above description Conrad alludes to Christ's characterization of his opponents, the New Testament's Pharisees, as "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful (i. e., "virtuous," in Christ's context) outwardly, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness" (Matthew 23: 27) spiritually. What the Saviour found so objectionable in his sectarian adversaries is what Marlow finds so repulsive in the Belgian company: sheer hypocrisy. Just as the Pharisees maintained that they were solely concerned with the spiritual health of the people of Israel but acted out of self-interest, so the Company hides its appetite for wealth and power behind empty platitudes about advancing the light of European civilisation through the darkness of the African jungle, and "'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'" (26).

When Marlow describes his city of departure . . . , white is immediately problematized for the reader. The color acquires not only sepulchral connotations but also moral dubiousness, Marlow's description recalling the Biblical phrase for the hypocrite, the man of inner darkness whitewashed by outer manner and conventional deed (Rosmarin 161).

If Brussels seems a whited sepulchre and the Company presents an enlightened façade, the interior reality is Mr. Kurtz, behind whom lurk death and desolation. The marble fireplace of the Intended's parlour possesses a "cold and monumental whiteness" (90), connecting this particular European interior with the general exterior of the society. The white of the middle-eastern tomb's exterior is the white of the African ivory, superficially attractive (in fact, the tombs were white-washed in order to be highly visible so that orthodox Jews might avoid ritual defilement by unwittingly coming too close): the inner truth is the stench of bones. Given over to the powers of darkness, Kurtz cannot restrain himself from misusing the tools afforded him by his race's superior technology — "the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter" (75) — and assuming godhead. He becomes a savage better only in fire-power than those with whom he is in league. His sociopathic tendencies being given full play, Kurtz mercilessly murders and pillages to provide his firm with his quota of tusks — most of it, significantly, disinterred "fossil." The savagery behind the whole European commercial endeavour in Africa is symbolized by the whitened skulls which ornament the pilings of his stockade like nobs on newel posts in respectable European homes.

The closing scene of *The Heart of Darkness*

Marlow's interview with the dead man's white Intended (a pale figure of delusion juxtaposed against the black Athena who had usurped her place for Kurtz at the Inner Station), leaves the reader with ambivalent feelings

about Conrad's chief narrator. To his male auditors aboard the 'Nellie' Marlow denies that his "trifle" (94), his gift of unspotted memory of her beloved, was of any significance. Although he is trying to spare her further anguish, he is simultaneously denying that the evils which Kurtz, the Company, and the pilgrims committed in the heart of darkness are still taking place. In fact, even after the follies — "the merry dance of death and trade" (28) — he has witnessed in Africa, Marlow values European colonialism as stabilizing — "There was a vast amount of red — good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there" (24). Although he admits the debilitating effects of civilisation on the Congolese (even the muscles of his cannibal crew are gradually deteriorating under its influence), Marlow sees the system as setting positive constraints ("a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another" [63]) to individual conduct. Even in "the sepulchral city" (87) which he loathes, Marlow sees the virtue of a system that permits people "going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety" (87). He justifies his personal commitment to the former, unreal, idealistic and idealized Kurtz by describing his impending lie as resulting from "an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfilment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence" (89). One must wonder if the sort of lie that Marlow tells Kurtz's Intended was the same first step that Kurtz took on the path to self-destruction at the Inner Station.

Like Willa Cather's protagonist in her psychological study "Paul's Case," Kurtz and Marlow have looked into that dark place in the human psyche and know what lies there. Buddha-like, Marlow has come back from near death on the Stygian shore to tell the world (in his mind, apparently a male construct), but feels an almost boyish reticence about revealing the horror of the darkness to the woman. Does he, as Moser has suggested, allow himself to be maneuvered into lying out of an outmoded, chivalric regard for the lady's sensibility, or does he feel that she is unworthy of (or incapable of understanding) the truth as it revealed itself to him through Kurtz at the heart of darkness? Or does he believe that someone must have his or her innocence maintained in order to sustain a worthwhile ideal that animates a workable system? "If he had told the girl the simple facts," asserts Walter F. Wright, "he would have acknowledged that the pilgrims in their cynicism had the truth, that goodness and faith were the unrealities" (159). Or is the lie an affirmation of Marlow's fellowship and solidarity with Kurtz, whom Marlow feels that he has no right to condemn?

The answers to Marlow's motivation are to be discovered in the nature of the lie itself and in the nature of the liar. Lies, of course, have proven indispensable to fabulists ever since Cain lied to God in Genesis and Odysseus slipped out of one disguise into another in *The Odyssey*. But Marlow's lie is neither as wicked as Cain's (especially since it acknowledges his need to be the keeper of his spiritual brother's memory) nor as self-serving but justifiable as Odysseus's. At first glance there is neither gain to be achieved nor pain to be avoided in Marlow's lying to the Intended. Marlow's lie is neither the cowardly evasion of Cain, whose conduct evokes the reader's scorn, nor the cunning imposture of Odysseus, whose studied impersonations and self-control call forth the reader's admiration. Marlow's lie we judge as neither premeditated nor wilful. Rather, readers never doubt for a moment that, in Marlow's place, they would likewise have spared the Intended's feelings and made her a present of Kurtz's final words. And that is precisely the effect for which Conrad is striving: we would do just what Marlow did, even though, as moral, decent people, we too abhor lying and deceit. And yet we would be wrong, for in shielding her from the truth about her fiancé Marlow is also insulating her from the Darwinian reality behind not only the African jungle, but also behind Brussels' impassive façade. If Kurtz's Intended represents bourgeois European society, then Marlow has just joined those devious political and commercial interests who are keeping the middle-class consciousness from apprehending the European exploitation of Africa for what it is: a cultural, economic, and geographical rape. "The Intended [and, by implication, European society as a whole] remains as unknowing of the truth as she always has, and remains a part of the foreboding darkness with which the story ends" (Montag 97). As a gentleman, Marlow feels that women are to be protected and insulated from any unpleasantness; as a closet misogynist, he states that "the women are out of touch with truth" (27), that they are an intellectually inferior, impractical species incapable of dealing with any reality, let alone the brutal reality of the Belgian fiasco in Africa. Through keeping Kurtz's Intended from the truth of his death Marlow reinforces his own chivalric image of himself: he would rather be chivalrous and lie than be cruel and tell the truth, recognizing how sustaining for her will be the illusion of a noble, sane, humane Kurtz. While Homer's epic voyager never has to lie to himself, even though he lies out of self-defense many times to others, Conrad's reflective mariner has trapped himself into doing and being what he detests, and, in doing so, has

also lied to himself about his motives.

It seems an innocent, benignly-motivated deception, a mere 'white lie', but, as Rosmarin points out, in *Heart of Darkness* white is the "the most explicit confusion" (161) for the reader, since it is an "off-color," the hue of ivory (upon which the whole European economic venture rests) and of Kurtz's complexion, a muddied, sullied white that, again to quote Rosmarin, "bespeaks contamination, a mutual transference between the spheres of morality and vision, between the self one is and the self one seems to be" (162).

As the story unfolds, Marlow reverses the normal symbology of the black-white dichotomy, so that gradually darkness comes to mean truth, whiteness falsehood. Ugly and harsh — black — as the undisguised version of Kurtz's death would have been for her, without facing "the horror" of the darkness the Intended will never be free of her illusions about the man to whose memory she has consecrated with nun-like devotion (as suggested by her mourning dress over a year after his death) the rest of her life. Conrad's subtle insistence on the whiteness of her forehead suggests that Marlow subconsciously now sees whiteness "as a symbol of all those who suffer self-deception as well as a symbol of all those who practice self-deception" (Brady 25). The implications for the complacent, white, middle-class, and emphatically male readers of Conrad's Congo tale in the patriarchal journal *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* are obvious. We are brought to the realization that the pathways of the African jungle and the streets of Brussels, jungles and buildings, heat and cold, mysteries and commercial enterprise, are, as W. F. Wright remarks, mere symbols of "the larger darkness, which is in the heart of man" (160), a darkness in which lies the potential for evil and for good.