

30. Joseph Conrad

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Heart of Darkness (1899-1902) 106

The inner truth

The end of the novel makes a final analogy between Marlow and Kurtz: the former appears to see an alter ego in Kurtz, who has eventually grasped the mystery of life when it is too late. Kurtz's death gives Marlow bitter awareness/wisdom, as the Ancient Mariner before him in Coleridge's ballad. In the following passage, Kurtz dies, after being worshipped as a deity by the natives whom he has ruled in total integration with the place: he has definitely forgotten his noble view of colonialism and has turned into a cruel profiteer driven to insanity by the desperate situation in which the Company has left him.

His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines. [...]
 One evening coming in with a candle I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within
 5 a foot of his eyes. I forced myself to murmur, 'Oh, nonsense!' and stood over him as if transfixed. Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent¹. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven² terror
 10 – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender³ 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!' I blew the candle out and left the cabin. The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room, and
 15 I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored. He leaned back⁴, serene, with that peculiar

1. **rent**: torn apart violently

2. **craven**: it. *vile*

3. **desire ... surrender**: the three nouns mark the development of his life through these three stages

4. **leaned back**: it. *piegò indietro*

smile of his sealing the unexpressed depths of his meanness⁵. A continuous shower of small flies streamed upon the lamp, upon the cloth, upon our hands and faces. Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt⁶: 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead.' All the pilgrims rushed out to see. I remained, and went on with my dinner. I believe that I was considered brutally callous⁷. However, I did not eat much. [...]

20 However, as you see, I did not go to join Kurtz there and then. I did not. I remained to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show my loyalty to Kurtz once more. Destiny. My destiny! Droll⁸ thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge⁹ myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up – he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – the strange commingling¹⁰ of desire and hate. And it is not my own extremity I remember best – a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things – even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride¹¹, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry – much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal.

5. **meanness**: it. *meschinità*

6. **scathing contempt**: sarcastic disdain (it. *sarcastico disprezzo*)

7. **callous**: it. *insensibile*

8. **Droll**: it. *Comica, divertente*

9. **had ... edge**: it. *avevo dato un'occhiata dal bordo*

10. **commingling**: union, mixture

11. **stride**: it. *passo*

- 10 had inoculated the children for Polio, and this old man came running after us and he was crying. He couldn't see. We went back there and they had come and hacked off¹ every inoculated arm. There they were in a pile ... A pile of little arms. And I remember ... I ... I ... I cried ... I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out. I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I want to
- 15 remember it. I never want to forget it. I never want to forget. And then I realized ... like I was shot ... Like I was shot with a diamond ... a diamond bullet right through my forehead ... And I thought: My God ... the genius of that. The genius. The will to do that. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure.
- 20 And then I realized they were stronger than we. Because they could stand that these were not monsters ... These were men ... trained cadres² ... these men who fought with their hearts, who had families, who had children, who were filled with love ... but they had the strength ... the strength ... to do that. If I had ten divisions of those men our troubles here would be over very quickly. You
- 25 have to have men who are moral ... and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling ... without passion ... without judgement ... without judgement. Because it's judgement that defeats us.'

1. **hacked off:** it. *avevano tranciato*

2. **cadres:** it. *squadre*