

Wacław GRZYBOWSKI

## **The European Mind and the Gnostic Derailment in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad in the Light of Eric Voegelin’s Philosophy**

In various ways Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is connected with friend, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, a Scottish laird, with admixture of Spanish blood, a Socialist, a sea traveller and a writer, with whom he got acquainted in 1897. Some of the literary impulses to write this tale came from his friend’s essays and fiction<sup>1</sup>. Graham’s attack on imperialism<sup>2</sup> could inspire Conrad to address the same topic. The two soon became friends and Conrad considered dedicating the collection of his short stories, including *Heart of Darkness*, to

---

<sup>1</sup> K. R. Frederick, ed., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 44. A passage from Graham’s *Notes on the District of Menteith*, a guide to his ancestral Caledonia, seemed to have found a peculiar continuation in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Graham wrote there: “What an abode of horror it must have been to the unfortunate centurion, say from Naples, stranded in a marsh far from the world, in a climate of the roughest, and blocked on every side by painted savages.” And in *Heart of Darkness* at the beginning of his monologue Marlow also ponders upon the Thames as once also one of dark places of the earth, and upon “the feelings of a (Roman) commander of a fine – what d’ye call them? – trireme in Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north .... Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages.” (J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, New York, 1981, p. 30). It is possible that Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* has something in common with Cunnighame Graham. After all both “followed the sea”; in the literal sense, for Graham was learning the art of sailing from his older friend; and in the figurative meaning, for “the way of the sea”, just as the craft of a writer, was to Conrad, and to a degree to Graham, a substitute of spirituality. (J. Lester, *Conrad and Religion*, London, 1988, p. 21; see J. Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, London, 1921, pp. 255-264)

<sup>2</sup> K. R. Frederick, ed., *The Collected Letters...*, p. 68. Graham was also an author of “Bloody Niggers”, a shocking diatribe against imperialism and colonial racism and Conrad liked this text.

Graham<sup>3</sup>. What drew them closer was their chivalric humanism and sea travels. However, unexpectedly there appeared a disagreement between the two over the condition of humanity and chances for political reforms. Their dispute, in fact, found an obscure reflection in *Heart of Darkness*, where Conrad continued, in a veiled manner, the dialogue started in letters. The idealism of the Scottish radical provoked outbursts of Conrad's pessimism. Thus he attempted to expose, before the eyes of his friend, the dark perplexity within the heart of man and thus within the human society. In this way, Conrad's vision of tyranny, paradoxically emerging from idealism, in *Heart of Darkness*, became an important supplement to the classics of political philosophy, even to a greater degree than directly political *The Secret Agent* or *Under Western Eyes*. Conrad's African tale gains such importance when interpreted in the light of the philosophy of Eric Voegelin, a German philosopher and a diagnostic of totalitarianism, forced to escape from Vienna by the advent of Nazi regime in 1938.

In the first volume of Voegelin's *opus vitae*, *Order and History*, one finds a fascinating interpretation of a simple fact, namely, that man is not the source of his own existence, not even of the existence of things, but receives the so-called existence "from somewhere" and, in this way, participates in reality:

At the centre of his being man is unknown to himself and must remain so, for the part of being that calls itself man could be known fully only if the community of being and its drama in time were known as a whole. Man's partnership in being is the essence of his existence, and this essence depends on the whole, of which existence is a part. Knowledge of the whole is precluded by the identity of the knower with the partner, and ignorance of the whole precludes essential knowledge of the part. This situation of ignorance is more than disconcerting: it is profoundly disturbing, for from the depth of this ultimate ignorance wells up the anxiety of existence<sup>4</sup>.

As Royal Roussel suggests, this inability to know one's ground of being and the ensuing anxiety are present in Conrad's fiction as the invisible dark element. He makes his characters attempt to master the darkness by searching for the "ground of their existence", in the irrational and beyond it, to rob the darkness of its destructiveness<sup>5</sup>.

Why is it political? Because the anxiety caused by this basic uneasiness and the imperfections of existence tempt man to look for oversimplified ideological solutions to the basic dilemmas of humanity, and may lead to disguised forms

---

<sup>3</sup> All in all it was *Typhoon* that was dedicated to Graham.

<sup>4</sup> E. Voegelin, *Order and History. Israel and Revelation.*, Baton Rouge, 1958, pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> R. Roussel, *The Metaphysics of Darkness*, Baltimore, 1971, pp. 16-17.

of tyranny. In *New Science of Politics*, Voegelin calls it Gnostic derailment and recognizes it in utopian idealisms and the moral duplicity of Puritans, of French Enlightenment, of Socialism, both Marxist and Nazi, as one of the main causes of the continuing drama of the Western world. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad shows how Kurtz's misguided idealism, based on decorous, but empty, rhetoric, makes him completely defenceless against his own duplicity and leads him to demonic tyranny.

In one of his letters to Graham Conrad wrote:

There are no converts to ideas of honour, justice, pity, freedom. There are only people who without knowledge, understanding, or feeling, drive themselves into frenzy with words, repeat them, shout them out, imagine they believe in them – without believing in anything but profit, personal advantage, satisfied vanity<sup>6</sup>.

“Honour, justice, pity, freedom” – these four words summarize Conrad's creed, which, just as Graham's, can be defined as chivalric, or at least heroic. At the same time the description of the modern duplicity is parallel to the characteristics of Kurtz's alter ego. But all that Marlow is allowed to hear about him suggests that he is a harbinger of the noble cause, a knight-errant, who honestly struggles with injustice and his own vulnerability. Kurtz is a member of the “gang of virtue”, a defender of humanity, at least in Europe. He is an author of a pamphlet advocating humanitarian ways of civilizing Africans. In fact, the notion of the “gang of virtue” alludes to Robespierre's idea the “party of virtue” justifying the use of violence by idealistic goal.

The plot of the novel, developing like “a genie out of a bottle”, is to bring a surprising discovery that Kurtz is a man of sublime ideas and great charisma that is ill-used, of the great voice and the immense emptiness within himself in which the voices of primordial demons “echo loudly”. (Conrad 1981: 97) Thus he is not only a literary version of Henry Morton Stanley, the explorer of African wilderness, or Leopold II the founder of the Congo Free State, the merciless exploiter of its native inhabitants, as Robert Hampson proves (Hampson 2002: 8-16), but also something more. There is in him an admixture of Graham's idealism.

In a letter, dated 23 January 1898, Conrad wrote to his friend:

You with your ideals of sincerity, courage and truth are strangely out of place in this epoch of material preoccupations. Into the noblest cause men manage to put something of their baseness; and sometimes when I think of You here, quietly You seem to me tragic .... I am more in sympathy with you than words can express, yet if I had a grain of belief left in me I would believe you misguided. You are misguided

---

<sup>6</sup> K. R. Frederick, op. cit., p. 70, the letter dated 15 June 1898.

by your desire of the impossible .... Not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly<sup>7</sup>.

Here one comes across Conrad's realism, bordering, in fact, on pessimism, which was one of the few things that differed him from Graham. It seems that in his letters to Graham written in the course of his work on *Heart of Darkness* Conrad wanted to tell something to his friend but feared to say it directly. He was afraid that Graham would "curse him" for this story<sup>8</sup>. Obviously, Graham's determination and courage as a reformist and a sailor deserved admiration in the eyes of Conrad. However, by a strange twist of imagination the writer managed to create in *Heart of Darkness* a character who shared some of the features of this Socialist activist, such as idealism and personal charm, but was deprived of the interior substance of Graham's personality. The writer suggested German roots of his hero, to put him in the line of great German idealists and, at the same time, nihilists. The writer made him poor and placed him in the environment of "sepulchral city", Brussels, to make him even more alienated. The "genie out of the bottle" inverted the image of brave idealism to show the political consequences of "the desire of the impossible"<sup>9</sup>.

But was not faith in sublime ideals a part of the chivalric creed, faith in the noble cause, in the purity of the heart and the necessity of justice? Although Conrad and Graham's friendship was based on their common convictions, the former, witnessing the futile sophistry of democracy, with its underlying egoism and the cult of wealth, finding no support in traditional religiosity, convinced about the hopelessness of the Polish cause, was ready to admit that there was no other position for an honest seeker of truth but the one of a lonely knight-errant, who, like a knight in Dürer's engraving, had nobody at his side but a dog, a symbol of faithfulness, and a devil and death embodying enigmatic darkness. That was what remained of Conrad's chivalric idealism. Or rather that was another aspect of Conrad's heroic attitude, underpinned by his neurosis, and not far, in fact, from Nietzsche's tragic vision.

In fact, Kurtz's ultimate vision of "horror" makes him a Nietzschean knight-errant, who differed from Dürer's in that he is deprived of the latter's restraint and integrity and was accompanied, not by a comical rustic devil, but by a horrifying, "weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly", and of bloody tyranny. In a perverted sense, Kurtz is an inheritor of the chivalric ethos, of European humanism and arts, in which he excelled, and of Western polity. In

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 157, the letter dated 8 February 1898.

<sup>9</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 193.

fact he inherits what remains of all these after the rise of Positivism and the loss of the “gospel of the heart”. Thus the narrator can say that “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz”<sup>10</sup>.

Reading the novel backwards, in somewhat abbreviated fashion, beginning with the encounter with the Intended, through Kurtz’s dismay and death, through the account of criminal greed and cruelty of white colonists, to the beginning set in London and Brussels, one may come to the conclusion that it was not the drama of the black continent that was in the centre of the text but the drama of Europe. The exploitation of Africa was the mirror reflection of the collapse of the old continent. The story of Kurtz was a terrifying prophecy anticipating the advent of Communism and Nazism. After all Kurtz had a German name, which linked him with the culture that, according to Conrad, reared the “Tree of Cynical Wisdom” and produced “the blood-red fruit” of partition and World War One. The only white friend of this unconventional agent was a young, uneducated, and idealistic Russian, the “harlequin”.

At this point Voegelin and Conrad meet in agreement. The loss of spiritual rationalism, or “intellectual humility”, as Conrad would put it, and the attempt to sooth the tension of existence by attractive, but erroneous, quasi-religious ideologies lies at the root of the totalitarian derailment. In *New Science of Politics*, Voegelin traced the beginnings of the utopian ideologies, offering a political paradise on the earth instead of the salvation of the human person, back to the medieval sectarian movements which sought the easy way out of the ordeal of faith and thus falsified the tension of existence discovered by classical thinkers and confirmed by Christ’s Gospel. Voegelin wrote:

Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of (visible) security in a “world full of gods” is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen .... The bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, ... forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of certainty that is gained is lost – the very lightness of the fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience<sup>11</sup>.

Obviously, Conrad was far from Christian orthodoxy, but Voegelin himself was also a religious individualist. Nevertheless, Conrad possessed a kind of heroic faith, even with a place for the dim silhouette of “God Almighty”. Moreover,

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> E. Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint*, Columbia, 2000, pp. 187-188.

the periods of aridity and despondency were certainly familiar to the author of *Heart of Darkness*. But unlike the forerunners of totalitarian ideologies, he chose to face his neurotic darkness with the hope “against hope”, which turned his chivalric idealism into chivalric spirituality. Strangely enough, in his late essay “The Ascending Effort” he defended religion and art against the Positivist idolatry of science and even dared to conclude that “art has served Religion; artists have found the most exalted inspiration in Christianity; but the light of Transfiguration which has illuminated the profoundest mysteries of our sinful souls is not the light of the generating stations”<sup>12</sup>. One may argue that it was just a rhetorical trope or that it was late Conrad. But the first approximations of this moral illumination are found in *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow prevents staggering Kurtz from returning to his subjects:

Soul! If anybody had struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I was not arguing with the lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear – concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear .... But his soul was mad .... I had – for my sins, I suppose – to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one’s belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity .... I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself<sup>13</sup>.

Conrad could put this words into Marlow’s mouth only if he had experienced such an insight, or at least believed in the light that could reveal the other’s conscience. Something similar recurs when Marlow meets the Intended and talks of his vision of Kurtz and the girl as simultaneously present in the same dimension. And again when he speaks of himself “bowing the head before the faith that was” in this girl, “before the great saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness”<sup>14</sup>. There must have been some intellectual light presupposed in the story that made Kurtz capable of seeing the ultimate “horror”. In fact, the light and the darkness are somehow inseparable. If Marlow’s lie about Kurtz’s last word is to be taken at its face value, the proper name of the Intended is ... “horror”, and the “unearthly glow” of her “saving illusion” is the ghastly shining of the same horrifying vision. The sense of darkness is intensified by her self-destructive commitment to Kurtz and his idealism. In fact her devotion has a character of obsessive escape from reality, which suggests an unexpected force of the spell of the idea she has followed. If her mournful destructiveness, disguised as the nobility of the spirit, is valued by

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 108.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 119.

her surrounding, it means that “horror” is also the proper name of the guiding light of the “sepulchral city”, i.e. of the culture she lives in.

The existential tension, described by Conrad and Voegelin, has deeply metaphysical core. For it flows from the struggle with imperfection of life to achieve *eudaimonia*, happiness, also in spiritual meaning, i.e. in the sense of satisfying an intellectual, moral, and aesthetic hunger, the hunger for beauty, or moral ideal, or grace, or the union with God. Following Plato, Voegelin calls this tension *metaxy*, “In-Between”, and explains that it is a combination of two movements, of *zetesis*, which is human search of transcendence, and *helkein*, which is the attraction exerted by God on man. Thus in the drama of *metaxy* there is the appeal of mystery, the appeal which is discovered not as a theory but as an experience of attraction to the sense of fullness of being, and which receives the symbolic designation of light<sup>15</sup>.

In *Heart of Darkness* one finds the light of an idea, and of an ideal, which exert their influence on the heroes. Kurtz’s report contains the following words: “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded”<sup>16</sup>. However, he writes also that the whites “must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, it is not clear what kind of light falls on the minds of the heroes of this story. Is it the moral illumination of Transfigured Christ or the light of a chivalric ideal, or is it demonic light luring one into self-destruction? Perhaps all of these illuminations are present at once making the whole story more complex and its symbolism more compact. The war within the soul goes on mercilessly and inexorably and it is responsibility of man to recognize the difference between the light of being and the shining of nothingness.

The drama of Kurtz, as a European, is designed to show that the cultural inheritance of the modern humanism and the complex of the civilizing mission does not prepare him for such discernment. Of the chivalric asceticism and spirituality there remains only rhetorical flourish which opens the mind to the light of idea but teaches neither “intellectual humility” nor “restraint”, both valued by Conrad as the ways to carry out sublime aspirations. Kurtz’s fate is a literary symbol of the European soul torn into two by the idea of “unbounded good” that subjugates it to the “immense plans” and “magnificent”, but futile, “eloquence”, and political success, that makes Kurtz’s will subject to the disguised “lust for massively possessive experience”. His semi-Gnostic idealism

---

<sup>15</sup> E. Voegelin, *Order and History. Plato and Aristotle*, Baton Rouge, 1957, pp. 200, 274.

<sup>16</sup> J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

makes him seek perfection and success beyond the tension of faith. The logic of the Gnostic derailment leads him not only to tyranny, genocide, ritual human sacrifices, and madness, but also to deicide, the murder of God, through the act of becoming a deity in the eyes of the natives. Once again, the “death” of God becomes the death of man.

EUROPEJSKI UMYSŁ I GNOSTYCKIE WYKOLEJENIE  
W *JĄDRZE CIEMNOŚCI* JÓZEFA CONRADA KORZENIOWSKIEGO  
W ŚWIETLE FILOZOFII ERICA VOEGELINA

Streszczenie

*Jądro ciemności* jest owocem sporu między Conradem a jego przyjacielem, szkockim arystokratą i socjalistą Cunnighamem Grahamem. Idealizm owego radykała spowodował eksplozję pesymizmu w umyśle Conrada. Pisząc *Jądro ciemności*, Korzeniowski usiłował unaocznic swemu przyjacielowi ciemną stronę ludzkiej duszy, a przez to destrukcyjne moce drzemiące w ludzkiej wspólnocie. W ten sposób w *Jądrze ciemności* Conradowska wizja tyranii, paradoksalnie wyłaniająca się z idealizmu, stała się ważnym komentarzem do klasycznej filozofii polityki, w większym nawet stopniu niż otwarcie polityczne powieści takie jak *Tajny Agent* czy *W oczach Zachodu*. Ów politologiczny i filozoficzny wymiar afrykańskiej powieści Korzeniowskiego staje się wyraźny, gdy do interpretacji jej zastosujemy filozofię Erica Voegelina, niemieckiego myśliciela, jednego z głównych europejskich diagnostyków totalitaryzmu, uciekiniera z nazistowskiej Austrii. Voegelinowska koncepcja głębokiego niepokoju wypływającego z ludzkiej niewiedzy o własnej tożsamości jest analogią do Conradowskiej wizji ludzkiego zapoznania gruntu swego istnienia i wynikającego z niego lęku jako niewidzialnego ciemnego żywiołu. Zagadnienie to omawia Royal Roussel w książce *The Metaphysics of Darkness (Metafizyka ciemności)*. Dla Voegelina ciemny niepokój ludzkiego ducha przynosi w sposób nieunikniony polityczne konsekwencje. Jego presja zmusza jednostki i całe grupy ideowe do poszukiwania utopijnych rozwiązań dla dylematu ludzkiego. W *Jądrze ciemności* głęboki niepokój Kurtza owocuje teoretycznym idealizmem i praktycznym „pożądaniem posiadania”, co powoduje rozbitcie jego osobowości i szaleństwo. Voegelinowska interpretacja totalitarnych utopii rzuca światło na obraz tragedii europejskiego umysłu nakreślony w powieści Conrada. Fabuła powieści wiedzie ku konfrontacji egzotycznej zagadki afrykańskiego kontynentu i afrykańskiej psyche z pustką i destruktywnością ukrywającymi się za idealizmem głównego bohatera. W ten sposób muszą one wyjść na światło dzienne i odegrać swoją demoniczną rolę. Głębokie znaczenia ukryte w historii Kurtza wskazują na kompleks bogobójstwa, który niemiecki myśliciel rozpoznaje jako istotną część tzw. gnostyckiego wykolejenia zachodniego umysłu (*Nowa Nauka Polityki*).