

THE GAME OF ALLUSION IN *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND *THE HOLLOW MEN*

A few years ago I was in Edinburgh attending a course in English Literature in which, among other topics, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was treated. I had been deeply impressed when I had first read it, so I was particularly interested in this part of the course. To my surprise, most of the attendants agreed in considering it basically as a manifesto against Imperialism; I agreed with them in considering it *also* in those terms, although I did not - and do not - think that that was the core of Conrad's novel. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, with all its allusions not only to *Heart of Darkness* but also to Guy Fawkes and Dante's *Inferno* is, I think, the best proof of Conrad's deeper meaning. This paper is the result of my reflections on the relation between the novel and the poem. First I will deal with certain aspects of *Heart of Darkness* which I consider essential to understand the third part; second, I will refer very briefly to Eliot's poem. Finally, I will try to establish the connection between both works.

Heart of Darkness is presented as the story of a journey, and has all the elements of a novel of travels: the expedition suffers considerable hardships, there are exotic cultures and settings, mysteries, etc. However, from the very first page Conrad creates the sensation that all the events, descriptions and characters that he is going to deal with are part of a much more complex reality than the simple fact of a journey through Africa. We have hints of this deeper meaning conveyed in the description of the setting and the characters on the Nellie. On one hand Marlow, who is sitting on the deck of the ship, adopts a solemn tone completely unexpected from someone who is going to give a simple account of an adventure through the Congo river. In fact, he "resembled an idol" while telling an experience which shortly afterwards turns to be more than the rescue of another adventurer; the experience itself is referred to, from the beginning, as a kind of revelation to Marlow: "It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me." On the other hand, the river Thames is described as loaded with an essential, archetypal function. It is "a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" where it is easy "to evoke the great spirit of the past;" as the Congo river, the Thames "has (also) been one of the dark places of the earth." The evocation of the remote forces that brought civilization into England through the Thames is the means by which both rivers are associated. Nevertheless, it is not only the Congo and the Thames that are deeply linked to each other as bearers of a strange conscience that runs along their waters, but also Africa and England partake of that similar nature; as in the jungle, in London "darkness was here yesterday ... cold, fog, disease, exile and death ... savagery, the utter savagery ... all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men." The narrator might be introducing a premise here: what he is going to tell us does not belong either to a particular period or to a particular place. It is an atemporal story about human nature that happened then in Africa as it formerly did in England, and as it might happen

at any time and in any place. The journey through the river is a journey through darkness, and darkness is everywhere since it is the unknown, the subconscious, the mystery of man's spiritual life. Sailing down the Congo river is the objective correlative - to use Eliot's own terms - of the spiritual initiation through experience, an incursion into the innermost nature and conscience of man which may result in either emerging illuminated from it - as Marlow - or definitely sinking into the shadows - as Kurtz. Marlow's journey represents the process of maturing through disillusion and defeat towards a deeper and greater understanding of man's self.

The mysterious significance of the journey is foreshadowed by several symbolic hints given to Marlow before leaving civilization. First, by the door of the company's office there are two women knitting black wool and sitting on chairs as if "guarding the door of Darkness" with a mysterious attitude of "unconcerned wisdom." They seem to be aware that they are the starting point to the unknown, and their attitude, their clothes and black wool provide them with a symbolic function: they are witnesses of the beginning of the initiatic journey as well as black omens of what may be found at the other side of the door of conscience.

Second, Marlow's description of the map of Africa and of a particular place that especially fascinates him is also foretelling: "a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea ... and its tail lost in the depths of land." Using Christian imagery to refer to the river, Marlow seems to be associating it to the temple in which the initiatic rite towards knowledge is going to take place. And further, as the snake in Eden, this one will also expose the travellers - that is, the neophytes - to its temptations, their own darkest passions and desires.

Third, Marlow has a presentiment at the moment of his departure for the dark continent; he feels as if he is starting something deeper than a mere journey to rescue an agent: "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set all for the centre of the earth." In fact, shortly afterwards the whole adventure turns out to be "a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares" in which two realities fuse: the journey through Africa and the spiritual pilgrimage that such a journey means to Marlow. The union of both realities in one is the clue to understand the moment of supreme conscience that Marlow goes through later in the novel, when he seems to glimpse the forces which had operated in Kurtz: "I foreshadowed a flabby, pretending weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."

The pilgrimage through the forces that work in the subconscious and that lead Marlow and Kurtz to gain knowledge of their own nature takes place in the river, the way into the deepest darkness where man must demonstrate his inner strength. The Congo river is a testing ground, it is the spiritual and physical isolation in which man has to fight against himself: "solitude - utter solitude ... silence - utter silence where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard ... you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness." If the journey to the heart of darkness is a journey to the most intimate part of man, to the subconscious, then the forces that harass Kurtz, and of which Marlow is a witness, come from the depths of the human mind. Marlow describes them as "the stillness of an im placable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with vengeful aspect."

Somehow, the mystery of the jungle is just the reflection of the mystery of man. The darkness of human nature is mirrored in the African landscape. In both the truth is concealed: "the inner truth is hidden - luckily ... But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me."

In the Congo river both past - primitivism - and present - civilization - are fused in the same way as they are in the human mind. "The mind of man is capable of anything - because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future." That is the reason why Marlow considers that the terror of the crew is not caused by the attack of the natives so much as by the fact that they were confronting with that substantial truth: "The danger, if any ... was for our proximity to a great human passion let loose." Therefore, in that sailing through the Congo river, in that inward pilgrimage "in the night of first ages" man must call on his innate strength to avoid temptation and then come out illuminated from that experience.

That is the great difference between Marlow and Kurtz. Both are conscious of the nature of their pilgrimage, but Marlow ends up with a broader knowledge and experience of himself and of the world whereas Kurtz is lost in the tangle of obscure and mysterious forces because he "was hollow at the core." He lacks the strength that might have saved him: "Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts ... there was something wanting in him." However, he is conscious of the nature of his journey and therefore discovers his own reality as well: "the ... wilderness ... had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know," although this only happens at the end of his life: "the knowledge came to him at last, only at the very last", when he is already facing his death and he has an instant of supreme conscience: "The horror! The horror!" Nevertheless, in spite of all that horror that fall on him at the moment of his death, Marlow declares: "Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it." We can understand this affirmation comparing Kurtz with other characters in the novel. Throughout this peregrination among nightmares we can see three different groups of people. First, Kurtz is aware of the transcendence of his journey when he sets off, although he falls because of his weakness, his hollowness: he would be the condemned figure. Second, Marlow starts the journey with the same awareness Kurtz had, but knowledge does not come too late for him because he also pays attention to the surface details of reality: he would be the redeemed one. And third, the rest of the expedition, the "manager" in the Central Station and the other "pilgrims" who appear all along the novel.

The latter are presented also as "hollow" characters, but their vacuity is different from Kurtz's, and still more condemnable. They travel to the centre of darkness without that characteristic awareness of Kurtz and Marlow. They are ignorant souls who neither choose nor act: "Even extreme grief may ultimate vent itself in violence - but more generally takes the form of apathy." It is this apathy and inactivity that pervades their behaviour, and the only thing they do is waiting: "they were all waiting - ... for something." They are "mean and greedy phantoms." In fact, Marlowe describes the "brickmaker" of the Central Station as a "papier-maché Mephistopheles." That is the reason why Kurtz seems to us less reprehensible than these other characters. At least, he acts, although he does it through evil: "Exterminate

all the brutes!" is a terrible exclamation, but there is an excuse for it and for Kurtz's behaviour: "the wilderness had found him out early." He achieves "that supreme moment of complete knowledge" in which his cry is one of victory. Marlow discovers through Kurtz that there is a potential hell in every man's heart. This is the legacy he receives from his initiatic journey and from Kurtz's experience.

In *The Hollow Men*, by T. S. Eliot, we may appreciate from the beginning two clear allusions which will play a definite role in the apprehension of the poem. One to *Heart of Darkness*, and the other to a historical figure, Guy Fawkes. To understand their significance and function within the poem we should first refer very briefly to some of Eliot's ideas on choice and action exposed in his work: In the utterly degraded scenery of contemporary society, in which there is a spiritual decadence, man is a victim of the rootlessness, isolation and sterility of urban life. But within that panorama of desolation there is a hope. Man may still attain his liberation and redeem himself. Here, the doctrine of individual worth and free will comes into play; man must assume his responsibility for his own destiny, which depends on his actions and elections. In fact, the theme of "choice" is recurrent in Eliot. Choosing is a privilege and a duty, for the soul is moulded through it and through experience. Life is an accumulation of experiences which are personal trials in which man has to exert his ability to choose. The wrong choice is the sin of the "wastelanders," the "hollow men," Prufrock, etc. So to redeem himself, man has the obligation to accept that compromise which leads to self-knowledge, to the exploration of his own conscience and environment to find his right place in Universe. This is the only way for man to know what and how to choose, to attain his right to freedom.

In Eliot we can see numerous references and allusions to Dante's *Inferno*. *The Waste Land* and the poem treated here are two good examples. The "wastelanders" and the "hollow men" are those who either made the wrong choice or those who have not been able to choose at all. The latter are the souls in the Purgatory, who are unacceptable both in Heaven and Hell, given their incapacity to act. They are not condemned, but they are neither redeemed. Those beings wander in a limbo which is a kind of death-in-life. Their inactivity and inability to choose excludes them from the possibility to acquire the absolute knowledge and conscience which are the only ways of liberation. In *The Hollow Men* we listen to those souls who have not chosen, who have not acted and who roam around that limbo. They are in that death-in-life condition, as they have not crossed the threshold of knowledge and death - understood as regeneration, as liberation and achievement of the absolute conscience of the self, a means of spiritual rebirth.- The hollow men dare not look at those who did act and choose: "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams / In death's dream kingdom." Here, as in *The Waste Land*, "This is the dead land / This is cactus land," and in this landscape of desolation Eliot describes the vision of these souls, "Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion."

Those "hollow men" are such because they have not accepted their moral and social responsibility as human beings; they have not committed themselves to choose and to act in order to acquire knowledge. This situation is clearly defined in the last part of the poem, and it is re-

ferred to as "Falls the Shadow." The shadow is the lack of knowledge that prevents these men from attaining their plenitude as human beings. And thus, neither does the idea crystallize into a reality: "Between the idea / And the reality," nor does movement become an action so that men are regarded as puppets: "Between the motion / And the act," nor there is any possibility for creation in a spiritually waste world: "Between the conception / And the creation." In this world of shadows, life - experience - is limited to a mere potential existence which does not become real: "Between the potency / And the existence / ... / Falls the Shadow." This litany which may remind us of the Bible Psalms is comprised of broken sentences, a meaningless structure that turns out to be useless: "For Thine is / Life is / For Thine is the." As we have already seen, the river is a central element in *Heart of Darkness*; it is the testing ground for man to arrive to the centre of darkness, to the discovery of the self. In *The Hollow Men*, the souls who talk to us from that limbo are also "Gathered on this beach of the tumid river;" there is also a river here, as in Conrad's novel. And like Conrad's characters, the "hollow men" do not set off in a spiritual journey, because they do not penetrate into the river that separates them from knowledge. They stay on its banks, and so they do not either redeem themselves like Marlow, or condemn themselves, like Kurtz.

In *Heart of Darkness* the man who transcends the reality that surrounds him, assumes his nature and acts, "must meet that truth with its own true stuff;" he must enter into the darkness and search his own truth. The "hollow men" dare not look at that truth: "Eyes I dare not meet in dreams." These "hollow men" are "sightless, unless / The eyes reappear / As the perpetual star," as opposing those who do act and see, those who "have crossed / With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom," like Kurtz and Marlow. Thus, we have the same recurrent image in both works: those men who have the mystic vision against those who do not have the courage to look. Marlow himself reveals the initiatic nature of the act of looking into the darkness: "I had ... to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself." Kurtz has the revealing vision at the end of his life: "He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision," like Marlow: "I had peeped over the edge myself." Within the mythic reality presented in the novel, the act of "looking" is a feature of the initiated men who have made a fact of that visionary capacity. On the contrary, as we have seen, the "hollow men" of the poem avoid all transcendental vision, and we are continually told so: "Eyes I dare not meet," "The eyes are not here."

But the "hollow men" do not either speak: "We grope together / And avoid speech," and if they do, their speech is insignificant and without sense: "Our dried voices ... / Are quiet and meaningless." Therefore, these "hollow men" are presented in a diametrically opposed way to Kurtz, who "presented himself as a voice." In fact, throughout the novel there are many references to Kurtz's voice and speech. Marlow, for instance, realizes that the aim of his quest is talking and listening to him: "I became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to - a talk with Kurtz." In this man who is "hollow at the core," but with a vacuity different from that of the "hollow men" of the poem, the voice is full of meanings and nuances: "his words - the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness." If the "hollow men" avoid speech, it is through words that

Kurtz shows his strenght, like in the pamphlet he was writing before losing himself: "The peroration was magnificent ... It made tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence - of words - of burning noble words." However, in *Heart of Darkness* we may also find an analogous situation to that of the "hollow men" as regards speech: when describing the members of the expedition that sets off to take ivory, Marlow characterizes them by the vacuity of their discourse: "Their talk ... was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage." Like the men in Eliot's poem, their language is superficial, weak; it is mere potentiality as suggested in the last part of the poem.

The other important allusion in Eliot's poem appears in the title: "A penny for the Old Guy," making reference to the historical figure of Guy Fawkes, a leader of the plot who tried to blow the House of Lords in 1605. Once the conspiracy was thwarted the leaders were executed; Guy Fawkes was one of them. This fact is celebrated once a year with the children carrying an effigy filled with straw that represents the figure of Guy Fawkes while singing, precisely, "A penny for the Old Guy." This allusion at the beginning of the poem contributes to create the image of men devoid of individual, inborn strenght. The effigy is identified with the "hollow men," those "stuffed men" who are "Headpiece filled with straw." The allusion goes further. In relation to this symbolic meaning, in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow talks about the agent of the Central Station in the following terms: "I let him run on, this papier-maché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little dirt, maybe." The agent is also a kind of scarecrow. All these characters, Eliot's "hollow men," Conrad's agent and "pilgrims" and the effigy of Guy Fawkes, are deeply connected through the same image of a form without content.

However, it may be convenient to make a distinction when considering the figure of Guy Fawkes. He was not an empty man; like Marlowe and Kurtz, he did act and choose. He is one of those "Violent souls" who have crossed the symbolic line that leads to "death's other kingdom." From there, these souls remember the shadows that the "hollow men" are. Although through violence, Guy Fawkes acted and that is what separates him from the lost souls who wander in a death-in-life condition. This dichotomy supports the complex system of allusions that Eliot creates in his poem. This character's duality relates him to Marlowe and Kurtz, also "violent souls" who have been initiated through their journey towards man's conscience and who look from the other side of death to those who have not made the initiatic journey. Like Kurtz who is referred to as "hollow at the core," Fawkes is remembered as an empty figure, a scarecrow. Like him, also, his vacuity is different from that of the wastelanders, the hollow men or the pilgrims. Both acted and, like Marlow, acquired knowledge and experience, tasted the substance of life. Unlike him, both were condemned.

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