WILDERNESS AS REVENGEFUL BIOSPHERE: JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

Dimitrie Andrei Borcan

PhD, „Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: The novella is a symbolist parable of ecocide and genocide, telling stories of a revengeful nature, which kills by means of obsession and disease all the cornucopian intruders greedy for ivory. Kurtz's story is a parable of a prodigy's regress and destruction due to both inner and outer darkness, the biosphere avenges its ecocide and genocide by commodificating him into an ivory ball. The symbolic story of the trip into an inferno is also an inner journey into the human soul. Conrad is a complex humane racist and antiracist anticolonialist, very different from the defamatory characterization that Achebe made to him.

Keywords: ivory, parable, racism, cornucopia, impressionism, symbolism

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a symbolist parable whose meaning does not lie "within the shell of a cracked nut" (*HD* 8), but surrounds it. At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, "the sea and the sky [...] welded together" on the Thames recall ship-building and the "mist[...] like a gauzy [...] fabric" (*HD* 6) evokes textile goods, as Greg Winston remarks in "The great demoralization of the land" (2015: 46). I consider that they suggest a similarity between different historical ages and geographical areas. With a disquieting remark about the historical relativism of progress of imperial England - "this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (*HD* 7), Marlow starts "spinning a yarn,"(*HD* 8) a phrase recalling wool like the British traditional goods repeatedly mentioned in the novella.

Cornucopia has always connected different historical ages and empires. When Marlow states, "The mind of man is capable of anything, - because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future"(38), he expresses the idea of history as an ironical repetition in the similarity between the Roman colonists in ancient Britain's wilderness and the Belgian colonialists in Congo's wilderness. He dares to challenge the imperialist myth of progress denouncing the Europeans as plunderers throughout history, a charge extendable to the British. The Roman legionary's distress in ancient Britain seen as "the very end of the world [...] cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death [...] skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush" (*HD* 9) undermines the myth of the Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. Britain's wilderness had been as barbarous and deadly to the Romans as the nineteenth century Congo wilderness was to the Europeans. The response of ancient Britain's hostile environment to the unwelcome intruders - "they must have been dying like flies here"(9) is identical to Belgian Congo's wilderness: "they all die so quick [...] at rate of three a day"(20). What is also similar is the colonist's painful contact with savagery of outer and inner wilderness, "in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (9).

From the start of the voyage, Marlow sees that he is not "going to the centre of a continent," but he is "about to set off for the centre of the earth," for the Inferno (*HD*18). The two foreboding women in mourning outfit, "feverishly [...] knitting black wool as for a warm pall" (*HD* 16) are ecocritically symbolic: knitting a yarn is foretelling the odds of life, the pall refers to burial in connection to the one-way voyage to the African hell. Marlow declares he is going "dead in the centre"(*HD* 15). The yellow patch of blankness on the map intriguing him as pristine wilderness since his boyhood has been sullied with toponyms and

is now imperialistically divided. Marlow's journey into wilderness passes through three Hell Circles: the Outer, Central and Inner Station. At the seashore he is warned about being unwelcome by the animistic mangroves "writhing" (*HD* 19) at him and by the lethal surf where soldiers, landed for no logical purpose, drown, as the start of the deadly attacks of wilderness on the intruders. By unbearable atmospheric heat, hostile vegetation and lethal surf, biosphere mirrors colonialist violence trying to block the abuse of a continent. They "stopped, landed soldiers, went on...Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care" (*HD* 19).

Throughout the novella, natural elements are invariably sentient, agentive and unfriendly, and the white intruders' behaviour is absurd. Marlow contrasts the whites' "flabbiness"(30) and need for a justifying idea for their plundering invasion to the blacks' vitality. The only humans he describes admiringly are the native canoeists belonging to the place, wanting "no excuse for being there" (*HD* 20), in an entanglement of man and environment. Multiple nonsensical incidents at the First Circle of Hell, the Outer Station, reveal a genocide and a geocide: a man-of-war firing nonsensically into the continent; a detonation against a cliff in the way of nothing; a blow up scarring a hill; a forced labour camp where chained blacks aimlessly carry earth uphill, guarded by a corrupted "reclaimed specimen"(*HD* 23) (a heterotopia of deviation); the extermination camp of the grove-of-death (a heterotopia of crisis). Displacement leads to the blacks' lethal decay in a habitat that is not their native one. In the grove-of-death, workers reduced to "moribund black shadows"(*HD* 24) by starvation, agonize reified into "bundles of acute angles"(*HD* 25) become anemomorphic, " nearly as thin [...] as air" (*HD* 24).

The scenes of the natives' genocide policy are juxtaposed on the accountant dressed in immaculate white, calculating the loot of the ecocide. "In the great demoralization of the land," (*HD* 26) the chief accountant, the single case of work integrity, attempting a reterritorialization of western values, harbingers Kurtz's codicil: "When one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages - hate them to death" (*HD* 27). His cynicism covers more than the Negro dying in the room or the blacks in the grove. His files "in apple-pie order" (*HD* 26) are evidence about ivory loot and fauna massacre. A shot black lying on the road, an execution, is sarcastically decreed to be the only "visible improvement"(*HD* 29) of the progress-justified imperialistic project. Without the presumed construction work, machinery degrades like theriomorphic carcasses (*HD* 22). The First Circle of the Congolese Inferno is summarized as the blacks' extermination, the absurd war against the land and the accountancy of the loot. Death is the common denominator for the invaders' genocide, geocide, ecocide, machinery destruction. Achebe's critique that the shelling is not into men in order to depersonalize the action actually focuses the disanthropocentric violence onto the environment.

Nature reacts by wilderness-of-the-body manifest as lethal diseases carried by "big flies [which] buzzed fiendishly, and did not sting but stabbed" (*HD* 26), a sign of epidemics as the response of the agentive river, which has banned all humans from its banks, a fact inferred from the abandoned villages, a wasteland as retrieved wilderness, suggesting a past of epidemics, wilderness-of-the-body, as nature's lethal response against invasive man, the universal parasite. The retrieved wilderness of the forsaken places is non-natural, a feature described by Jesse Oak Taylor as "both 'away from' and 'derived from' natural," a "resurgence" of the wild after the "end of nature" (2018: 28-29), a wasteland as a product of "the inhuman Anthropocene" (Luciano 2015:1).

> Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped -in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets, down and up

> chilly ravines, up and down stony hills ablaze with heat; and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut. The population had cleared out a long time ago. (*HD* 28)

Grass obsessively mentioned in the paragraph above is Conrad's typical vegetal symbol of death. Later, up the river, the steamboat is entomomorphic, whereas the trees are numberless, intimidatingly gigantic. The atmosphere contributes to making the journey hard.

> Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine […] Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steamboat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. (*HD* 48)

The numberless trees along the river are the augmentative argument of nature's hostility after the warning tall grass of the abandoned banks. In the nightmarish primeval horror of the asymmetry of the parties, wilderness is in ecocentric antithesis to the steamboat, symbolic of the puny mankind. By invasive abundance, the aquamorphic jungle belonging to the geological era of dinosaurs threatens to crush the inappropriate presence of man like a flood of excessive savage flora.

> The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, […]was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, […] a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence (*HD* 43) .

Time seems to play with the travellers, reversing to the primitives' era fears and further back to the era of the ichtyosaurus. "And it moved not. A deadened burst of mighty splashes and snorts reached us from afar, as though an ichtyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river" (*HD* 43).

In Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833), there is no historical progress but a cyclical and random movement of both geologic eras and the brief intrusion of human history in the planet's existence. There is a possibility, among others, of the dinosaur era's return to the earth due to climatic evolutions. Conrad's jungle is deaf and dumb, watching and brooding with a cryptic intent, reducing man to vulnerability, and, judging by the asymmetry, the odds of the duel are on the side of wilderness. Whereas with the Romantics and the Transcendentalists wilderness has ecophilic positive values, Conrad's modernist wilderness is ecophobically anthropophobic: "The silent wilderness […] struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth" (*HD* 33). By proximity, Conrad suggests the equation of "evil" and "truth" about nature.

> All this was great, expectant, mute,[…]I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two was meant as an appeal or as a menace (*HD* 38).

He does not trust nature. There is a mute duel between the jungle and the intruders.

> Could we handle the dumb thing or would it handle us?[…] I felt how big, how confoundedly big was the thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in there? (*HD* 38)

Wilderness watching the intruders' advancement seems to appeal to various stratagems to stop it. Through white fog and silence, it disorients him, denies them the use of senses turning them into deaf and blind creatures: "Not the faintest sound […]. You looked on amazed and began to suspect yourself of being deaf - then the night came suddenly and struck you blind as well" (*HD* 56). The subsequent mornings bring an even more blinding stratagem: "white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all round" (56).

In its duel, the fog tries to asphyxiate the intruders: "I watched the fog for the signs of lifting as the cat watches a mouse; our eyes were of no more use to us than if we had been buried miles deep in a heap of cotton-wool. It felt like it, too - choking, warm, stifling" (*HD* 62). Fog and silence, as well as the blurring of the outlines of things and human subjects are, according to John Peters' *Conrad and Impressionism* (2001), impressionist techniques. In an ecocritical perception, they are used on purpose, to suggest the dissolution of the borders between the human and nature, the confusion of subject and object, in a conflictual assemblage of actants' alternating dominance in a duel.

Nature also fights back intrusion by maddening the humans. The Central Station is the Second Circle of the African Hell, where Marlow sees the colonialists' inner wilderness-of-the-mind, in the massacre of the elephants. The greedy "pilgrims" possessed by a collective trance repeat a cornucopian mantra, "ivory," the vibrant matter obsession to which they fall prey. The "pilgrims" are all hollow men: the brickmaker is "a papier-mâché Mephistopheles" (*HD* 37) with "nothing inside him but a little loose dirt, maybe" (37). The Manager's cynicism is revealed by his cogitation: "Men who come out here should have no entrails" (*HD* 31). Specular to nature, he is patient: his rivals "die so quick that [he hasn't] time to send them out of the country" (*HD* 47). To survive on the Congo infested bank, a white man must have physically "nothing within him" (*HD* 31) and to prosper he must be ethically "hollow at the core" (*HD* 83). Every white colonizer is hollow and greedy to be filled with ivory. In response, African wilderness fills him with disease and very soon turns him into an ivory skeleton. Ivory is thus a *gestalt* metaphor for cornucopian greed and for death.

At the Third Circle, the Inner Station, Kurtz the prodigy, the champion trader, and the charismatic orator-leader of a tribe, has acquired "a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (*HD* 70), has advanced to the heart of darkness and has found it impossible to leave it. Fascinated, in a centripetal drive, he dares to immerse in the evil truth, whereas Marlow, in centrifugal prudence, does not step beyond the pale. The tribe of blacks near the lake is engaged in intertribal raiding intra-racial wars for plunder of buried ivory from an inter-species massacre. Kurtz's career is that of a robber plundering the country followed by a tribe of assassins: "Kurtz got a tribe [...] They adored him" (*HD* 80). The thousand blacks opposing Kurtz's departure signify that he embodies, together with his tribe practicing "unspeakable rites" (71), collective wilderness-of-the-mind. We do not know who has initiated whom in either native primitive human sacrifice or racist killing, who has committed the double horror of corrupting the Other into a murderer.

In "A Choice of Nightmares: The Ecology of Heart of Darkness" (2018), in Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's interpretation of the novella, the heads are a warning about the evil nature's dangers surrounding Kurtz's house, while his terrible revelation resumed in "The horror!" is a"scramble for shelter, for sustenance, and for another creature's throat"(McCarthy 641). He states that Kurtz does not "go native," he does more, he "goes nature" in Lyell's view of nature as violent intra-species competition (Lyell vol. 2: 84;

McCarthy 628). I find Kurtz's immersing in nature similar to the anomic, subhuman life of "the ape and the tiger" in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (Tennyson 118). Having abandoned the sham of civilization, he embodies the monstrous superseding civilization in crime, he views himself as a champion of elephant ecocide, and of criminal rites. He keeps the impaled heads facing his windows as a permanent reminder of his target, extremity in evil, the heart of darkness. However, nature imposes limits to its creations, be they civilized, savage or subhuman. "There was something wanting in him," (*HD* 83), he "lacked restraint" (83), which is unacceptable even in anomie. "The horror," (*HD* 100) his terrible metanoia, comes before his death, when he realizes that evil in nature has a necessary limit, cannot be godly infinite, and if it exceeds restraint, it is punished by nature, the universal executioner.

Benita Parry sees the novella not as mystery but as "secret, hidden knowledge" (Parry 49). The symbolic light/darkness and white/black oppositions become relative like a *gestalt*-image: light becoming dark and vice-versa (Ciugureanu 149). According to Adina Ciugureanu, ("Joseph Conrad: In the dustbin of progress…"),"dark may hide a revelatory and a deep immanent truth which may change the consciousness's understanding of life and the world, it may hide deep, secret knowledge which is revealed only to those who dare confront its limits" (2008:149) following their centripetal drives. The dark prevailing over London and the whole world at the end of the novella, after the interview with the Intended, already affected by the growing dark, may hide in Marlow's "inconclusive" manner the deciphered "horror," the post-Darwinian evil of man and nature.

I agree with Achebe that Conrad's blacks are jabbering, inarticulate and unindividualized, with the remark that they are so on purpose, to enforce ecocentrism. In an ecocritical analysis they are also theriomorphic, trainable circus animals (*HD* 52), swarm-like droning in a "weird incantation" (92), manageable "simple people" (76) frightened by the ship's whistle, as greedy as the whites, however they osmotically belong to the place. Their portraits are ecomorphic, intentionally expressed in vegetal and animal tropes, to define them holistically, organically integrated in their environment, to the extent of confounding with it as *natura naturans*, vibrant matter. Identified with the bush, they acquire a dendromorphic aspect: "the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement" (64), their "naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes" (64) become its branches. When the arrow attack starts, the anthropomorphic bush "began to howl" (65) with human voices. They are called "beings" and the "breath" (*HD* 86) which the animistic forest pneumomorphically expires and aspires "as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration" (86). They are confounded with "the mist itself [which] had screamed" (57) in an aquamorphic image of humans and an anthropomorphic image of mist. "Streams of human beings […] poured into the clearing" (85), a tide-like liquid "mass of naked bronze bodies" which "flowed out of the woods" (96). Holistic Conrad repeatedly changes physical states and kingdoms in their description. They watch the ship, animistically figured by primitive minds as a "fierce river-demon […] breathing black smoke" (96). The change of the point-of-view replaces Marlow's with the Other's thinking at the perception of the steamer.

Similarly, while the blacks are prehistoric and inarticulate, all the whites are oversimplified hollow caricatures of plunderers and hypocrites, Conrad favours neither race. Instead, he portrays both as symbolist sketches. Like the blacks, protean Kurtz changes states and kingdoms. He is "an animated image of death carved out of old ivory," (*HD* 85) "an atrocious phantom," (85) "a vapour," (93) "a Voice! a voice!" (98). The extreme simplification of the human portraits focuses environment as an agentive character instead of a backdrop. In *The Passive Voice: An Approach to Modern Fiction* (1966), Harold Kaplan expresses the view that for Conrad "the human enterprise [is] a cardboard reality against the background of nature" (Kaplan 131). In *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination* (1974) C.

B. Cox sees Marlow at his final return to Brussels as a Gulliver-like Swiftian misanthropist (Cox 42). I consider that his diminishing human caricatures consistently define the novella as disanthropocentric and ecocentric.

In contrast to the reduced human sketches, every description of nature is rich, with anthropomorphizing verbal and adjectival phrases, and oversizing. Wilderness does not forgive the white intruders even after killing them, their burials are retaliations. A Swede's hanging is the object of his compatriot's disdainful indifference, Fresleven's body is spitefully left unburied to be eaten by the beasts, reified into an ivory-like skeleton invaded by the overpowering grass, a phytomorphic image of death: "The grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones" (*HD*13). Kurtz is "something" (100) thrown into the mud.

Outstanding in the mass of the blacks, "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent," (*HD* 87) "the barbarous woman" (97) wears "the value of several elephant tusks upon her" in "brass wire gauntlets,[...]brass leggings,[...]glass beads"(*HD* 87). She is loaded with trinkets, showing how relative the value of trite glass and brass (equivalent to pearls and gold in Europe) is on different continents, and, in deep ecology, how negligible elephants' lives are to everyone. This is the only time when the word "elephant" appears in the text, commodified as tusks value in brass and glass. It shows how low the rate of exchange of ivory is in the whites' transactions with the blacks. She is the pathetic fallacy of wilderness, watched by the jungle in specularity, as "the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul" (87); an ecofeministic anthropomorphization of "wilderness itself, with an air brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (87) who does not flinch in front of the guns. Her fauna tantamount, the bulletproof old hippopotamus is equivalent to the theriomorphized wilderness in deep ecology. On the other hand, the African mistress has the high status of a matriarchal queen of a tribe of assassins, dealing with fauna destruction, intertribe wars and cannibalistic rites, she is the greedy beneficiary of Kurtz's "unsound method" (97) of ivory trade, although the text looks her up as if she were the immortal jungle.

Ironically specular to her, like a photographic negative, the Intended in mourning, standing for civilization's idealism, is ivory pale. Her tragic gestures mirror the African woman. Her ignorance and saving illusions are extenuating circumstances against the accusation of her complicity to the fauna and natives' massacre. She is sure that her name was Kurtz's last word, and this being "The horror!" (100), she is identified with it (as the fourth possible meaning of the noun in the text), because she is the initial reason of Kurtz's going to Congo. Moreover, as the third woman in black in the "sepulchral city" (102), the Intended completes the group of the three Fates determining the doom of the "pilgrims" to Congo.

Throughout the novella protean Kurtz changes his physical state a few times: he titanically kicks the earth to pieces, he crawls like a creeper through the grass, he is gaseous like vapour, he is ossified like ivory. McCarthy sees in all these changes Kurtz's intimate identification with nature, his utter "going nature" (McCarthy 642), responded by wilderness to her "favourite" by granting him special gifts. Admitting that these images are reader traps, they are ironical. Bennett's vibrant matter wilderness, finding Kurtz's idealism empty, "hollow inside," reifies him, and ivory fills him, entering his blood and dissolving him, turning him by transcorporeal "devilish initiation" into killing and cannibalism. The finding of Fresleven's skeleton invaded by high grass is ominous of Kurtz's destiny as decided by wilderness, mockingly changing "its spoiled and pampered favourite"'s (69) physical states and kingdoms. He has cannibalistic greed: "I saw him open his mouth wide - it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (*HD* 85); he craves to swallow the air, so wilderness changes him into pneumomorphic vapour: "he rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by

the earth, and swayed slightly, misty and silent"(93); he "kicked the very earth to pieces," (*HD* 95) so he transcorporeally turns into a theriomorphic creature "crawling on all fours" (*HD* 93) and is finally buried in mud (100). Kurtz has cannibalized at least six black "rebels" into ceremonial victims and has reified them into knobs on stakes, "not ornamental but symbolic" (*HD* 82), as a reminder. In return, agentive wilderness commodifies the best trader into his goods, ossifying him into an ivory knob or a billiard ball: "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and [...] it was like a ball - an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and [...] he had withered; it had [...] embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh" (*HD* 69). He has killed men and elephants to loot ivory; so nature osmotically fills his proximity with ivory in incommensurable quantities like gold in Mydas's myth, ironically oversaturating his excessive cornucopian greed: "Ivory? [...] Heaps of it, stacks of it. The old mud shanty was bursting with it. You would think there was not a single tusk left either above or below the ground in the whole country" (69). Unforgiving, allegedly generous wilderness has its toy pay with its sanity and life for fauna plunder. In final irony, when he dies, the patient immune Manager appropriates his ivory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (1899), London: Penguin, 1994.

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa in Conrad's Heart of Darkness", Massachusetts Review 18/1977

Ciugureanu, Adina. "Joseph Conrad: In the dustbin of progress…",*Modernism and the Idea of Modernity*, Constanta, Ex Ponto, 2004.

Cox, C. B. *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination*, London: Dent, 1974

Kaplan, Harold. *The Passive Voice: An Approach to Modern Fiction*, Athens: Ohio

University Press, 1966

Lyell, Charles. *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) London: Penguin's Classics, 1998.,

McCarthy, Jeffrey Mathes "A Choice of Nightmares: The Ecology of Heart of Darkness"

eds. Schneider-Rebozo, L., McCarthy, J., Peters, J., *Conrad and Nature: Essays,*

London, Routledge, 2018

Oak Taylor, Jesse. "Wilderness after Nature: Conrad, Empire and the Anthropocene", eds.

Schneider-Rebozo, L., McCarthy, J., Peters, J., *Conrad and Nature: Essays,* London,

Routledge, 2018

Parry, Benita. *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers*,

London: Macmillan, 1983

Peters, John. *Conrad and Impressionism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001

Tennyson, Alfred. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1850, Web.

Winston, Greg. "The great demoralization of the land"- Postcolonial Ecology in *Heart of*

Darkness" ed. Szczeszak-Brewer, *Critical Approaches to Joseph Conrad*, Columbia:

South Carolina University Press, 2015