

Višnja Sepčić

The Dream Universe of Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

The originality of Conrad's art has been stressed by many critics. To quote only a few: Douglas Hewitt analysed Conrad's subtle equations of the external and the internal, Marvin Mudrick wrote about Conrad's masterful usage of the "double plot" wherein the physical and the spiritual are inextricably blended, Albert Guerard asserted that it is the inward voyage that creates the rich moral context of Conrad's tales of adventure and that the inward voyage is described in daringly new fictional techniques. These judgements played a fundamental role in the reappraisal of Conrad that took place after the Second World War. It is the purpose of this article to show with a specific text, that of Conrad's great short novel *Heart of Darkness*, that his modernity extends further than these judgements imply and that the astonishingly wide range of fictional techniques he used in this work to embody his vision of reality, points directly towards certain powerful trends in twentieth-century literature that appeared most notably in the work of Franz Kafka and in the literature of the absurd.

Heart of Darkness is a powerful piece of symbolist fiction, full of difficult and complex insights. Conrad embodied these insights with astonishing technical inventiveness which prefigures significant trends in both modernist and post-modernist fiction. What purports to be a realistic account of things is dominated by the slanting perspectives of the dream-like, the hallucinatory and the grotesque; factual description slides into a phantasmagorical inner landscape of shifting, indefinable meanings; all throughout the real is submerged in the atmosphere and modes of a dream, which stresses the basic irrationality and absurdity of what is being presented. All these shifting perspectives blend into a rich unity, projecting

one of Conrad's most profound insights into the structure of being whose ultimate foundations are chaos and death.

An extremely dense interpenetration of the levels of meaning characterizes the description of Marlow's sailing to Africa with which his tale opens.

I left in a French steamer, and she called in every blamed port they have out there, for, as far as I could see, the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom-house officers. I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you — smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering. Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there greyish-whitish specks showed up clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background. We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers — to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same as though we had not moved; but we passed various places — trading places — with names like Gran'Bas-sam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted out in front of a sinister backcloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks — these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward fact; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and

water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech — and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives — he called them enemies! — hidden out of sight somewhere.

We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three-a-day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularised impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares. (64—66)¹

There is an obvious socio-political level which is characterized by precise notation, vivid statement. Facts are selected for their high significance and pervaded by a clearly defined point of view. Marlow sails to Africa in a French steamer which disembarks soldiers and custom-house clerks, both of whom serve the European colonial venture. The Europeans arrive in Africa in order to extract profits while the erection of a flimsy structure of local administration and commercial network serves only as a mere smokescreen for the work of plunder and murder that goes on behind it. The brutal facts of war and trade are in the foreground all the time (the vividness with which things are presented testifies to Conrad's allegiance to realism with its respect for factual truth) but in spite of that Conrad's art is basically non-mimetic. The full burden of the passage depends upon a dense interpenetration of the multilevelled structure of meanings, creating a "misty halo" around words. The socio-political level merges with the psychological, the realistic mode with the oneiric. The fusion is achieved because of a certain common denominator underlying both levels of presentation.

From the first Conrad's description stresses the irrationality of the proceedings. The European colonial undertaking is characterized by an utter absence of rational purpose, plan-

¹ References are to page numbers in J. Conrad, *Youth and Heart of Darkness*, J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1965.

ning, control. Consequently, it appears senseless, ludicrous, grotesque. In its absence of rational co-ordination and its sporadic and purposeless bursts of hysterical energy it presents a mixture of the ludicrous and the horrible. The culminating point of the description at this level is a grotesque image of "a man-of-war firing into a continent". The disparity between the two opposing forces, a "lonely" ship on the one hand and a continent on the other, is enormous. The collision of these two disproportionate things turns a seemingly purposeful act (a ship firing at an enemy) into a grotesque image of paranoid delusion (the supposition that there are enemies where there are none; the supposition that a war can be won by firing into a continent). The European colonial venture seems to be permeated by insanity. It is similar to the workings of a deranged psyche in that the lack of co-ordination between its many and various actions appears to be absolute. Schizophrenic outbursts of purposeless energy are followed by apathy, a pattern which will be repeated many times as the novel progresses. Grotesque disproportions, a general senselessness of things taking place on the socio-political level merge with the psychological level which from the very beginning throbs with a powerful oneiric meaning.

The psychological level is indissolubly linked with processes in Marlow's consciousness. They are dominated by a sense of the dissolution of reality. The description of Marlow's crossing to Africa projects an image of a rational man on slanting surfaces trying to keep his moral and spiritual balance. The description raises the question of what is reality. This question will resound all throughout the novel. Marlow has a feeling of being precipitated into a world utterly unlike the well-known, normal one, a disjointed world whose co-ordinates have been wrenched out of place and where the laws of causality and time sequence are not valid any more. From this dissonant, disproportionate world any structuring principle has been eliminated. The physical world in which objects float about in space without being coherently related (a disused boiler in the grass, broken pipes in the ravine, the purposeless blasting of a cliff) suggests a chaotic reality, deprived of any integrative principle. Objects — products of rational intelligence and symbols of European technological inventiveness — do not function here within a socially structured reality. They seem like some cruel and wanton toys which some schizophrenic psyche has projected into space. Marlow is plunged into a nightmarish world of illogical relations. The emotional concomitants of this are bewilderment, anguish

and later on moral panic. With every subsequent event a sense of the absurd asserts itself ever stronger. Marlow's moral vertigo stems from the fact that this rational man suddenly puts to himself the question whether what he has been taking for reality up to that time is only the world of appearances while this nightmarish world of irrationally scattered objects (from the boiler wallowing in the grass to human beings used as playthings, broken in the process and thrown away to die slowly) is reality itself, everything else being a flimsy superstructure erected by European civilization. Conrad uses a telling phrase, "sordid farce", to describe the proceedings. Both horror and farcical humour are component parts of the spectacle Marlow is watching. For the first time in his life Marlow sees life, reality and human activities as grotesque, senseless and absurd. The description of Marlow's crossing to Africa projects an absurd world as primary reality. Thus the socio-economical level merges with the level of psychological awareness which will develop the theme of moral and psychological chaos as the ultimate foundation of the human being. In the novel, whose thematic complex ranges from the savage satire of socio-political realities to the anguished existential questionings of the nature and predicament of man, the irrational activity of a man-of-war firing into a continent is of a piece with Kurtz's madness. All throughout the Congo ordeal Conrad stresses Marlow's painful juggling with the categories of the real and the unreal. As the novel progresses these categories disquietingly change place. As in the *King Lear* universe their reversal is essential while madness, according insights denied to normality, seems to be a path to truth.

How closely the levels are interpenetrated is shown by the man-of-war image. An image taken from political reality takes on a psychological significance and powerfully expresses a sense of the insane disproportions of the world into which Marlow is plunged. Although anchored to socio-political realities it also condenses the inner feelings of the protagonist, his disturbing sense of being caught in a senseless, meaningless nightmare. Conrad achieved the effortless merging of the two levels by inventing Marlow, the complex narrating voice that interpenetrates facts with a profoundly subjective response to them. Marlow's perspective structures the world of the novel for us. It is not the facts in themselves but the inner resonance of facts that counts. Marlow's subjective response to facts provides the passage with its underlying emotional tonality, a mixture of anxiety and a sense of vague menace. Rational order and control over things recedes irrev-

ocably and is supplanted by an irrational chaotic world of meaningless fragments in which any conceptual ordering of reality is impossible to achieve. A sense of absurdity, of general disproportions and of an absence of logical relations culminates in the warship image. The warship image fixes a state of mind just as powerfully as a state of fact. The logical relations between things are broken. An irrational universe moves according to its own laws. It is incomprehensible to the rational intellect but its impact upon the senses and the imagination is powerful. It is felt as vaguely threatening and malignant. The familiar, normal, logically related world has gone to pieces and is restructured in entirely new and incomprehensible terms. This becomes a source of terror. Hence Marlow's anxiety, fear, panic. An irrational and chaotic universe is bent on crushing all opposition and absorbing an alien personality into itself.

From the time of medieval allegories the convention of a dream vision has been used to embody insights into the ultimate spiritual realities. Dante is the greatest example. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which embodies his profoundest insights into the structure of being, a dream atmosphere has been created from the very first, even before Marlow sails to Africa.²

From the description of Marlow's visit to the Brussels headquarters of the Belgian firm that runs the Congo business and authentic atmosphere of a troublesome dream is induced. The visit takes place in a strange scene of desolation as if the great city has been suddenly and inexplicably depopulated. The description irradiates suggestions of death and grave-like stillness.³ These ominous tones are reinforced by Marlow's sinister encounter with the two women who usher him in. The parallel with the Fates is developed with every descriptive detail. Their presence seems to breathe a vague but unmistakable suggestion of imminent disaster. The somnambulistic walking of one of them, the trance-like state of both give Marlow an uneasy feeling that they possess supernatural knowledge about the future. The emotional impact of his encounter with

² In his masterful interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* A. Guerard stressed that its deepest level of meaning is concerned with the inward voyage of the hero in which the dream vision plays a dominant role. Guerard links the dream perspective primarily with the theme of the double. This article hopes to show that the implications of the dream perspective reach further and deeper and ramify subtly in all directions through the rich thematic complex of *Heart of Darkness*.

³ Cf. an almost identical description of the same city when Marlow pays a visit to Kurtz's Intended at the end of the novel. In the latter description there is an explicit reference to a cemetery as if to reinforce the funereal atmosphere.

these two entranced figures, weary with the foreknowledge of doom, establishes the atmosphere of a nightmarish dream which all subsequent happenings will strengthen.

When Marlow's tale of his African journey starts unfolding the landscape remembered from an actual journey slides into a phantasmagorical dream landscape. It both refers to the African tropical region and is an authentic dreamland, "the tenebrous land invaded by... phantoms". In these shifting *chiaro-scuro* landscapes phantoms of the mind haunting the consciousness co-exist with the grotesquely distorted, wildly funny, *papier-maché* figures that seem to belong to some sinister puppet show. The universe of *Heart of Darkness* is basically surreal. It is the motley universe of a dream. It is characterized by a violent conjunction of disparate elements. Wildly disparate and incongruous phenomena that seem to be entirely unrelated suddenly and inexplicably co-exist on the same level. The element of the grotesque is interwoven with the surreal. Its collision of disparities and its break-down of logic, its mixture of the ludicrous and the horrible, of the real and the fantastic, accords well with the surreal universe of a dream. The Congo world presents to Marlow a wild, seemingly nonsensical assemblage of things, a multicoloured, bewildering and wildly incongruous universe which in his disheartened moments seems to resolve itself into "one immense jabber... without any sense". Yet the seemingly surrealist universe of a dream possesses a deeper coherence and embodies ambivalent and multilayered meanings. The triumph of Conrad's impressionistic method in *Heart of Darkness* lies in following Marlow's journey step by step, reproducing the process of search gradually as Marlow experienced it, with its bewilderment, anguish, the painful piecing together of seemingly chaotic fragments of a strange, seemingly incomprehensible and terrifying reality to the full impact of which he is exposed. The dream techniques are highly appropriate because they suggest the full measure of vulnerability helplessness and the Kafkaesque horror which make up the fundamental emotional substratum of Marlow's experiences in the Congo. Conrad intuitively hit upon the dream techniques of presentation in order to objectify the inner vision but in contrast to other modernist and post-modernist writers who also use dream techniques to objectify complexes of inner life, the dream techniques in *Heart of Darkness* are not an end in themselves, they are in *ultima linea*, subordinated to a cognitive process. Through his dream-like vision Marlow learns complex truths about the human condition.

The novel abounds in abrupt dream linkages, abrupt changes of scene, the sudden emergence of vivid though inex-

plicable things, people, and events. Many of the narrated events are similar to mysterious, incomprehensible dream rituals from which the dreamer is excluded, although he is unaccountably plunged in their midst, an unwilling, reluctant spectator. Although the ultimate meaning eludes him, he is forced to participate in them, or, more precisely, the action has some incomprehensible but powerfully felt bearing on his own situation. Such are, for instance, the description of the inexplicable hair-raising screaming of unseen savages through a dense white fog, the description of the sudden appearances of Kurtz and of the savage woman, etc. *Heart of Darkness* is full of scenes which possess the hallucinatory vividness of things seen in dreams while their full meaning eludes understanding.

The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep — it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf — then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a 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 you like something solid. At eight or nine, perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it — all perfectly still — and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves, I ordered the chain, which we had begun to heave in, to be paid out again. Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. (110—111)

The long shadows of the forest had slipped downhill while we talked, had gone far beyond the ruined hovel, beyond the symbolic row of stakes. All this was in the gloom, while we down there were yet in the sunshine, and the stretch of the river abreast of the chearing glittered in a still and dazzling splendour, with a murky and overshadowed bend above and below. Not a living soul was seen on the shore. The bushes did not rustle.

Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings — of naked human beings — with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility.

"Now, if he does not say the right thing to them we are all done for", said the Russian at my elbow. The knot of men with the stretcher had stopped too, half-way to the steamer, as if petrified. I saw the man on the stretcher sit up, lank and with an uplifted arm, above the shoulders of the bearers. "Let us hope that the man who can talk so well of love in general will find some particular reason to spare us this time, I said. I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonouring necessity. I could not hear a sound, but through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks. Kurtz — Kurtz — that means short in German — don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life — and death. He looked at least seven feet long. His covering had fallen off and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide — it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting. He fell back suddenly. The stretcher shook as the bearers staggered forward again, and almost at the same time I noticed that the crowd of savages was vanishing without any perceptible movement of retreat, 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". (145—147)

Dark human shapes could be made out in the distance, flitting indistinctly against the gloomy border of the forest, and near the river two bronze figures, leaning on tall spears, stood in the sunlight under fantastic head-dresses of spotted skins, war-like and still in statuesque repose. And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and

superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.

She came abreast of the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water's edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. A whole minute passed, and then she made a step forward. There was a low jingle, a glint of yellow metal, a sway of fringed draperies, and she stopped as if her heart had failed her. The young fellow by my side growled. The pilgrims murmured at my back. She looked at us as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene. (148—149)

Incomplete motivation is another aspect of the dream technique. So is the stressed importance of gesture versus language. Many scenes rely for their effect upon the heightened importance of gesture and movement. These strange scenes that seem to be broken fragments of some inexplicable rituals emphasize the role of gesture and movement at the expense of language. Language is devalued and it is the symbolical gesture and the symbolical ritualistic movement that assume central importance. Such are the scenes of the emergence of Kurtz and of the savage woman and, finally, the description of the mysterious ritual in the wood towards which Kurtz is crawling on all fours and which is probably, as Stephen A. Reid suggested, related to him in a sinister way.⁴

The dream jumble justifies, the co-presence of incompatibles of all kinds. What a motley crowd *Heart of Darkness* harbours! The weird sisters, the funny old doctor with his "scientific" interests, the Swede who hanged himself on the road for no apparent reason, the chief accountant grotesquely out of place in his surroundings, the phantom Negroes in the grove of death, the "pilgrim" traders living for years inside a rotten fence, surrounded by the wilderness, the Eldorado expedition, the cannibal crew, the harlequin Russian with his indecipherable notes in the Cyrillic alphabet, Kurtz himself,

⁴ Cf. Stephen A. Reid, "The Unspeakable Rites in *Heart of Darkness*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, IX, No. 4, Winter 1963—64.

the savage woman, etc. The events dramatized also present a weird assortment of incongruities and oddities: the purposeless blasting of a cliff, the chained Negroes who transport baskets filled with earth from one place to another for no apparent reason, the outbreak of fire at the middle station which the "pilgrims" try to put out by bringing water in a holed bucket, the Eldorado, expedition going into the jungle outfitted with brand-new things and perishing down to a man, the pilgrims in pink pyjamas shooting into a blinding fog with Winchesters held to the hip, Marlow's dispelling of the attacking savages by jerking the line of the steam-whistle, etc.

The action in *Heart of Darkness* is distinguished by a quick, abrupt change of scene and the hallucinatory vividness of isolated moments. Such spots of time are dislocated from the conventional temporal and spatial sequence. *Heart of Darkness* resolves itself in memory into vivid, isolated scenes, connected by the unifying oppressive atmosphere. These vivid isolated scenes are pregnant with mysterious meaning, which engages the emotions without being fully understood.

Motivational incompleteness, which would be out of place in a realistic account of events, is appropriate here. It is of a piece with the surreal world of a dream. When Marlow tries to rationalize such events the results are disastrous and his strenuous explications are completely inadequate. For instance, when he tries to explain what happened between him and Kurtz on the fateful night when he finally brought Kurtz back to the ship he breaks the spell and destroys the dream. In using discursive language Marlow undercuts the wonderful suggestiveness of the implicit language of the ritualistic gesture and movement which these scenes rely on. Conrad must preserve the essential mystery of sights and scenes to achieve his full effect. In this he unconsciously mimics the logic of dreams, harnessing it to his narrative purpose. These vivid, impressive scenes are only incompletely understood by Marlow at the moment but they are all the more powerful for that very reason. They belong to the essentially hermetic code of dreams one cannot easily decipher.

Within the dream universe of *Heart of Darkness* suggested so powerfully from the very beginning of the fateful voyage to the Congo, Conrad suggests a characteristic emotional tonality as the fundamental substratum of Marlow's experience. It is made up of anxiety, fear, terror and a sense of being enmeshed in a situation beyond control, a sense of passive exposure to malevolent outside forces. The complex of feelings felt by Marlow at the beginning intensifies with the progress of the tale. It is basically the same complex but the emotions

gain in intensity while their implications are more fully drawn out each time they reappear. Thus their meaning constantly expands. In his book *The Forgotten Language* Erich Fromm states that in a dream the inner structure of an emotion is frequently rendered in a time sequence although the dream universe does not respect the laws of time and space.⁵ Analogous to this, the basic structural development of *Heart of Darkness* renders as a process the intensifying of the fundamental psychological situation.

With Marlow's further penetration into the Congo jungle the oneiric level is reinforced. The complex of inner feelings structures the outer universe through which the dreamer moves. The external world is an extension of the dreamer. Witness the dream sequence describing Marlow's voyage up the Congo.

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. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once — somewhere — far away — in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable destiny. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it any more; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we would cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality — the reality, I tell you — fades. The inner truth is hidden — luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt its mysterious stillness watching me at my

⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1957, p. 22.

monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tightropes for — what is it? half-a-crown a tumble. (100—101)

Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of the tumble-down hovel with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange — had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell. The word ivory would ring in the air for a while — and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel. Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steam-boat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico. It made you feel very small, very lost, and yet it was not altogether depressing, that feeling. After all, if you were small, the grimy beetle crawled on — which was just what you wanted it to do. Where the pilgrims imagined it crawled to I don't know. To some place where they expected to get something, I bet! For me it crawled towards Kurtz — exclusively; but when the steam-pipes started leaking we crawled very slow. The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest has stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. (102—103)

The description is distinguished not only for its powerful visualization but also for the incantatory power of the rhythm, which has a hypnotic effect on the reader, inducing a complete identification with Marlow. The powerful rhythmic phrasing reinforces the basic thematic pattern of the description which centres on the threat of the decomposition of will and consciousness and the annihilation of personality which comes from the powerfully hostile outside forces, standing in *ultima linea* for an undifferentiated matrix of being, a purposeless circling of mindless matter. On the oneiric level, the passage suggests primal matter threatening man with ultimate destruction, yearning to reabsorb all forms of individuated life into itself. The undifferentiated matrix of being calls for a return of all individuated forms of existence into itself, levelling man with animals and plants, bent on reabsorbing them all into the primal chaos as the ultimate foundation of being. (Kurtz will later on represent an extension of this threat on the moral and spiritual plane. In himself he embodies primal chaos threatening the ethical construct of man). The dreamer feels the terrifying threat of primal matter, senselessly circling round, bent on reabsorbing man as an alien phenomenon into itself, levelling him with plants and vegetation, using all forms of individuated life with equal indifference for "the mould of primeval earth", from man-groves "contorted in despair" to the Eldorado expedition and

Kurtz himself who finally becomes a thing "buried . . . in a muddy hole".⁶

The theme of primal matter threatening the isolated consciousness, dissolving the will to live, is one of the great underlying themes of the Conrad canon. This theme is dramatically enacted in Martin Decoud's suicide in *Nostromo*; it is powerfully suggested as a basic dilemma underlying the moral tensions of the young captain in *The Shadow-Line*;⁷ its echoes are found all over the Conrad canon.

⁶ In *Heart of Darkness* death is an all-pervasive presence. The list of victims is inexhaustible. It is a macabre dance of death that Marlow's vision frames in the tenebrous world of the Congo. Innumerable details of physical description, supported by interwoven imagery ("mangroves contorted in despair", e. g.), suggest death as the substratum of life. One of the terrifying insights gained by Conrad-Marlow in the painful coils of the Congo experience is a shattering vision of man's mortality. The assimilation of things, tokens of European civilization, into the world of the jungle, the world of death and decay, fits into this pattern. (A "railway truck lying there with its wheels in the air . . . looked as dead as the carcass of some animal; "decaying machinery"; the steamer Marlow drags up from the bottom of the river resembles "the carcass of some big river animal"). The fast multiplying images of human death pursue Marlow from the beginning to the end of the fateful Congo journey. All throughout the novel Marlow goes through a series of profound imaginative identification with death and the dying, the most prominent among them being the close-up of one of the dying Negroes in the grove of death, the death of the cannibal helmsman and Kurtz's final agony. These descriptions render the terror of death and the agony of dying in powerful imaginative terms which testify to the closeness of Marlow's identification with the dying. Conrad's macabre description of the "merry dance of death and trade" is the fundamental symbolic image of *Heart of Darkness*. It is related to the medieval concept of the dance of the seven deadly sins in which the skeletons join and Death with the sceptre leads the dance. This medieval symbol is taken up by Conrad. The "immense jabber" of the Congo experience finally resolves itself for Marlow into a chain of dancing sinners who one by one sink into the grave. The dance is led by the chief sinner, the radical immoralist Kurtz, who blends with the image of Death.

"His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze". (140)

Thus a Christian image has been taken by Conrad and reworked into a modern view of the chaotic and absurd universe. All skeletons melt into one, and the human skull as a reminder of man's mortality and a symbol of the agony of existence grins at Marlow from every side in the tenebrous world of the Congo.

⁷ Cf. Višnja Sepčić: "The Mirror of Despair: A Reading of Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*", *Studia Romanica et Anglicae Zagrabienstia*, 41—42/1976.

In *Heart of Darkness* this theme reappears in Marlow's reaction to what A. Guerard calls "the menace of vegetation".⁸ The story of the Swede who hanged himself on the road shortly after arriving fits into this thematic pattern too. His case is mentioned in passing as a detail of the *dance macabre* of the Congo world, but viewed in the light of Marlow's subsequent experiences the implication of his case seems to be that what seemed a motiveless act was probably occasioned by a Decoud-like response to the dark menace of primal matter, dissolving the will to live.

In the absolute silence and solitude the overwhelming presence of rioting vegetation affects Marlow's will to live, too, but he does not give in. Darkly and dimly he relives the Swede's crisis in his imagination but does not give in.

Marlow's panic in the overwhelming presence of the senseless circling of primal matter, the primary reality, has already been projected earlier in the novel. It is objectivized in three ways:

a) as a sense of being let loose in a boundless expanse:

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... Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side. A great silence, around and above. (75—76)

b) as a crushing sense of being enclosed in a tight space with immense walls of trees overhanging the little boat crawling along:

Trees, trees, millions of trees, massive, immense, running up high; and at their foot, hugging the bank against the stream, crept the little begrimed steam-boat, like a sluggish beetle crawling on the floor of a lofty portico... The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return. We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. (103)

c) as a sense of floating in an undifferentiated volume of space where he cannot tell right from left, above from below:

The current ran smooth and swift, but a dumb immobility sat on the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep — it seemed unnatural, like a state of

⁸ *Conrad the Novelist*, Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 47.

trance. Not the faintest sound of any king could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf — then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a 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 you like something solid. At eight or nine perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of the towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it — all perfectly still — and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves . . . What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her — and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere; as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind. (110—111)⁹

The description of the immobilization of Marlow's ship in a fog so dense that it obliterates the world represents the culminating point of the third stage of Marlow's voyage towards the innermost station, the heart of the jungle and

⁹ Cf. the terms in which Marlow later on describes his nocturnal encounter with Kurtz: "And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head — though I had a lively sense of that danger too — but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even, like the niggers, to invoke him — himself — his own exalted and incredible degradation. *There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.* I've been telling you what we said — repeating the phrases we pronounced — but what's the good? They are common everyday words — the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man". (158)

Cf. a passage from Jung which describes the meeting with the Shadow, the unconscious potential of being: "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constrictions no one is spared who goes down to the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself, in order to know who one is. For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is the world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of sympathetic system, the soul of everything living begins; where I am indivisibly this *and* that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me" (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works, Vol. IX, Part I, pp. 21—22*).

Kurtz. What purports to be an account of physical adventure is converted by Conrad into a powerful image of an inward experience. The symbolic description projects a profoundly terrifying image of an individual consciousness functioning in an absolute void, without any orientation marks, any moral and spiritual props. It represents one of the purest expressions of Marlow's existential anxiety. The description projects in powerfully concrete terms his complete loss of orientation, attended by moral panic. It speaks of the extremity of his ordeal, of the intensity of the agony of holding one's own in an alien universe. In diving deep towards the fundamentals of being this is what is sprung upon him: an agonizing realization of man's absolute loneliness in a meaningless universe, a vast, blank void, without a mark, without a name. Confronted with the naked facts of existence Marlow grapples with it. Nowhere else is the need for moral and spiritual answer to the basic existential dilemma so painfully acute as here where an individual consciousness exists in a void in which the senses function imperfectly and the will is frozen. Of course, in the oneiric perspective which so persistently plays upon facts all throughout the novel, actions and motivations, situations and events have to be congruent with the motley universe of a dream. Thus a surreal image of a ship hanging in a void, which has a paralysing effect on the consciousness of the main protagonist, is shortly afterwards followed up by a wildly nonsensical act by Marlow, which nevertheless has its full effect: Marlow blows a steam whistle and thus dispels the attacking savages and saves the ship. The seemingly irrelevant act is of a piece with the incongruent universe of a dream. In its motley garb it expresses Marlow's imperious need to act, his need to counter the existential anxiety by acting according to a chosen moral code. Marlow proves his persistent adherence to the code by firmly steering his ship even in the midst of hostile, terrifying and incomprehensible surroundings.¹⁰

¹⁰ Of course, the oneiric level is only one component in the complex narrative texture of *Heart of Darkness*. In the painful division of being that Marlow undergoes, the active captain exists side by side with the dreamer who is engaged in the imaginative exploration of an inner landscape. At the cost of much personal suffering the acting man preserves fidelity to the fundamental tenets of his strict moral code in the midst of the incomprehensible from which there come both the threat of violence and the threat of entranced apathy. Like the captain of *The Shadow-Line*, another of Conrad's stories of a moral test in an extreme situation, he is the centre of the moral universe which he creates by acting. The peculiarly dense resonance of *Heart of Darkness* stems from the fact that the passive dreaming self that imaginatively identifies with places, people and events, or, to put it differently, mo-

The oneiric level of *Heart of Darkness* is concentrated in the descriptions of the three stages of Marlow's journey to Kurtz's station in the heart of the jungle and in the scenes round Kurtz's death. These descriptions are distinguished by an extreme density of writing. They represent the thematic nuclei of the novel and its structural key points.¹¹ These crucial stages in the progress of the narrative are signposts by which Marlow's progress towards the dark fundamentals of being is measured. They belong, to use Erich Fromm's terminology, to the latent, not to the manifest content of the dream, in other words, to the pattern of its innermost significance.¹²

Marlow's imaginative identification with Kurtz is a major fact in the oneiric perspective of the novel.¹³ He hears of Kurtz through others and is not much interested at first. As the same name strikes his ear over and over again, his curiosity is aroused and he forms a certain mental image of him. Yet all this does not amount to much. For Marlow, Kurtz is just a flitting shadow crossing the consciousness. In the meanwhile Conrad builds up the powerful presence of the jungle which contains Kurtz, of which Kurtz is but a human extension. Both of them represent monstrously exaggerated, disproportionate, gigantic growths, chaos and destruction being a precondition of their deadly exuberance. Then at the crucial point in the structure of the tale the process of unconscious identification abruptly and unaccountably begins. From that moment Marlow's actions and reactions in the further progress of the tale seem exaggerated, wildly disproportionate, if one applies commonsense logic. Yet this wild behaviour is perfectly congruent with the surreal universe of a dream.

To tell you the truth, I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks. "He is dead", murmured the fellow, immensely impressed. "No doubt about it", said I, tugging like mad at the shoe-laces. "And by the way, I suppose Mr. Kurtz is dead as well by this time".

For the moment that was *the dominant thought*. There was a sense of *extreme disappointment*, as though I had found out

ves through a landscape that embodies the inner tensions of the mind, coexists with the morally alert waking self and the two kinds of experiences are equally passionately embodied by Conrad in the same experiential complex.

¹¹ For a different view of the structure of *Heart of Darkness* see Lillian Feder, "Marlow's Descent into Hell", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, IX, March, 1955, and Robert O. Evans, "Conrad's Underworld", *Modern Fiction Studies*, II, May, 1956. Both authors see the structure of *Heart of Darkness* as basically epic.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹³ Here I acknowledge a very great debt to A. Guerard.

I had been striving after something althoother without a substance. *I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with...* I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to — a talk with Kurtz — ... I thought, By Jove! it's all over. We are too late; he has vanished — the gift has vanished, by means of some spear, arrow, or club. I will never hear that chap speak after all — *and my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion*, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush. *I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life.* (124—125)

In Marlow's quest for the matrix of being, the inner division of the self has begun. On this level, Kurtz is no more than a shadow lying on the dark waters of the primal chaos, a potential without a form and a name. The interpolation of the dark *alter ego* is acceptable because Marlow's quest is archetypal. Marlow is a hero of the soul's high adventure, imaginatively exploring the structure of being. He doubles the real with the imaginative voyage, using his imagination as the profoundest cognitive method in the sense of Nietzsche's dictum "Art is the only metaphysical activity of man". The voyage up the Congo river towards the innermost station, towards Kurtz, assumes for Marlow a profoundly subjective meaning which has nothing to do with his earlier detachment. Nor has it anything to do with his exercising of professional duties. ("For me it crawled towards Kurtz — exclusively".) Yet the interpenetration of the narrative levels is such that the earlier parts of the narrative depicting socio-political realities of the European imperialist undertaking have been presented in such a way that they easily slant over into the denser universe of a dream that takes over later on. An absurd, meaningless universe of grotesque disparities easily merges with the illogical dream universe. In his relation to Kurtz, Marlow, "the imperturbable", loses all sense of proportion, all sense of measure. A touch of Kurtz's psychological and moral insanity seems to infect Marlow's reactions, if not his judgment. Kurtz, as it were, starts psychologically assimilating Marlow. This threat of the hypnotic entrancing of one's own personality while assuming the personality of the other is of the essence in the theme of the double, discovered in Romanticism (witness S.T. Coleridge in *Christabel* and E.A. Poe in innumerable tales of psychological horror) and later on developed by Dostoevsky, Conrad and others. The quest becomes a matter of life and death, bearing testimony to the fact that the imaginative exploration engages profoundly the whole being. The imaginative exploration of the human con-

dition, the dream voyage, is, for Marlow-Conrad, destiny in the most precise sense of the word. ("I could not have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life"). Marlow's emotion is extravagant, yet we believe its sincerity. It is part and parcel of this surreal universe where the incongruous and the illogical seem to be the fundamental law. Marlow's fascination with this far-away and as yet completely unknown figure is not rooted in any rational motivation. The quest is presented as a psychic compulsion. As such it is fully congruent with the dream universe. Marlow senses this. He subjects everything to scrutiny, using his intellect and his imagination in turn, but never once questions his obsession. After an intense movement of sympathy in the psychological shadow-play beyond the facts of the tale, the countermovement of drawing apart starts. When Marlow finally comes below Kurtz's station and meets the Russian youth, a disciple of Kurtz, he is again for the moment a cool, sensible, rational captain. Marlow listens to what the Russian has to tell him and discusses Kurtz as an objective phenomenon. He caps the Russian's comments, puts questions, makes suppositions on the basis of what he hears ("I suppose"). Marlow's attitude all throughout that conversation is that of a cool spectator at a queer show which is profoundly alien to him. Nowhere does he give away signs of inner disturbance. When Kurtz himself appears Marlow's perspective becomes highly ambivalent. On the surface Marlow views Kurtz as an objective phenomenon. He sees a kind of grotesque puppet. This Kurtz fits in well with the Congo world of the whites wherein grotesque dehumanized puppets move about on wires. Marlow resents the fact that the ship and all the human lives on it depend on this grotesque puppet. He feels this as a "dishonouring necessity". But in his encounter with Kurtz in the midnight wood there is no sense of distance whatsoever but of a painful and total identification. The scene is presented in the form of a symbolic ritual which reveals the essential reality of the jungle of which Kurtz is a human extension. The low fires fitfully illuminating the weird ritual going on in the depths of the wood, the indistinct shapes of the participants and the figure of sorcerer with the antelope horns on his head sum up in a powerful symbolic image all the dispersed hints, intimations, guesses which have for so long baffled Marlow. Everything falls into place, the picture has a centre. Fragments of incoherent nightmare suddenly cohere. They are illuminated in a flash of vision and known with an intimacy of hallucination. Thus we see that Conrad's masterful usage of dream techniques has been all along sub-

servient to the cognitive process.¹⁴ Marlow's visionary clairvoyance is extraordinary. Things and events seem to be both parts of external reality of his own consciousness. His mad elation stems from the fact that now he possesses total knowledge of the reality which has been baffling and eluding him all the time. His identification not only with Kurtz but with the whole of external reality is quite extraordinary.¹⁵ He is even able to foretell things such as Kurtz's movements. Although a complete stranger to the locality he "knows" which direction Kurtz will be taking.

I thought I could see a kind of motion ahead of me. I was strangely cocksure of everything that night. I actually left the track and ran in a wide semicircle (I verily believe chuckling to myself) so as to get in front of that stir, of that motion I had seen — if indeed I had seen anything. (156)

Marlow's chuckling to himself while in mortal danger seems to be an utterly disproportionate reaction. But motivation in a dream universe differs widely from anything in the waking world. His elation comes from closeness, however terrible, to the final goal of this journey fraught with perils.

The confrontation scene is done completely in a dream manner. It is the climactic point of the whole novel on all its levels of meaning. On the level of action (after all, in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad makes a highly sophisticated use of the

¹⁴ Cf. A. Guerard: "The random movement of the nightmare is also the controlled movement of a poem, in which a quality of feeling may be stated or suggested and only much later justified. But it is justified at last". Guerard also states that the "narrative advances and withdraws as in a succession of long dark waves borne by the incoming tide. The waves encroach fairly evenly on the shore, and presently a few more feet of sand have been won. But an occasional wave thrusts up unexpectedly, much further than the others: even as far, say, as Kurtz and his Inner Station. Or, to take the other figure: the flashlight is held firmly; there are no whimsical jerkings from side to side. But now and then it is raised higher, and for a brief moment in a sudden clear light we discern enigmatic matters to be explored much later. Thus the movement of the story is sinuously progressive, with much incremental repetition . . . Yet no figure can convey *Heart of Darkness* in all its resonance and tenebrous atmosphere. The movement is not one of penetration and withdrawal only; it is also the tracing of a large grand circle of awareness. It begins with the friends on the yacht under the dark above Gravesend and at last returns to them, to the tranquil waterway that «leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky — seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (*Ibid.*, p. 44—45).

¹⁵ Cf. Guerard's perception: "At the climax Marlow follows Kurtz ashore, *confounds the beat of the drums with the beating of his heart*, goes through the ordeal of looking into Kurtz's mad soul and brings him back to the ship". (*Ibid.*, p. 38).

adventure tale) this represents the climactic point of the tale of suspense. On the psychological level this is the moment of the hero's total identification with the terrifying and finally recognizable *Doppelgänger*. On the ontological level, this is the moment of Marlow's final insight into the structure of being. At this highly charged moment Marlow gains complete knowledge of the ultimate reality the jungle has been half-revealing, half-hiding all the time. Kurtz is finally seen as one with the jungle. The whirling of ethically undifferentiated, chaotic psychic impulses in him corresponds fully to the chaotic circling of primal matter in the jungle. Marlow's final ontological insight is that both Kurtz and the jungle can be subsumed under primal chaos as ultimate reality. This is the final reality, this is the source of being, these chaotic, libidinal, formless energies, whirling about, annulling one another, before any form, any structural principle has been imposed upon them. This is why Marlow cannot become calm after this revelation. ("It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing.")

Up to meeting Kurtz, Marlow gets to know only the sham world of the whites, papier-maché figures, grotesque puppets. These "pilgrims" in search of ivory, as Conrad calls them in the sarcastic inversion of the term, live in a world of insubstantial personal fantasies of wealth and power without an anchor in reality. They are all performers in the ghostly European circus, absurdly trying to reproduce tiny patterns of the civilization they left behind, which is grotesquely out of place. Their lack of self-awareness is absolute and the only real thing that comes to them is death. In contrast to them, Kurtz reaches a frightening degree of self-awareness, probing with awful daring the chaos of his own being. This is a crucial point of difference between the soulless traders and Kurtz. He alone possesses "complete knowledge". The cry he utters in his death agony "The horror! The horror!" bears witness to his insight into primal chaos as the foundation of being. When Marlow leaves the nonsense universe of the whites and encounters Kurtz he descends much deeper than at any other time in his life into the primeval sources of being. These are the alternatives of Marlow's frightful dilemma, "a choice of nightmares", in his own pregnant phrase. What to choose? To be enmeshed in the absurd world of subjective illusions and self-deceptions which the whites take for reality (illusion of power, social prestige, money, etc.) or to be, together with Kurtz, sucked into the maelstrom of primeval chaos. These are the terms of the terrifying dilemma which grants to Marlow a profoundly disturbing insight into the human condition.

With the scene in the midnight wood the mythical pattern upon which Conrad intuitively hit in imaginatively reliving his Congo experience also culminates. Conrad's novel follows the archetypal pattern of one of the world's oldest and most widely spread myths, discussed by J. Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In its many guises the myth deals with the theme of the initiation of a hero into the ultimate secrets of the universe. Conrad's novel basically follows the structural pattern of this ancient myth which the anthropologist Campbell describes in the following terms. The hero crosses the waters, which signifies that he leaves the familiar well-known world behind. He enters a new and strange world, has many fabulous adventures, fights with mythical beings and faces many dangers. Finally, he confronts the last obstacle. If he successfully overcomes it he penetrates to the ultimate mystery. As Campbell puts it:

The ultimate adventure... is commonly represented as a mystical marriage... of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis of the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart.¹⁶

It is unnecessary to stress the analogy of the structural pattern of Conrad's novel with this anthropological scheme. Conrad wrote a darkly inverted version of the ancient pattern in consonance with the modern spirit. In Conrad's novel it is Kurtz, whose soul has disintegrated back into the primal chaos, who represents the mystical Goddess, the "enchanted princess", to be won and possessed at the end of the perilous journey. At the ultimate destination of his journey Conrad's hero gains the knowledge that it is the whirling of purposeless energies that constitutes the fundamentals of being. Contrary to the pattern of the ancient myth the hero's knowledge does not bring about a renewal of life, does not release the life-giving waters of the World's Navel into the world again.¹⁷ The terrifying knowledge which the seer, the visionary, the lonely artist gains at the cost of the menace of self-destruction and the painful split of being, remains locked within his own breast. It is only through art that he is able to embody his knowledge and to diffuse it into the world. For a frightening moment he has touched the raw matrix of being.

¹⁶ J. Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bolingen Series, Princeton, 1973, p. 109.

¹⁷ "The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (*Ibid.*, p. 40).