

**‘Know thyself’ and
‘Know what thou canst work at’:
Duty, Belief and Endeavor in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness***

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Heart of Darkness is generally considered to be an early example of Modernist literature anticipating the great experiment that broke with the culture of the nineteenth century. Modernism saw an immense change in the creation of poetry and prose, as well as art and architecture. In this article, I do not wish to dispute the pivotal role of Conrad’s great work in literary history, which Owen Knowles describes in the introduction to *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* as ‘a foundation work of European Modernism’ (xxvii). However, the protagonist, Marlow, is certainly a product of the Victorian zeitgeist. He is imbued with the great Victorian concepts of duty, belief and, not least of all, endeavor. To understand better how important *Heart of Darkness* is as a gateway to and anticipation of this cultural change, I have placed it more in the context of Victorian beliefs than the practices of Modernism, principally those presented in Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*. In my article, Carlyle’s emphasis on ‘Know thyself’ and ‘Know what thy canst work at’ is placed alongside Marlow’s experiences in Africa to bring into relief the transition from Victorianism to Modernism. It also places in cultural context the creation of *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow’s meeting with Kurtz broadens his psychological experience and reveals the hidden life of the mind. His encounter with the manager and the brickmaker also reveal aspects of human nature, but of the more usual, avaricious kind.

Conrad too was a Victorian man with, however, very different beliefs

and principals to those of Carlyle. Lest I draw too strongly on *Sartor Resartus* in contextualizing *Heart of Darkness*, I present the different notions of truth and belief Carlyle and Conrad professed. Carlyle was much directed by his sense of social obligation and religious beliefs, though not orthodox 'finding the Calvinism of his father insupportable without some new intelligent justification' (Levine 59). While Conrad saw truth in the expression and presentation of artistic authenticity encapsulated in the now famous line from the 'Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*': 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*' (xlix). This transitional novel saw an awakening of Conrad's artistic skill and genius. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this phase in his writing career. Having completed what seemed like a literary apprenticeship, a vast horizon opened for experimentation in narrative, plot and character. The novels, thereafter, can be seen as his reappraisal of the Victorian period from the perspective of early Modernism, and in this way a sign of his growing confidence as a writer and ability to express his thoughts and feelings on a period of his life and the *fin de siècle*. He was a man both of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century.

Self-knowledge in *Heart of Darkness* is to an extent bound up with ideas of truth and the nature of reality. If we start from the historical validity of the story, we can see that not all of Marlow's experiences and observations can be reconciled with what was actually happening in this part of Africa at the time, nor do they reflect Conrad's own encounter with the Company and the 'heart of an immense darkness' (*Heart of Darkness and Other Tales* 252). As Ian Watt comments, there is no direct correlation between experience and representation: '*Heart of Darkness* is no more a direct representation of conditions in the Congo in 1890 than it is of Conrad's actual experiences there; but it is an expression of the essence of the social and historical reality of the Congo Free State as his

imagination recreated it.’ (138). Conrad’s use of his imagination may be said to offer a more subjective response to conditions in the Congo. Zdzislaw Najder suggests in *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, the story is ‘more important as a psychological than a historical and descriptive document’ (140). This is closely associated with the question of what is truth; what is reality. The qualitative nature of his observations and the emphasis on always involving his emotions in judging situations indicates a desire to achieve a deeper understanding. The notion of subjective and objective perspectives suggests the consideration of the characters being described only by the role they fulfill in Africa for the Company. Having been transported to Africa, the truth of their identity in Europe is partly lost or partly submerged beneath the task, which is expected of them in the jungle. If, as Conrad has noted, this is reality pushed only a little, then we can assume that in these kinds of conditions individuals became part of the group and became ultimately what they did. This, of course, cannot be relied upon for a direct job description. In this story the manager does not manage and the brickmaker does not appear to make bricks. Therefore, the truth of their roles in Africa lies elsewhere. The connection between the reality of their presence and the fiction of their employment divests this situation of its authenticity. For Marlow, as for Carlyle, this authenticity is created through the principles and processes of work. As Marlow observes of some black fellows:

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. (151)

The reality of this scene is projected mainly through the ‘energy’ of the

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paddlers. Physical movement and 'a wild vitality' create the truth of the scene. The natural environment brings motion into bold relief and makes Marlow feel a part of reality: 'For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts' (151). That the coast is 'their coast' also contributes to the authenticity created through the actions of the paddlers. This emphasises the falsity of colonialists, whether romantic adventurers and exploitative tyrants, who, according to Stein in *Lord Jim*, have come where they do not belong: 'but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still' (213). Even before Marlow has left Brussels he has 'a queer feeling [...] that I was an impostor' (150), thereby implying the false nature of his work and later presence in Africa. Later when Marlow witnesses the activities of the natives on the riverbank, he again invokes the name of work to bring solidity to his reality in Africa:

You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. (187)

The physical presence of the 'white-lead' and 'strips of woollen blanket' provide an anchor for Marlow keeping him in the world of work and so reality and suppressing his psychological connection with the dancers on the river bank:

Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. (186)

Here, Marlow is presented with another kind of truth or reality. There is within him just a ‘trace’ of acknowledgement that he may not be so far from what he wishes to distance himself from – that is a kind of kinship with the dancers on the riverbank. His struggle with this ‘terrible frankness’ again suggests that humankind cannot withstand too much reality [T.S. Eliot declared in *Burnt Norton*, the first part of *Four Quartets* ‘human kind / Cannot bear very much reality’ (44-45)] and the frankness may be something able to penetrate the defence, which is for Marlow the world of work.

This also heightens the ironic nature of the manager and the brickmaker. Their characters are anything but frank. Indeed, their positions in Africa have been created and are maintained through deceit. The jobs describing their social status point to the opposite in that a manager is supposed to bring direction and certainty while the manager performs the opposite. Also, the brickmaker who is supposed to bring stability through the production of building materials does not appear to do so. Marlow must find an affirmation of order which lies outside the commitment to work. He does so in part through ‘the foreman – a boiler-maker by trade – a good worker’ (175). Marlow’s actions, which help keep the steamer from sinking or breaking down, are in conflict with the intrigues of the manager and the brickmaker. Doubt has been sown in his mind, so weakening the structure of belief and introducing the possibility that there may be another form of reality, other than the one that keeps everyday life together. Work is instrumental in rejecting this idea, in that it is a bulwark against temptations and a protector of faith. It also secures an assurance against introspection leading to doubt and depletion of faith. As Watt comments, ‘Carlyle’s preachments about work, duty, and renunciation are essentially an early, comprehensive, and, of course, very influential statement of a constellation of values which characterised Victorian life as a whole. Here too these values were often placed in the context of a defence against temptation, hedonism, and loss

of faith. Thus, work was a defence against the powers of evil; renunciation saved man from the self-absorbed despair which result from the vain pursuit of happiness; while duty was humanity's last stay against the demoralizing loss of Christian faith' (150). These very Victorian ideas are instilled in Marlow, even though 'he did not represent his class. He was as seaman, but he was a wanderer, too' (*Heart of Darkness* 138) and 'a teller of untypical yarns' (*Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* xxxiii). He abandons the possibility of gaining employment on the sea and takes a job in the jungle:

I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas—a regular dose of the East—six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you. It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship—I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game, too. (141-142)

As we can see from the above quotation, after Marlow's return to London he goes through a series of exertions and disappointments. He, therefore, finds it difficult to adhere to the Victorian ideas condoned by Thomas Carlyle: work, duty and renunciation. Though he does mention, 'a heavenly mission to civilize you' alluding to the missionary fervor of the nineteenth century of 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways' (149) and, perhaps, referring askance to what is to come in the story. Overall, the focus here is on the reality or truth of being unemployed and still living by those beliefs, which have been instilled from an early age. Norman Sherry associates the situation Marlow finds himself in with the one Conrad was in after returning to London from Adelaide in 1889 and before that the East: 'Back in London in the early summer of 1889, he [Conrad] was once more without a job' (52). Both

Conrad and Marlow, therefore, went without the anchor of employment, a condition, according to Victorian ideas, that encourages temptation and a lack of faith. Such a condition would be also an opportunity for self-reflection, though under those guidelines recommended by Carlyle, this too is folly:

And yet of your Strength there is and can be no clean feeling, save by what you have prospered in, by what you have done. Between vague waving Capability and fixed indubitable Performance, what a difference! A certain inarticulate Self-consciousness dwells dimly in us; which only our Works can render articulate and decisively discernible. Our Works are the mirror wherein the spirit first sees its natural lineaments. Hence, too, the folly of that impossible Precept, *Know thyself*; till it be translated into this partially possible one, *Know what though canst work at.* (*Sartor Resartus* 118)

The emphasis is on communication with humanity, not counsel with oneself. The crowd on the river bank in the Congo push Marlow towards that ‘*Know thyself*’ condition, while he struggles with the steamboat engine. Thus Marlow is about to take counsel with himself in finding within him a deeply rooted relation with the crowd: ‘It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman’ (186). Ironically, Carlyle believed that science and mechanical things were dangerous to the human spirit and that they announced an age of disbelief:

In the midst of their crowded streets and assemblages, I walked solitary; and (except as it was my own heart, not other’s, that I kept devouring) savage also, as the tiger in his jungle. Some comfort it would have been, could I, like Faust, have fancied myself tempted and tormented of the Devil; for a Hell, as I imagine, without Life, though only diabolic Life, were mere frightful: but in our age of Down pulling and Disbelief, the very Devil has been pulled down, you cannot so much as believed in a Devil. To me the

Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference to grind me limb from limb. (*Sartor Resartus* 119)

There is a desire here for temptation to sense some division between good and evil, vice and virtue, to look into a heart of darkness, rather than the continued vague disconnection from belief and hope. Presented with what one does not believe in, there is a suggestion that self-belief and self-knowledge will inevitably surface. It is also noteworthy, that Carlyle paid special attention to using the image of the steam engine, to illustrate its aggressive characteristics. In this, the steam engine will pull him apart, physically. In *Heart of Darkness*, however, it is precisely the steam engine Marlow is working on which stops him from succumbing to the influences of the natives. Conrad, in apparent echo of this, used the image of the knitting machine in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham to illustrate the 'irrealisable' quality of Cunninghame Graham's beliefs: 'You want from men faith, honour, fidelity to truth in themselves and others' (*Joseph Conrad's Letters to R.B. Cunninghame Graham* 56). In it he criticises the scientific organisation of society and its lack of real depth of feeling. This appears to correspond with Carlyle's early beliefs about being pulled 'limb from limb'. However, for Carlyle the problem is that the machine will be an obstacle in humanity's path to God. For Conrad though, the machine is something which will inhibit individual thought. The machine will knit while it should really 'embroider'.

They both appeared to fear the dominating influence of science to force humanity into a situation of universal oppression and uniformity of thought. In Carlyle's case, this stemmed from his deep, though unorthodox, religiosity. In Conrad's case, it may have its origin in his Polish background and the oppression his parents received from the Russian state. Truth is the issue at the centre of Carlyle and Conrad's fears. Again for Carlyle, the truth would have been based in the eternal

truth of the word of God. For Conrad, truth would have been based in his desire ‘to make you hear, to make you feel [...] to make you see’. Marlow’s problem is at the point where he is torn between going ‘ashore for a howl and a dance’ and mending the steam pipes. In this situation science, or just making things work, acts as an opportune defence against answering his deeper instincts. It serves Carlyle’s dictum of ‘*Know[ing] what thou canst work at*’, but it temporarily obscures Conrad’s to ‘*Know thyself*’.

Knowing oneself is one of the dominating themes of *Heart of Darkness*. Carlyle’s emphasis on doing rather than being moves the individual away from a soul searching introspection in an attempt to find how people fit into society, with a dominating imperialistic Victorian hegemony. What Carlyle perhaps feared in a ‘*Know thyself*’ approach to self-development was probably the prospect of finding something within oneself, which did not contribute to society or religion. Though, that did not prevent him from examining the sources of inner motivation, through the avatar of Teufelsdröckh. If we look again at *Sartor Resartus*, we can find that in the hierarchy of principles upon which human existence is based, ‘Hope’ plays an important part: ‘Alas, shut-out from Hope, in a deeper sense than we yet dream of! For, as he wanders wearisomely through this world, he has now lost all tidings of another and higher. Full of religion, or at least of religiosity, as our Friend has since exhibited himself, he hides not that, in those days, he was wholly irreligious’ (116). The loss of ‘Hope’ leads to a condition where both one’s moral compass and the central pillar of one’s life, God, are forsaken. The ultimate end for such a journey in the wilderness of ‘Inquiry’ (117) is to find nothing more than a desert populated by beasts and ‘hate-filled men’ where questions of destiny receive only an echo: ‘Thus has the bewildered Wanderer to stand, as so many have done, shouting question after question into the Sibyl-cave of Destiny, and receive no Answer but an Echo. It is all a grim Desert, this once-fair world of his; wherein is heard only the howling of

wild-beasts, or the shrieks of despairing, hate-filled men; and no Pillar of Cloud by day, and no Pillar of Fire by night, any longer guides the Pilgrim. To such length has the spirit of Inquiry carried him' (117). There are no answers to be found for those willing to pursue the road of self-examination. The imagery which Carlyle uses presents a state of chaos, closer to ideas of a hellish place. There seems to be no rule in this place without 'Hope'. The extremity of the place would appear to anticipate the condition of alienation felt by modern man in the early twentieth century documented in 'The Hollow Men':

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men. (13-18)

The path of certainty recommended by Carlyle in the nineteenth century has been exchanged for the path of 'Shape without form', through the twentieth century's questioning of established Victorian principles, in this context initiated by Conrad and continued by Eliot. 'The Hollow Men' is a valid disquisition and commentary, very much in the manner of Conrad's fiction, on the sustainability of those nineteenth-century values people once trusted and may feel tempted to turn to in moments of twentieth-century existential doubt:

Head piece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass

Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar (4-10)

The epigraph '*Mistah Kurtz – he dead*' acts as a solemn portent for the poem, but also recalls Marlow's reading of Kurtz's 'report' for 'the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs', the optimism of which suggests 'an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence' (208) 'the exposition of [the] method [...] "Exterminate all the brutes"' (208) suggests the emergence of other values incompatible with the nineteenth-century establishment. The quotations seem to confirm Carlyle's worst fears concerning the effects of self-examination. The Godless nature of the modern period, at the beginning of the twentieth century, left humanity at the centre of existence instead of a God centered universe. After the removal of religion as the defining guide in a society saved from the chaos of disorder by the order of an ethical philosophy, Christianity, there remained no possibility to squeeze 'the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question' (Prufrock 92-93). There was no overwhelming question, because the answer, God, for many people had ceased to provide a response to the dilemmas of modern alienation. In both 'The Hollow Men' and 'Prufrock', hope is lost as Carlyle appears to anticipate. The wasteland of irreligious he defines for Teufelsdröckh seems similar to those populated by Prufrock and the hollow men. Where Carlyle sees this lack of hope from a personal perspective: 'Under the stress of near poverty and a sense of his own personal inadequacies he [Carlyle] had tried to reshape the world by sheer force of will so as to make it meaningful' (Levine 59): and has Teufelsdröckh suggest 'for the sensitive man to "Establish himself in Bedlam; begin writing Satanic Poetry; or blow-out his brains' (59). Eliot's sees it more in terms of 'Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!' (3-4), and 'Violent souls, but only / As the hollow men / The

stuffed men' (16-18), so suggesting something more fundamental. The route of thought on the processes and effects of taking counsel with oneself can be plotted from Carlyle, through Conrad to Eliot.

Also, that most of the characters in *Heart of Darkness*, as I have already noted, are described by their jobs, and that these titles bear little relation to what they actually do, appears to be a criticism of Carlyle's dictum 'Know what though canst work at'. The increasingly protean relationship between employment and humanity foregrounds the principle of an ever depleting sense of conventional identity. From early times when surnames were derived from what people did and the idea of what you do is who you are, in *Heart of Darkness* there are no comfortable foundations of truth or reality relating to this traditional perspective. This situation, where the 'pilgrims' are not pilgrims, the manager does not really manage and the brickmaker is never so much as near a brick presents a breakdown between description and intention and questions received ideas on truth and reality. This even applies to Marlow himself. He is nominally the captain of a steamboat. However, while he is waiting for rivets to rebuild his command, he is gradually transformed into the keeper of Mr. Kurtz's reputation. This does not happen by some deliberate act, but is the outcome of his encounter with the hollow men in the Congo jungle. Their presence acts like a contagion draining those around them of their identities and solidity. This also extends to inanimate objects, for example, 'Tower' or 'Towson's' (189) 'An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship'. This book, with 'illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables' for the improvement of seamanship in 'his Majesty's Navy', makes Marlow 'forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real'.

This then, as Jacques Berthoud has it, explains the importance of the extent to which society extends a controlling hand over its people: '*Heart of Darkness*, then, can be considered as an inquiry into how strong the hold of civilization is in its members. It is therefore necessary to note the

degree to which this tale, particularly in its initial phase, exhibits the consequences of abstracting men from their native contexts' (45). Individual identities are not so much accepted but allotted in an effort to incorporate each person into its guiding might. What we are is what we receive in the form of an identity, which we adapt and transform to our own character. As Winnie Verloc says in *The Secret Agent*, 'We ain't downtrodden slaves here' (205). Even if Adolf Verloc feels a three-way oppression from the police, the anarchists and a foreign embassy, matters are different in the Congo jungle for most Europeans, where the ordinary sources of social restraint do not apply.

Life, humanity, society, self-reflection, inner knowledge and outer bearing appear important in the works of Carlyle and Conrad. In principle work is the vehicle through which identity should be discovered. In a market economy, this noble belief is tinged by the presence of having to exchange one's labour for money to continue the daily routine of eating, drinking and keeping a roof over one's head. This is where things get complicated. The right job in the wrong conditions, or even the right conditions but the wrong job lead to idle thought, negativity, discontent and alienation. Instead of finding the centre of the self in the forgetful energy of physical exertion, the self becomes internalized, cut off from fellowship, duty and loyalty. It is interesting that Marlow continues to refer to the manager and brickmaker by their allotted roles, as if still hoping to see in their designated job descriptions the anchor that will affix him to some kind of reality. They are, nominally as least, his superiors with a greater stake in the success of the Company. In extreme conditions, one looks to one's superiors for counselling and guidance. However, Marlow discovers that while one does not manage the other is a 'papier-mâché Mephistopheles' (171) anticipating perhaps Eliot's hollow men. Perhaps there is already in the brickmaker a sense of the alienation of the modern world.

Carlyle's struggles with making sense of the world have a more

concrete base in that alienation has a tangible source, industrialism, and a clear-cut outcome, disharmony in the spiritual and physical. In an anachronistic reference to the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, the Marlow of 'Youth' reads *Sartor Resartus* for the first time while his ship is laid up for repairs. At this time, Mrs Beard, the captain's wife, mends young Marlow's clothes. Marlow aptly reads this book, when both the ship and his clothes are being patched. Though he prefers 'Burnaby's *Ride to Khiva*' at this point in his life, Carlyle's work provides a sobering reflection on the philosophy of 'Know[ing] thyself'. 'Know[ing] thyself' is not something that the Marlow of 'Youth' finds too much of a riddle. The Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* takes a very different view. This suggests that one can skate across the surface of life oblivious of its suspicions and uncertainties, or dive deep to discover its ambiguities and contradictions, which Carlyle and Conrad did, and which I hope to have shown they did in this article.

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