

Conrad and Arendt. Revealing the roots of evil*

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TO THE CENTRE OF COLONIAL AFRICA

This article deals with the relationships between three texts revealing the essence of colonialism and totalitarianism – two systems which share, among other things, the practice of concealing large-scale crime behind a façade of official clichés. On the role that *Heart of Darkness* played in discrediting colonial empires which realise ‘white man’s mission’, Przemysław Czapliński wrote: ‘I do not know of a literary text that would be as successful in leading to an implosion of colonial discourse’.¹ A pattern of moving from the hidden to the public exists on many levels in Conrad’s short story. The reader finds out about the stark reality of colonial Africa, hidden beneath the slogans of civilisational mission. They find out about the invisible, archaic roots of modernity, and about discovering by the narrator story of layers of his own psyche, previously unknown to him.

Conrad’s story played an important role in the creation of Hannah Arendt’s book on the origins and rules of totalitarianism. The author of *The origins of totalitarianism* endeavoured to describe a phenomenon with no precedence, and therefore she regarded methods previously used in sociology, history and philosophy as insufficient. The original title of the work could be misleading, as it signals a certain conservatism:

Brzmiał zbyt akademicko i sucho, przywołując na myśl głośne dzieło Darwina *The origins of species* (*O powstawaniu gatunków*), fałszywie sugerował

It sounded too academic and dry, bringing into mind the well-known work of Darwin, *On the origin of species*, falsely suggesting a standard, historical

* First printed as “Conrad i Arendt. Ujawnianie korzeni zła”, in: *Napis* issue XVII (2011), pp. 139-151.

1 P. Czapliński, *Niebezpieczne arcydzieło* [Dangerous masterpiece], afterword to: J. Conrad, *Jądro ciemności* [*Heart of Darkness*], transl. by J. Polak (Poznań: 2009), p. 147.

standardowe podejście historyczne, mimo że duża część rozprawy poświęcona była analizie współczesności; nie sygnalizował jej nowatorstwa formalnego i metodologicznego, zwłaszcza zaś jej filozoficzno-moralnego wymiaru².

approach, despite the fact that a substantial part of the essay was devoted to an analysis of the present; it did not signal its originality of form methodology, especially its philosophical-moral angle.³

As Michelle-Irene Brudny observed, based on – among others – her studies of Arendt’s manuscripts, in the shaping of the insightful theory literature was more important than scholarly studies. Literary quotations functioned as centres of crystallising, or matrixes constituting the ‘foundation of further arguments’.³ Such initiating role played novels by Proust, Disraeli, Kipling, as well Lawrence of Arabia’s memoirs, but especially Conrad’s short story about Charles Marlow sailing up the river Congo to meet Kurtz:

Snując rozważania o imperializmie, Arendt posłużyła się pewnym dłuższym fragmentem *Jądra ciemności*, który zrobił na niej ogromne wrażenie, traktując go jako teren obserwacji krystalizowania się pewnego układu elementów wykorzystanych później przez nazizm⁴.

Reflecting on imperialism, Arendt utilised a longer fragment of *Heart of Darkness*, which made a great impression on her, treating it as a ground for observing the crystallising of a certain system of elements later used by Nazism.⁴

Marlow often asked whether indigenous Africans were already humans, or whether they remained a part of a hostile, inhuman wilderness, striving to drag strangers from the civilised world onto their side, and reign once more over those whose ancestors came out of the darkness centuries ago. He himself represented the era which consistently used the notion of progress, he flinched from recognising its value which he saw as a relic of a long-gone past, perhaps, as Arendt wrote with reference to Conrad’s story, identifying it as ‘the accidentally surviving specimens of the first forms of human life on earth’⁵. Conrad gave his character (who is a buffer in the relationship with the English reader) the awareness that he was not in contact with indigenous culture, preserved in its pure state, as that had been irreversibly disrupted by brutal, external interference. This is portrayed symbolically in the scene of the bombardment of wild areas by a French man-of-war:

2 D. Grinberg, *Wstęp do wydania polskiego* [Introduction to the Polish edition], in: H. Arendt, *Korzenie totalitaryzmu*, transl. by D. Grinberg and M. Szawiel (Warsaw: 1989), vol. I, p. IX [*The origins of totalitarianism* (New York: 1973)].

3 M.-I. Brudny, *Hannah Arendt. Próba biografii intelektualnej* transl. by M. Kowalska (Warsaw: 2010), p. 86 [*idem, Hannah Arendt. An intellectual biography* (New York: 2008)].

4 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

The theory of African colonies as a kind of testing-ground for Nazism was further developed by Swedish writer, Sven Lindqvist, who placed the well-known sentence by Kurtz, written on the margin of the report for the ‘International Society for the Suppression of Wild Customs’ in the title of his book. Cf. *idem*, “*Exterminate all the brutes*”. *One man’s Odyssey into the heart of darkness and the origins of European genocide* (New York: 1992).

5 H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (New York: 1973), p. 192.

Wśród niezmierzonej pustki ziemi, nieba i wody tkwił ten niepojęty okręt i strzelał w głąb kontynentu. Bum! odzywała się jedna z sześciocalowych armat; drobny płomyk wyskakiwał i znikał, niewielki kłąb białego dymu rozpyływał się w powietrzu, drobny pocisk zaskrzeczał słabo – i nic nie nastąpiło. Nic nastąpić nie mogło. Było w tym działaniu coś obłąkanego, widok przypominał ponurą krotoczwilę i nie rozproszył tego wrażenia jakiś człowiek z pokładu zapewniający mnie poważnie, że tam jest obóz krajowców – nazywał ich nieprzyjaciółmi! – ukryty gdzieś w głębi.⁶

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.⁶

Marlow did not want to disavow his own culture, although he was deeply critical of it, and he did not form a closer relationship with any of the white colonisers, having witnessed their stupidity and cruelty. He nevertheless remained one of them, but he did not go as far as to deny the humanity of the foreigners that he met during the disastrous African escapade. When Marlow first mentioned indigenuous Africans, he called them people,⁷ and although he later used an array of other names (niggers, natives, savages, etc.), the narrator of the story and former captain of the aforementioned steamer never denied the fundamental bond with the ‘others’. He would sometimes react with disgust to their otherness, unable and unwilling to understand exotic customs, but he did not regard the indigenous people as brutes. Furthermore, when facing the experience of death, Marlow found confirmation of kinship, as his looking into the face of a dying black man became the ultimate corroboration of a shared, human fate: ‘And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory – like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment’.⁸

The narrator of the story experienced the presence of something alien, mysterious and dangerous. When the unintelligible voices of black men were coming from the jungle, he asked, expressing the emotions of all white people travelling aboard the steamer:

Czy przedhistoryczny człowiek nas przeklinał, czy modlił się do nas, czy też nas witał – któż to mógł wiedzieć? Zrozumienie tego, co nas otaczało, było dla nas niemożliwe; przesuwaaliśmy się jak widma,

The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly

6 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in: *idem, Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories* (William Blackwood and Sons: Edinburgh and London: 1902), p. 70, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1 [Polish version: J. Conrad, *Jądro ciemności*, in: *idem, Młodość i inne opowiadania*, transl. by A. Żagórska (Warsaw: 1972), p. 77].

7 ‘Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path’. *Ibid.*, p. 72, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 135, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2.

rozciekawieni i pełni ukrytego lęku, niby ludzie normalni wobec jakiegoś entuzjastycznego wybuchu w zakładzie dla obłąkanych. Nie mogliśmy tego pojąć, ponieważ odeszliśmy za daleko i nie umieliśmy już sobie przypomnieć; ponieważ wędrowaliśmy przez mroki pierwszych wieków, tamtych wieków, które minęły, nie zostawiając prawie żadnego śladu i żadnych wspomnień. Ziemia nie wydawała się ziemską. [...] A ludzie byli... Nie, ludzie nie byli niehumani. Widzicie, otóż to było najgorsze ze wszystkiego – podejrzenie, że oni nie są niehumani...⁹

appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign – and no memories.

The earth seemed 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.⁹

Thanks to the journey to the centre of the continent, Marlow realised that both the similarity and the difference between the two cultural worlds are something inscrutable and unfathomable, requiring humility. Meanwhile, Kurtz tried to understand and solve the problem, equipped with contemporary ideas, because, as we know, '[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of [him]'¹⁰. In the story, the report prepared by him, in which the first paragraph characterises the superiority of the White man, becomes a document of this attempt at understanding. The emissary of civilisation, equipped with fire-arms, may seem to the Africans a supernatural being and, '[b]y the simple exercise of [his] will', he will be able to 'exert a power for good practically unbounded'¹¹. When Kurtz understood, however, that elevating 'the savages' onto a civilisational level of the Europeans was impossible, while still being convinced of his own, almost indefinite, capabilities, only one solution came to mind:

Była bardzo prosta, i u końca tego wzruszającego wezwania do wszelkich altruistycznych uczuć gorzała, jaśniejąca i przeraźliwa, jak błyskawica wśród pogodnego nieba: „Wytepić te wszystkie bestie!”¹².

It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!'¹².

The discovery of race, according to Arendt, led people like Kurtz to believe that their nation could be turned into the master race.¹³ The expansion of colonial empires became possible due to the incorporation of two rules of ruling over foreign

9 *Ibid.*, p. 109, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2 [Polish version: p. 37].

10 *Ibid.*, p. 133, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 134, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2.

12 *Ibid.*, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2 [Polish version: p. 51].

13 Cf. M.-I. Brudny, *Hannah Arendt. Próba biografii intelektualnej*, p. 85.

peoples: 'One was race as a principle of the body politic, and the other bureaucracy as a principle of foreign domination'.¹⁴ Adopting the argument of biological, evolutionary inferiority of indigenous people whose inability to embrace higher civilisation quickly became apparent to the members of the master race, led to classifying them as the 'objective enemy'.¹⁵ Such an enemy can and should be exterminated, sparing the public opinion the knowledge of this unpleasant operation. Monstrous bureaucracy is used to create a distance towards genocide, to rationalise and conceal it, both in the world of *Heart of Darkness*, and in totalitarian states. Before coming to Africa, Marlow had to be approved by elaborate colonial administration. The Society offices, visited by the character of the story, occupied the largest building in the city, and the banal, official act was performed in such an *entourage* that Marlow remembered it as if it was taking part in a lofty ceremony in some shrine. Also in Africa, when he witnessed stupidity, abuse and brutality, he saw the accompanying, systematic work of the bureaucrat: 'bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death'.¹⁶

The above-mentioned 'grove of death' was the place where the black people died, emaciated by work – a harbinger of the 'Muselmanns' and the 'dokhodyagi' in twentieth-century camps.

A reading of *Heart of Darkness* suggested to Arendt the model of social advancement in totalitarian systems. Careers of 'new people' became possible when traditional norms and social values ceased to hold. Marlow, in an attempt to explain to himself and to his listeners the rise and fall of Kurtz, highlighted that the latter found himself in a world where 'principles won't do', they reveal themselves to be 'acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags' which 'would fly off at the first good shake'.¹⁷ In this ethical vacuum one had to create one's own *credo*: Kurtz found it and reduced it to a genocide warrant, expressed tersely on the margin of his report. Under the new conditions, customary rules of appointing the elites (social background, education, virtue, achievements, etc.) were replaced by charisma. About white people who made their career in Africa (founders of totalitarian regimes followed this model), Arendt wrote as follows, regarding Conrad's literary depiction (based on his personal experiences) as a plausible basis for scientific generalisations:

14 H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, p. 185.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 465.

16 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, pp. 79-80, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 109, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2.

Jak Kurtz z *Jądra ciemności* Conrada byli „wydrążeni do samego sedna [...], zuchwali bez dzielności, chciwi bez odwagi i okrutni bez męstwa”. W nic nie wierzyli i „potrafiли w mówić w siebie wszystko – wszystko”. Wygnani ze świata uznawanych wartości społecznych, byli zdani na siebie i wciąż nie mieli się na czym oprzeć z wyjątkiem przeblysków talentu, który sprawiał, że byliby równie niebezpieczni, jak Kurtz, gdyby wolno im było kiedykolwiek wrócić do ojczyzny. Jedynym bowiem talentem, który mógłby się rozwinąć w ich pustych duszach, był dar fascynacji, tworzący „wspaniałego przywódcę skrajnej partii”. [...] Uzdolnieni czy nie, wszyscy „gotowi byli na wszystko – od gry w ceto i licho do rozmyślnego morderstwa”, a bliźni „znaczyli dla nich nie więcej niż mucha”. I tak przynieśli ze sobą lub szybko sobie przyswoili kodeks zachowania odpowiedni dla tworzącego się wówczas typu mordercy, dla którego jedynym, niewybaczalnym grzechem jest stracić panowanie nad sobą¹⁸.

Like Mr. Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, they were 'hollow to the core,' reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity and cruel without courage'. They believed in nothing and 'could get (themselves) to believe anything – anything'. Expelled from a world with accepted social values, they had been thrown back upon themselves and still had nothing to fall back upon except, here and there, a streak of talent which made them as dangerous as Kurtz if they were ever allowed to return to their homelands. For the only talent that could possibly burgeon in their hollow souls was the gift of fascination which makes a 'splendid leader of an extreme party'. (...) But gifted or not, they were all 'game for anything from pitch and toss to wilful murder' and to them their fellow-men were 'no more one way or another than that fly there'. Thus they brought with them, or they learned quickly, the code of manners which befitted the coming type of murderer to whom the only unforgivable sin is to lose his temper.¹⁸

In traditional societies, the success of 'very remarkable'¹⁹ people (as Kurtz is described by the Company's chief accountant) was arrested by various barriers. In the new world, as pointed out by the author of *The origins of totalitarianism*, the 'advancement of the underworld' was not restricted by anything. People from different circles and social strata were connected there by an easy and unequivocal method of identification, that is race which guaranteed that crimes could be committed with impunity. Supported by institutions and propaganda, they were able to establish rules which were later fully realised by totalitarian regimes, assessing people based on their usefulness for the system. Thus, Marlow noticed with contempt, that he also participated, against his will, in the history-changing grand design, and that he was:

Działaczem, przez duże „D” – rozumiecie. Niby wysłańcem świata, niby apostołem pośledniejszego gatunku. W owych czasach rozpuszczano masę takich bredni w druk i słowie [...]²⁰.

one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time (...)²⁰

Institution, bureaucracy, clichés, fire-arms – with such an arsenal, Kurtz could single-handedly start his own country in the heart of the continent. But he could not survive without the approval of others, without the support of the colonial

18 H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*, p. 189 [Polish version: p. 152].

19 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 78, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 67, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1 [Polish version: p. 74].

system. The expedition to get Kurtz was not undertaken due to his crimes, as these were nothing unusual or unjustified. The scandal related to the fact that a solitary white man started to resemble 'the savages'.

TO JERUSALEM

Arendt also travelled on her own journey to the 'heart of darkness'. Laure Adler, her notable biographer, associated Marlow's journey to the heart of colonial Africa with the trial of Adolf Eichmann:

Hannah prowadzi nas w podróż do jądra ciemności. Drżymy z przerażenia i wstydu, ponieważ niektórzy ludzie, zupełnie tacy jak my, popełnili zbrodnię przeciwko wszystkim innym ludziom: bezbronnym ofiarom, a nie wojennym wrogom. Na zawsze zhańbili rodzaj ludzki, a mimo wszystko nadal zamieszkują Ziemię. Odtąd narzuca się pytanie, które Hannah Arendt ośmieliła się sformułować jako pierwsza: czy ludobójstwo może się powtórzyć? Niestety, w czterdzieści lat później historia przyznała jej rację²¹.

Hannah leads us on a journey to the heart of darkness. We shiver in terror and shame, because people exactly like us committed a crime against all other people: defenceless victims, and not wartime enemies. They have forever disgraced the human race, and despite all this, they still live on Earth. From then on, a question has appeared, and Hannah Arendt was the first to dare ask it: can genocide repeat itself? Unfortunately, forty years later, history proved her right.²¹

In May 1960, Eichmann, one of the main executors of the plan to exterminate the European Jews was captured in Buenos Aires by Mossad operatives, and then transported to Israel, where his trial was to take place. Arendt, who escaped the Holocaust by leaving France for the United States in 1941, followed these events with great interest. It could be said that Adolf Eichmann became her Kurtz; she decided to attend the trial, to understand the mechanism of mass crimes of the Nazi system and the participation in those of a specific person. In order to become a reporter, the University lecturer made an offer to William Shawn, owner of *The New Yorker*, to write a report from the trial. She informed him that she was not going to write an extensive academic study, but rather 'just a few lines, nothing elaborate'²². She prepared thoroughly for the journey, following press articles on the arrangements for the trial and reading studies on the Holocaust, still sparse at the time. She soon realised that her curiosity went beyond the usual boundaries: 'the thing is, I am completely addicted to this trial'.²³ An analogy to Marlow, fascinated by Kurtz, comes to mind. Both of them, the philosopher and the character

21 L. Adler, *Śladami Hannah Arendt* [In the steps of Hannah Arendt], transl. from French by J. Aleksandrowicz (Warsaw: 2008), p. 398.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 346.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

of Conrad's story, are impatiently anticipating an encounter with an unusual, strong man. They are aware, at least in general terms, of his crimes. They expect that they will get to know the mystery of human evil. And both were to be surprised – the criminals turned out not to be grand and pompous, but banal.

Eichmann as described by Arendt is a Kurtz who did not have to kill. This distinguished specialist on race did not have to come face to face with merciless facts, generally hiding behind a veil of clichés. The grand work of development, of removing superfluous biological material, was, in practice, reduced to technical issues, columns of numbers and dry bureaucratic correspondence. Much seems to suggest that, should he have had to visit the camps more often (he did so twice, and only briefly: Treblinka and Auschwitz), he would not have been able to endure it, would fall from his heights like Kurtz. Eichmann was also never abandoned by the Party, the equivalent of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs from Conrad's work.

Arendt could have borrowed the notion of the 'banality of evil' (or, rather: the 'banality of the evil-doer') from Conrad's literary works²⁴. In his commentary to *Under Western Eyes*, the writer, disputing the demonic characterisations of revolutionaries in Dostoevsky's works, recommends his characters as follows:

Nikogo nie przedstawiłem tutaj jako potwora – ani prostodusznej Tekli, ani fanatycznej Zofii Antonówny. Piotr Iwanowicz i pani de S. proszą się o cięgi. Są małpami złowrogiej dżungli i zostali potraktowani tak, jak na to zasługiwały strojone przez nie grymasy. Jeśli idzie o Nikitę – zwanego Nekatorem – jest on typowym. W tworzeniu tej postaci najwięcej trudności sprawiała mi nie jej potworność, lecz banalność. Wystawiano ją na widok publiczny przez lata całe w tak zwanych rewelacjach dziennikarskich, w sekretnych szkicach historycznych, w sensacyjnych powieściach²⁵.

Nobody is exhibited as a monster here – neither the simple-minded Tekla nor the wrong-headed Sophia Antonovna. Peter Ivanovitch and Madame de S. are fair game. They are the apes of a sinister jungle and are treated as their grimaces deserve. As to Nikita – nicknamed Necator – he is the perfect flower of the terroristic wildness. What troubled me most in dealing with him was not his monstrosity but his banality. He has been exhibited to the public eye for years in so-called 'disclosures' in newspaper articles, in secret histories, in sensational novels.²⁵

Conrad explicitly discouraged investigating the meanders of psychological life of these characters from novels. Instead, he tried to convince the reader that they were a 'common', 'normal' product of their times, and their behaviours were determined by taking on one of two seemingly conflicting ideas: autocratic and revolutionary. Those who in the novels resorted to murder for political reasons, are not repulsive monsters, possessed people, or even fanatics. The criminals portrayed by

24 And the theme of 'banality of evil' she suggested, whether drawn from Conrad (in: *Under Western Eyes*), from Blücher, or even from Jaspers, directed her 'beyond the area of politics' for good. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

25 J. Conrad, *From the Author*, in: *ibid.*, *Under Western Eyes*, ed. J. Peters (Toronto: 2010), p. 45.

Conrad and Arendt were neither lofty nor tragic. They are, to use a phrase repeated in the novel *Lord Jim* in relation to the main character, 'one of us',²⁶ though it would surely be more convenient to assume that they were monsters. Julia Kristeva wrote on this aspect of Arendt's study of Eichmann:

Indywidualia, które nie są perwertami ani sadystami, ludzie „przerażliwie normalni”, z całkowicie czystym sumieniem posuwają się do popełniania zbrodni całkiem nowego rodzaju. Osobnicy ci, niezdolni do osądu, przypisują sobie prawo „decydowania o tym, kto ma, a kto nie ma zamieszkiwać na świecie”²⁷.

Individuals, who are not perverts or sadists, 'frighteningly normal' people, with a completely clear conscience, set out to commit crimes of a wholly new kind. These types, incapable of judgment, arrogate to themselves the right to 'decide who is, and who is not to live in the world.'²⁷

In her other work, Arendt, analysing totalitarianism, states that 'violence... is not monstrous, or irrational'²⁸, and highlights the lack of correlation, or personal relationship between the executioner and the victim. Eichmann distanced himself from anti-Semitism a number of times, and emphasised that he had Jewish friends. Also in Conrad's short story, Kurtz does not hold personal feelings of hate or animosity towards his victims; they are only repulsive to him as members of a species.

Arendt, as noted by Kristeva, from as early as the 1950's ('from the times of reflection on Auschwitz'), associated 'radical evil with that which she was to later call 'banality of evil'.²⁹ Functionaries of totalitarian regimes such as Eichmann (and, earlier – people like Kurtz) were subject to a 'destruction of thinking' characteristic of their times, which was 'cunning, generalised, ignored, and in this sense, banal'. It preceded 'destruction of life'.³⁰

Both books, *Heart of Darkness* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, recreate disillusionment experienced by a traveller in search of an answer to the question of the essence of evil who wants to uncover the hidden. Both Marlow from Conrad's story and Arendt had to listen to long testimonies. To them, Kurtz and Eichmann are voices, first and foremost. Marlow states, 'Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice!'³¹ The

26 J. Conrad, *Lord Jim* (San Diego: 2005), p. 10 and others.

27 J. Kristeva, *Geniusz kobiecy. Hannah Arendt. Biografia* [Female genius. Hannah Arendt], transl. from French by J. Levin, (Warsaw: 2007), p. 156.

Later, Kristeva identifies a timely warning in Arendt's book: 'One can imagine how, in the near future, the needs associated with automatization will persuade the "decision-makers", equally incapable of judgement, to exterminate all those whose IQ does not reach a particular level. Are there potential Eichmanns already lurking amongst the "successful people" of the hyper-technical consumer society?' (*ibid.*).

28 H. Arendt, *Crises of the republic. On violence. Civil disobedience. Lying in politics. Thoughts on politics and revolution* (New York: 1972), p. 158.

29 J. Kristeva, *Geniusz kobiecy. Hannah Arendt. Biografia*, p. 151.

30 *Ibid.*

31 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 166, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_3.

sound of the words seemed unreal against the emaciated body of the speaker and the extraordinary scenery of the monologues. Arendt described experiencing a similar feeling of participating in something unreal:

Żadnemu ze słów wypowiedzianych przez oskarżonego dziwnie nierealnym głosem dobiegającym z magnetofonu – nierealnym podwójnie, bo ciało, do którego należał ów głos, było obecne, lecz samo przedstawiało osobliwie nierealny widok, przeszło-nięte grubymi taflami szkła – nie zaprzeczył ani on sam, ani jego obrońca³².

Nothing the accused said, in the curiously disembodied voice that came out of the tape-recorder – doubly disembodied, because the body that owned the voice was present but itself also appeared strangely disembodied through the thick glass walls surrounding it – was denied either by him or by the defence.³²

Marlow's travel at first seemed to him as an initiation journey, a chance to meet with a deity, or at least with a 'very remarkable person'.³³ In reality, as it turned out, he was to watch a dying 'hollow sham' who 'hide[s] in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart'.³⁴ Arendt's tale, based on the many hours of Eichmann's testimony, also contains a surprisingly mediocre, bland biography:

Ten normalny przeciętny człowiek zrobił na niej wrażenie podczas całego procesu, okazał się bowiem indywidualum „całkowicie niezdołnym do [...] odróżnienia dobra od zła”. Arendt sarkastycznie zauważa, że śmieszne były „heroiczne zmagania Eichmanna z językiem niemieckim, nieodmiennie kończące się jego klęską”, a także jego „biurokratyczny żargon”, który „stał się jego mową dlatego, że doprawdy nie był w stanie wypowiedzieć zdania, które nie byłoby komunalem”³⁵.

This normal, average man made an impression on her throughout the entire trial, as he turned out to be an individual 'perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong'. Arendt sarcastically notes that 'Eichmann's heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him' is funny, as is his 'Officialese', which 'became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché'.³⁵

Conrad's Kurtz was more eloquent, although he also used clichés. They are connected by the 'great inauthenticity',³⁶ both were equipped with certain rules and enjoyed the acceptance and respect of their contemporaries. From the viewpoint of the end of their journeys it is clear that both men were not able to depend on 'own innate strength, upon [their] own capacity for faithfulness',³⁷ but they remained

32 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (New York: 1992), p. 90 [Polish version: *idem, Eichmann w Jerozolimie. Rzecz o banalności zła*, transl. A. Szostkiewicz (Cracow: 1987), p. 116].

33 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 78, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_1.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 166, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_3.

35 J. Kristeva, *Geniusz kobiecy. Hannah Arendt. Biografia*, p. 154.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

37 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 132, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_2.

dependent on the approving glances of people serving the colonial or fascist systems. Eichmann, as Arendt observed, had a 'horrible gift for consoling himself with clichés', which 'did not leave him in the hour of his death'.³⁸ Kurtz had the same 'gift', but it let him down when he was dying, as he negated all his previous discourses with no more than a breath: 'The horror!'

CRITICS' OBJECTIONS AND DOING JUSTICE

In February and March 1963, Arendt published five articles on the Eichmann trial in *The New Yorker*, and several months later the first version of the book was published, followed by a revised version the following year. The heated debates that ensued bring to mind, to some degree, the controversy around *Heart of Darkness*, which has been going on since late 1970's. First of all, both authors were criticised for their lack of respect towards the victims and for suggesting their passiveness in the face of violence, or even participation in it. Arendt was called an anti-Semite,³⁹ Conrad – a racist. Such extreme opinions stemmed, among other things, from the fact that the writers failed to employ the presupposition of victim innocence. This is because they presented systems whose essence was to de-humanise the disadvantaged and deny them the chance for heroic behaviours, as well as to blur the boundary between perpetrators and victims. The evil-doer was not monstrous, the victims were not beautiful: many readers of *Heart of Darkness* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* refused to accept this conclusion.

In his famous article, Chinua Achebe accused the author of *Heart of Darkness* of objectifying the victims of colonialism, and even of reinforcing racial prejudice by depicting Africans as a passive black mass.⁴⁰ In reference to this judgement, Edward Said noted that Conrad described one of the fundamental rules of the system as follows:

Skoro nie potrafimy w pełni zrozumieć doświadczeń drugiej osoby, skoro musimy polegać na autorytecie tego rodzaju władzy, jaką dzierży w dżungli Kurtz jako biały człowiek, czy jaką Marlow, kolejny biały człowiek, dzierży jako narrator, nie ma sensu szukać innych, nieimperialistycznych alternatyw: system

For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alterna-

38 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, p. 55.

39 Cf. J. Kristeva, *Geniusz kobiety. Hannah Arendt. Biografia*, pp. 152-153.

40 C. Achebe, "An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", in: *The Massachusetts Review* vol. 18, issue 4 (1977).

po prostu je wyeliminował i sprawił, że stały się niemożliwe do pomyślenia⁴¹.

tives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable.⁴¹

After all, Marlow, despite many similarities, is not Conrad. One could go even further: the writer had somewhat ‘betrayed’ his character, as the narrator of the story of Kurtz was convinced that the truth about colonial Africa must remain hidden. He addressed his monologue to a handful of trusted, discreet men of the sea, having chosen a place and time which would make it impossible for a stranger to listen in on it. Marlow was talking about an embarrassing problem, the revealing of which would not only threaten the peace of Kurtz’s fiancée (mourning him as a hero), but it would also expose the ambiguity of modern culture, which was difficult to accept, and which constituted the criminal system. All that Marlow witnessed in Africa cannot be seen as an exception to the rules of contemporary White man’s civilisation, but it should be acknowledged as its logical consequence. Publicly revealing the concealed truth, however, would mean ‘[i]t would have been too dark – too dark altogether...’⁴² Marlow and his listeners represent the type described by Said:

[...] nie są przeciętnymi, bezmyślnymi świadkami europejskiego imperializmu. Nie akceptują po prostu tego, co się dzieje, w imię idei imperium. Myślą o tym wiele, martwią się tym, obawiają się nawet, czy potrafią zaakceptować ideę imperialną jako codzienność⁴³.

(...) are not average unreflecting witnesses of European imperialism. They do not simply accept what goes on in the name of the imperial idea: they think about it a lot, they worry about it, they are actually quite anxious about whether they can make it seem like a routine thing.⁴³

Why did one of those who heard Kurtz’s story, break the conspiracy of silence? It is difficult to answer this question – the frame narrator of *Heart of Darkness* is reserved and limits himself to presenting a report, revealing a hidden side of reality without a word of comment.

Although Conrad and Arendt presented the actions of Kurtz and Eichmann as results of the influence of their respective systems, at the same time, they did not blur the individual responsibility of the perpetrators of evil. When Marlow, in his conversation with the fiancée, hid, as an eyewitness, the crimes of Kurtz, he was convinced that his lie disturbed the balance of the world: ‘It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head’⁴⁴. At the

41 E. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (New York: 1994), p. 24 [Polish version: *idem, Kultura i imperializm*, transl. M. Wyrwas-Wiśniewska (Cracow: 2009), p. 23].

42 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 182, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_3.

43 E. Said, *Culture and imperialism*, p. 29 [Polish version: p. 28].

44 J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 182, cf. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Youth:_a_Narrative,_and_Two_Other_Stories/Heart_of_Darkness/Section_3.

same time, revealing the hidden truth would be, as the character understood, an equally scandalous cruelty towards the grieving woman. Therefore, it was for two reasons (pity and loyalty to his own civilisation) that Marlow did not dare to tell the publicly truth about what he had seen in Africa. An 'attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect'⁴⁵ is only made by the person who repeats Marlow's story. To go beyond the text, one could also say that it is Conrad himself who publicly accuses the perpetrator, the institution, and most of all, the culture which produced Kurtz.

Arendt commented on Eichmann's sentencing, referring to the elementary, archaic sense of justice, contested nowadays:

Odrzucamy – uznając je za barbarzyńskie – stanowisko, wedle którego „poważne przestępstwo zadaje gwałt naturze, do tego stopnia, że sama ziemia woła o pomstę; zło zakłóca naturalną harmonię, którą tylko kara może przywrócić, a na skrzywdzonej zbiorowości spoczywa względem ładu moralnego obowiązek wymierzenia kary przestępcy” (Yosal Rogat). Mimo to uważam, że nie da się zaprzeczyć, iż właśnie na gruncie owego dawno zapomnianego stanowiska postawiono przed sądem Eichmanna i że powyższe zapatrywania posłużyły w istocie za ostateczne uzasadnienie wymierzonej mu kary śmierci. Musiał zostać zlikwidowany, ponieważ brał udział i odegrał centralną rolę w przedsięwzięciu, którego jasnym celem była eliminacja z powierzchni ziemi niektórych „ras” ludzkich⁴⁶.

We refuse, and consider as barbaric, the propositions 'that a great crime offends nature, so that the very earth cries out for vengeance; that evil violates a natural harmony which only retribution can restore; that a wronged collectivity owes a duty to the moral order to punish the criminal' (Yosal Rogat). And yet I think it is undeniable that it was precisely on the ground of these long-forgotten propositions that Eichmann was brought to justice to begin with, and that they were, in fact, the supreme justification for the death penalty. Because he had been implicated and had played a central role in an enterprise whose open purpose was to eliminate forever certain 'races' from the surface of the earth, he had to be eliminated.⁴⁶

Conrad and Arendt played a similar, considerable role in 'administering justice' to the criminal systems, by immersing themselves in darkness, in order to reveal the hidden. In doing so, both rejected stereotypes which were fed to the public in their times: the character of Kurtz undid the cliché of the noble emissary of civilisation of Stanley's type, and Eichmann was not a mad, bloodthirsty anti-Semite. The authors of *Heart of Darkness*, *The origins of totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* did not only expose the crimes, but they also argued the perpetrators were not monsters, but 'one of us', and that the conclusion one should draw from the existence of the dark side of modernity, is that genocide could happen again.

*Translated by Maria Helena Żukowska,
verified by Jerzy Giebuttowski*

45 J. Conrad, *Preface*, in: *ibid.*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (Cambridge: 2017), p. 5.

46 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, p. 277 [Polish version: p. 358].

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ABSTRACT

Titles of major works of both writers point to the effort of revealing the most difficult and most hidden knowledge of evil. Hannah Arendt, trying to excavate the roots (or rather, the beginnings) of totalitarianism, follows Joseph Conrad as an explorer of the kernel (or, more precisely: heart) of darkness. And when, later, Arendt embarks on a journey to Jerusalem to participate in the Eichmann trial, like Conrad's Marlow, she is fascinated by tales of a strong man, because she expects to see someone undoubtedly bad, but also grand. Meanwhile, she reveals the 'banality of evil'. This category is worth referring to in the case of Kurtz in Conrad's story. The attacks of critics on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and *Heart of Darkness*, based on allegations of the humiliation of victims and suggesting their participation in the crime, also contain interesting parallels.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, totalitarianism, Conrad Joseph (1857-1924), Arendt Hannah (1906-1975)