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Zofia Mitosek

Przeł. Jan Pytalski

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One of the fundamental rules of every ideology is the revision of what has been done in the past, in the history preceding its emergence. To contradict, however, does not mean to break away. Speaking in the name of the truth, ideology attempts to show the illusory character of the former and, at the same time, assesses the practical dimension of uncovered illusions. The choice of the name post-colonialism is meaningful: even though it presents itself not as an ideology but a theory, researchers who represent this current have a similar critical approach. It is not concerned with resistance, with anti-colonialism. It is concerned with reflection, an interpretation of the facts, with the “analysis of world views constructed from the imperial (hence dominant) point of view”¹ and checking “how, *de facto*, it all happened.” Interestingly, even though post-colonialism was created primarily by scholars often coming from former colonies, it is primarily a product of American universities, a country that, for at least two hundred years now, feels good about itself, since whatever there was

Zofia Mitosek, professor in the Institute of Polish Literature of the University of Warsaw. Visiting professor at the Université de Montréal, Canada, Paris IV-Sorbonne. Dyrektor Centre de Civilisation polonaise, Sorbonne. Member of the Association Internationale de Littérature comparée. Her research interests include literary theory, theories of mimesis, and irony, novel. She is the author of among others, *Poznanie w powieści, Co z tą ironią?*

1 Burzyńska, A. M.P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Podręcznik*, Cracow: Znak, 2006, 551.

to be colonized – North America – has been colonized earlier and forms the backdrop of an innocent, full of good intentions and norms, Puritan society on Indian land.

Joseph Conrad fell victim to such judgment as well. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe deals with European colonialism in his works published in the United States: in his view, Conrad, established as a symbol of modern humanism, in truth praises the oppression of savage peoples and the conquest that his writing additionally supported. By quoting the *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Achebe imposes a conviction upon its author, by which the presented image of conquered peoples fully confirms the “colonial vision of the world, according to which the black inhabitants of Africa are not human because they do not belong to the Western culture.”²

The motivation behind the article is very important. At the beginning, the author presents the circumstances that helped him take interest in Conrad’s work. In 1974, as an already recognized author, he was invited by the University of Massachusetts to give a lecture on African literature. He was surprised by the lack of knowledge about contemporary Africa among university and high school students. He found confirmation of this lack of knowledge in the work of an Oxford professor, Hugh Trevor Roper, who wrote that Africa has no history. *Belle Lettres* that constitute the American literary canon at the English departments only confirmed the dominant stereotypes of the “savage.” Achebe’s goal was to expose such stereotypes, and *Heart of Darkness* was supposed to supply examples.

We have familiarized ourselves with Achebe’s views through a textbook by an outstanding historian of literary theory in the twentieth century, Michał Paweł Markowski. In the context of presenting post-colonial theory, he notes the positions of Achebe. The Nigerian critic’s interpretations are treated as one of the examples of the post-colonial approach to classical masterpieces. In the *relata refero* mode, Markowski quotes an excerpt from the *Heart of Darkness* after Achebe, one that has become an object of “post-colonial literary revision.” It is hard to sense the attitude of Markowski from the tone of his essay. What seems quite obvious, however, is that one of the authors of *Teorie Literaturny XX wieku* [*Literary Theories of the 20th Century*] read the Nigerian author closely, but it is not obvious if he read Conrad so closely as well. When interpreted through the prism of a re-vindication by an inhabitant of Africa, *Heart of Darkness* is a different work than when read by a European. Jacques Derrida would say that we are not dealing with a distortion: post-colonial discourses are not *wrong* about Conrad, they just interpret him differently.

2 Achebe, Ch. “An Image of Africa. Rasism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” in *Research of African Literatures*, Special Issue of Literary Criticism, vol. 1(9), Spring 1978.

On the other hand, one the slogans of more recent theoretical thought is an ethical break with relativism in reading.³ In the name of this ethic, one talks about reliability. We keep arriving at a perpetually current aporia, an insolvable contradiction between an empirical reading and the data provided by the structure of the text.

In writing about the reliability of reading, I expose myself to the accusation of being a traditionalist. Nonetheless, I believe that the position is defensible. If the slogan of an “ethical turn in literary studies” becomes as fashionable as “post-colonialism,” then the ethics of Joseph Conrad, built on irony, contradicts 19th century usurpers who based their moral judgments on the opinions spoken by the characters in the novels. But it also contradicts the modern usurpers, like Achebe, who draw their ethical conclusions from literary images. Post-colonialism, by revealing that which “has been hidden under the surface of seemingly transparent discourse,”⁴ does not take into consideration that some of the novel discourses are not even seemingly transparent and the illustrative function of literature, as a result of complicated narrative techniques, achieves ambiguity far from any ideological messages that we so gladly find in post-colonial discourses.

It is therefore the right moment to finally formulate our thesis: *Heart of Darkness* is an ironic narration and situating the object of critique in the characters of Africans is the result of a reading that is as ideological as the texts of those who praise colonialism. Let us go back to the excerpt from the novel that Markowski quotes after Achebe, and which I will quote following Markowski:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst, of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. 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 appalled, as sane men would be before an

3 Markowski, M.P. “Zwrot etyczny w badaniach literackich,” in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, XCL, vol.1, 2000.

4 Burzyska, A., M.P. Markowski, *Teorie Literatury XX wieku*, 558.

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. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. 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. It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly.

This is where the quote provided by Markowski ends. He shortened the excerpt used by Achebe. Below is the remainder of the text:

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.

Achebe, on the other hand, stops in a place that, in our opinion, is extremely important for the interpretation of the entire work. Marlow's monologue goes on. Contrary to what his "post-colonial" interpreters might claim, the old sailor who tells his story many years later wants to understand that which he didn't understand before. He wonders:

And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valor, rage – who can tell? – *but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time.* [emphasis added by the author] Let the fool gape and shudder – the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff – with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags – rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row – is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that Cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who's that grunting? You wonder why 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.⁵

It is a subject and not an object of the provided excerpt that turns out to be the hero. The choice between rejection (fools – the domain of the colonizers) and a sentimental identification (Rousseau's tradition) puts Marlowe in an uncomfortable position. The escape "into work" is an attempt to avoid an aporia that from the 18th century saturates the mind of Europeans who face the phenomenon of a "savage." Noble Marlow attempts to understand the Other but is unable to quiet his own feelings. Within this difficult comparison, the aborigine appears to him as both difference and identity: as a different, disgusting savage, who at the same time – just like him, the English sailor – is also a human. Marlow does not pretend: he is not ashamed to admit to his disgust, to the hardship with which he comes to accept an identification with the aborigines. And that is, most likely, why Achebe assigned him the status of Conrad's "fool." If we should assume the doubts of the narrator to be Conrad's expression of colonialism, then we will completely ignore the writer's technique – one which, through the character of Marlow, presents conflicting world views and contradictions of the mentalities of a subject unprepared to confront something that different. The drama of that confrontation is what constitutes the deeper meaning of Conrad's narration. It is an effort of understanding that fills his work.

The next accusation is concerned with describing the aborigines as pre-historic peoples, as those who are suspended in motionlessness. Here, the problem is equally serious. Marlow states: "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (109). He continues: "The earth seemed unearthly." The phrase "was like" is in relation to a comparison and not a statement of fact: the comparative subject is what really matters. Similarly, the word "seemed" is not a statement of fact about the world, but a sensation experienced by the observer.⁶ Marlow's experiences are, somewhat, tainted with a "humanistic factor": it is not about treating the Congo's basin

5 Conrad, J. *Heart of Darkness, The Congo Diary*, ed., introd., notes by R. Hampson, London: Penguin Books, 1995, 62-3.

6 That is how Ian Watt interprets Marlow's observations in his *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Watt writes about the method of "delayed decoding" – it matches our hypothesis about the effort of understanding the Other, interactions between the reason and senses, which are one of the most prominent themes of *Heart of Darkness*. See also Bolecki, W. *L'impressionisme de Conrad et la littérature polonaise*, w: *Joseph Conrad. Un Polonais aux confins de l'Occident*, dir. de M. Delaperrière, Institut d'Etudes Slaves, Paris: 2009.

as a pre-historic earth, but rather about an attempt to express the subjective impressions of that earth. That is why Marlow states: "but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time." That is his answer to what he found impossible to understand. He himself is far from "a-historicism," from a "pre-historic" landscape that is reached only by the drums of "wilderness." One can also hear the moans of black slaves, who wear the history of their employment along with their chains: history of the "legal time contracts." A historian will ask between whom these contracts have been established. Ryszard Kapuściński's *The Shadow of the Sun* comes to mind. The question of legality and rape have been signaled by Conrad several decades before by Conrad: in the world presented by Marlow, history thuds rhythmically, only without dates and names of places.

Within the complicated processes of observation, aversion, empathy and understanding of the "savage" there is no contempt or rejection. There is also no irony, although the Marlow happens to make a satirical comments, which somewhat match the "colonial" stereotype. He tells stories about the attempts of cannibalism on the part of black members of the ship crew, or the black helmsman – a "fool" – who sheepishly followed all directions, or the slave overseer who imitated behavior of white people... As the plot develops, so does the process of understanding: the potential cannibals are famished and starving, yet they never brake the taboo and the killed helmsman turns out to be an irreplaceable friend.⁷ Blacks, just like a jungle, constitute "a mystery greater – when I thought of it – than the curious, inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamor that had swept by us on the river-bank, behind the blind whiteness of the fog" (122). On other occasions, Marlow talks about "man calm and quiet" who lives in the jungle. His story is saturated by a deep sense of the tragic. It is heightened by the fact that he does not speak the language of the aborigines, that his attempts to understand are limited to superficial gestures and rituals observed every now and then.

The narration makes its way from drama to a bitter irony. The sailor recounts his African adventure to his English friends. He tells them about the journey along the Congo River in the search of Kurtz, the mysterious agent,

7 Achebe quotes an excerpt about the black helmsman during the attack of the aborigines: Marlow calls him a "fool," while observing his panic reactions (he opens the window to shoot his rifle and, as a result, he dies from an arrow that comes through that open window). Later on, however, there is a reflection: "He steered for me – I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. 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." (*An Image of Africa*) Achebe responds to that, saying that the writer was not far from Albert Schweitzer's statement: "The African is my brother, but a younger brother."

who supplies the Belgian company with hugely profitable ivory. As I have written before, encountering Blacks constitutes a problem for Marlow; it is not the case with other European colonizers. In the attitude toward them, we see how sarcasm is combined with pure critique. Marlow's travel companions and managers of an ivory supply station are "fools." The overwhelming irony is summarized in the name he tagged them with. He never said a good word about those people. Throughout the entire novel he addresses them as "pilgrims": the goal of their pilgrimage was mammon. Their behaviors force him to use terms far more direct: Marlow calls them "filthy pirates," imbeciles and profiteers full of "savage greed." They are the ones creating an image of the Black. It is in their opinions, where an aborigine equals an "idler," "beast," "savage," "rebel," "enemy," "criminal." They stand for and confirm the stereotypes by which Achebe accuses Conrad. As an objective observer, not interested in accumulating "mammon," Marlow enjoys the freedom to make sarcastic comments, especially since he realized that the company and "pilgrims" have trusted him with the task of finding their most talented agent (or his remains). If the post-colonialists would like to look for criticism of imperialism at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries – it is to be found in Conrad's descriptions of the "pilgrims" that they will find the best examples. In any case, this has been done long ago by "scholars of Conrad," hence my surprise over Achebe's interpretation.⁸

The main object of the attack seems to be the hero of the novel "Mr. Kurtz," a man who is admired and envied (hence, wished dead) by the colonizers. He

8 My amazement, however, might not be fully excused in the case of M.P. Markowski's essay, who consequently refrains from any assessments and polemics. Achebe's interpretation evoked a strong response from Watt in his "Heart of Darkness and the Critics" (in: Watt, I. *Essays on Conrad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.) Swedish writer, Sven Lindqvist, published a book in 1988 entitled *Exterminate All the Brutes* (trans. by J. Tate, New York: New Press, 1996.) in which he tells the story of a modern day journey retracing the path of the *Heart of Darkness*. Linquist fully confirms the anti-colonialism of Joseph Conrad. On the topic of Conrad's humanism, Paul Thibaut has written quite recently on the pages of the "Esprit" magazine, calling *Heart of Darkness* a "radiography of the colonization done by King Leopold the Second" ("Esprit," January 2007), which is confirmed by the following examples from the novel. The Captain meets an elegantly dressed accountant. This is the sensibility presented by the elegant European: "When a truckle-bed with a sick man (some invalid agent from up-country) was put in there, he exhibited a gentle annoyance. 'The groans of this sick person,' he said, distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate" (19). When visiting the station, Marlow stumbles upon the body of a deceased black man with a bullet hole in his head. According to the supervisor of the station, it is an example of "energetic efforts," or a "permanent improvement." About that kind of "permanent improvement" achieved by Kurtz, Marlow will soon learn in the former's village. The company's director will comment by saying that the "time was not ripe" for methods used by Kurtz.

is not a “fool,” but a genius manipulator, a demon evoking admiration among simple people and in Marlow. His African mission is unclear: he works for the company harvesting ivory, but he was sent to Africa for scientific purposes. He went there full of sublime ideas. At that moment we begin to understand the reference to the conquest of England by the Roman warriors at the beginning of our era. It was done out of simple greed. Marlow comments:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (65)

The noble idealist Kurtz was supposed to write a scientific work. He left behind him a report ordered by the “International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.” His manuscript contains observations on ways of subduing the tribes to one’s will: “[we] must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity, and so on” (135). That knowledge was a source of Kurtz’s charisma, charisma that Marlow comments upon by stating ironically: “two shot-guns, a heavy rifle, and a light revolver-carbine – the thunderbolts of that pitiful Jupiter” (135). It was all confirmed by a scribbled conclusion at the end of the report: “Exterminate all the brutes” (135).

The transformation process of an idealist into a tyrant and arrivist is a process of learning that touches not so much upon the object of irony (Kurtz), but upon its subject – Marlow, who is dreaming of meeting Kurtz. I have once described this process as a keystone in the plot that emerges from an incoherent, a-chronological story. I claimed that the plot of the *Heart of Darkness* is “Aristotelian” in character, in that it is based on adversity and discovery, and Marlow’s story about his experiences in the Congo performs a cathartic function.⁹

We observe how the tone of the story about Kurtz changes. Marlow’s interest in the person of the agent grows as the rumors claiming that “he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together” (130). What is the truth, at the beginning seems to the captain to be a rumor coming from those whom he himself does not respect. The statement that “he had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” (133) has a relative value, given the opinions on the “local demons” was provided earlier

9 Mitosek, Z. *Poznanie (w) powieści*, Cracow: Universitas, 2003. Chapter: “Jak zrozumieć dzikich,” also hers “La narration comme catharsis”, in: *Joseph Conrad. Un Polonais aux confins de l’Occident*.

by Marlow ("*papier-mache* Mephistopheles"). Vicious opinions turn out to be merely a mild echo of the "truth" that is gradually revealed to Marlow. A Russian sailor met by accident tells a story about a nervous breakdown that lead Kurtz "to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which – as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times – were offered up to him – do you understand? – to Mr. Kurtz himself" (135). These incomplete pieces of information earn the status of ironic litotes when we learn that Kurtz actually murdered the Blacks. Marlow, however, was unable to understand the love which the local tribes granted to Kurtz. His strength was based not entirely on brutal crime. Kurtz spoke to the aborigines in their own language. He possessed a gift beyond the reach of the British captain, who himself experienced the effects of the criminal's beautiful speech.

Marlow is left with a tale about Kurtz: he tells it following a tragic realization. He therefore has every right to irony. However, his audience is incapable of understanding that irony; the audience that is being served all the information according to the rules of a proper intrigue, full of traps and deceptions. What is intended by Marlow's irony will be recognized as such later in the story, in the light of new information and new events. Here also – as Watt would say – operates the law of "delayed decoding." Before the narrator read the report given to him by the sick Kurtz, a careful look (through a telescope) allowed him to recognize the ornaments on the agent's headquarters: dried heads of the aborigines. Marlow comments:

I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.

The story gradually "de-demonizes" the hero. Right before his death, Kurtz keeps repeating "live rightly, die, die ...," but Marlow, a year after his death, keeps recalling his "concern," when helplessly ill he remembered that the last shipment of ivory belonged to him and worried that the company will take it away, leaving him without any money. He kept repeating: "I want no more than justice..." (174). The conclusion is clear: "Evidently the appetite for more ivory had got the better of the – what shall I say? – less material aspirations" (146).

Rhetorical irony is matched by the irony of faith, or object rather, in the process of forging the entire intrigue. The co-existence of lofty ideals and material interests is accompanied by a coexistence of the struggle for profit

and struggle for life. Kurtz loses because he is fatally ill: not mentally, but physically. And good health is what constitutes a foundation in the fight for resources that the colonizers try to steal from the “wilderness.” Reality confirms the strength of the jungle: these are waters and swamps and not savage peoples that are the enemies. That is why the merciless criminal dies and a pitiful clerk, whose only strength is good health, will survive. And the station supervisor comments: “Men who come out here should have no entrails” (90). Noble of vile ideas perish in the face of the “ironic necessity” presented by African nature.

And yet, Marlow uses this expression in a different context: he speaks of himself. The simple truth about the destructive forces of nature dawns on him when, after Kurtz’s death, he himself struggles for life. The narrator’s trouble has more than a purely physical character, they are also spiritual dimensions: he has to “look after the memory of Kurtz.” It is precisely then, that the ironic awareness of the piece is revealed for the first time:

There remained only his memory and his Intended – and I wanted to give that up too to the past, in a way, – to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of *our common fate*. I don’t defend myself. I had no clear perception of what it was I really wanted. Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfillment of one of these *ironic necessities* that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don’t know. I can’t tell. But I went. (173, emphasis added by the author)

How does ironic necessity work? We know the narrator’s opinion of Kurtz. We have observed the reactions of the captain that crop up in his story as he gets to know the “demon.” Yet, contrary to the bitter truth, Marlow acts in favor of the deceased agent. The ironic necessity means acting against one’s own will. Conrad presents two, mutually exclusive, motives. Marlow heard the last words spoken by Kurtz: “The horror! The horror!” That is how this “remarkable man” has “pronounced judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth” (168). One could assume that the captain forgives Kurtz for all his sins, since he has condemned himself and the awareness of this self-condemnation saves the agent in the eyes of the listener. The irony is replaced by the sense of the tragic that was revealed in the last words spoken by the “demon.” That is the reason for Marlow’s meetings with Kurtz’s friends in Brussels, including his fiancée. That is one of the possible interpretations. It is ethically fitting. The second possibility is darker. The British captain – a storyteller coming back from Africa – is one of the participants in the adventures. He goes there on behalf of the Belgian company. He does not ask about the goal of the trip,

he is purely interested in the exciting new continent that he has imagined in his childhood. Information he receives on the spot and the events that he is part of are terrifying. He reacts to them with cutting sarcasm, but still fulfills all his obligations toward the company. He is driven mainly by curiosity, he is ready to lie in order to meet his hero. His whole adventure ends with a lie. When he passes Kurtz's report to the administrators in Belgium, he rips out the conclusion: "Exterminate all the brutes." When meeting Kurtz's fiancée, instead of quoting him exclaiming "horror," Marlow states that "The last word he pronounced was – your name" (86).

Marlow's conversation with the fiancée is an excellent example of playing with "double speech": the woman forces him to pass judgments radically contrary to his own, praises radically contrasting with the persona of that "remarkable" criminal. The captain lies: he says something different than he thinks. He is struggling, contradicts himself, but is unable to exclaim the cruel truth. That way – against himself and according to the woman's will – he reinforces the myth of a noble explorer.

It does not mean, however, that this is what Joseph Conrad does. Lying is a similar mechanism to irony. One says something different than what one thinks. But the liar hides what he is thinking from the listener, who – as opposed to the listener of an ironic statement – has no reason to suspect anything. Lying Marlow is fully aware of his hypocrisy. "Ironic necessity" leads to an unhappy consciousness. When he said that he has to take care of the memory of Kurtz, he takes away his own, independent choice. He adds to himself, however: "I've done enough for it to give me the indisputable right to lay it, if I choose, for an everlasting rest in the dust-bin of progress, amongst all the sweepings and, figuratively speaking, all the dead cats of civilization" (136).

In the entire novel, the helplessness and uncertainty prevail and the question about who had given Marlow the right to criticize seems to be coming up again and again. This insightful ironist seems to be the most merciless toward himself. Contrary to the realistic writers of the first half of the 19th century, who claimed the right to judge their own heroes, Conrad recreates the epistemological turning point: his narrator is not capable of disconnecting from the group that is being judged, to distance himself from the condemned hero because "he is one of them." And all the impatient names he calls the black inhabitants of Africa he exclaims as the one who takes part in a massive crime and as the one who is aware of it. The place of sarcastic irony is taken by self-irony.

For the irony to have its desired effect, it needs to find an understanding listener. Conrad dramatizes the sailor's story: it is related by one of the participants of the sailing trip to the mouth of Thames. In a classical *mise en abyme* novel there is a relation of dependence between the two narrators. This

is the kind of relation that seems to be dominant in *Heart of Darkness*. It is not certain, however, if that submission constitutes the coda of the novel. Tragic catharsis is based on self-recognition. The captain keeps repeating the gesture of the agent, his bitter self-assessment. Instead of exclaiming “The horror!” he admits to a lie.

In that way, what so difficult for Marlow – understanding the Other – is passed on to the readers of the novel, which calls for understanding its narrator. The way of telling the story, through ellipsis, parallels, and ironic games all constitute traps for the reader that are difficult to tackle, just like it is difficult to make clear sense out of the narration. The narrator who relates the story of the Captain comments: “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (63).

The reader – but also the listeners of the story – are not able to determine what bothers Marlow more: the inability to understand the savages, expressed at the very beginning, the observed bestiality of the Belgian colonizers, the compromised “memory of Kurtz,” or, finally, the “ironic necessity” that brings the noble captain to the level of the people he criticizes. After all, the memory of Kurtz he has passed on in Brussels, expressed in the adoration of the fiancée and confirmed by the stammering Marlow, as well as the (incomplete) report given to the journalists, continues the fiction of the colonizer. Marlow uncovered the lies of the conquerors of Africa who played the role of the bearers of noble ideas. Joseph Conrad deciphers the lie of an adventurer, who was exposing the lies of others. He showed that there is no exit from the vicious circle of colonial ideology.

The captain shares his confusion with his travel companions. At the beginning of the journey he declared his hatred of lies: “There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies – which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world – what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do” (98). Now he can feel this mortal rotting on himself. He wants to get rid of it, but the request for understanding is not a request for forgiveness. On the contrary, toward his listeners Marlow tends to be aggressive. He depicts the Belgian colonizers mockingly, but he confesses his lie to the British. He speaks close to London and his stories are accompanied by the lights of “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (5) in the distance:

Absurd! he cried. This is the worst of trying to tell... Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and

temperature normal – you hear – normal from year’s end to year’s end.
And you say, Absurd! (131)

The butcher and the policeman are the warrants of “non-absurd” being, being that constitutes the lives of “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.” From that town and from that country comes the employee of the Belgian company, the mess and blood thirst of which he is so critical. That is how the field of irony is entered by the British Empire, the largest colonial power of the nineteenth century. Marlow’s lies, which seem to degrade only King Leopold’s companies, in fact degrades all colonizing attempts – regardless of intentions – all end just like Kurtz’s international report: “Exterminate all the brutes.”¹⁰

Let us go back to the accusations of the post-colonialists about the elimination of history (“pre-historic planet”). The *Heart of Darkness* is not a story about Blacks, it is not their history that interests the writer. He is concerned with the history of those who take away their land and riches, with the motivations behind the conquest, with the description of the identity of the exploration and exploitation, with the compromises reached in the face of ruthless plundering and finally with the impossibility of taking the position of being conquered. This inability precisely, and the inability to understand, in particular, is the theme of Marlow’s story. It is a signal of critical awareness, so close to the ideas of post-colonialism. Let us quote Markowski from his article *Ethical Turn*:

How to present that which has been removed from the dominating systems of representation, or hidden under the surface of seemingly transparent discourse. We are talking, of course, about the works devoted to colonialism. [...] the ethical goal of those publications [...] Gayatri Spivak defined as the “experience of impossible,” because the ethical (hence, responsible) representation of the subdued world (“*subalternity*”)

10 See also: “The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and – as he was good enough to say himself – his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance” (134-135). Reaction of the British towards the customs of Belgian administration in Congo has been symptomatic: Roger Casement, a diplomat, has been alerted to the cruelty of Leopold’s envoys from the 1890s and in 1903 he sent an official report to his government that caused an uproar in the international community. All of that happened, of course, with a mutual agreement to – better or worse (for whom?) – colonization. This must have been the “right side” that Kurtz has been standing by. We find the confirmation of that thesis in Lindqvist’s book, who writes that basically all of Europe followed the rule of “Exterminate all the brutes.”

is possible only when it is followed by the awareness of inadequacy of that very representation (and mutual understanding).¹¹

And that is what, most likely, Conrad was interested in. The theoretical problem was presented as Marlow's practical choice. As we have written before, the captain poses a question about his own ability to understand the "savage." It does not mean that he doesn't understand them. He goes even further: by criticizing the vicious colonizers, he poses a question about his own right to criticize. It does not mean, however, that he reaches any kind of compromise with them.

This subtlety of writing, this second level of irony that turns into self-irony is what escaped Achebe. The Polish scholar likewise missed this fact, hastily referring to the concept of post-colonialism. If, in Markowski's works, the paradox of self-reference is constantly signaled as one of the exhaustive aporias of twentieth century sciences, then missing the practice of writing from the turn of the century allows us to name that paradox and express it – as Conrad would put it – "something is missing, some small element."

Translation: Jan Pytalski

¹¹ Markowski, M.P. *Ethical Turn...*, 242.