

Fernando Galván y José Santiago Fernández, ed. and intr. 2005: *Joseph Conrad. El corazón de las tinieblas*. Madrid: Cátedra. 251 pp.

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Doris Lessing once wrote that Africa has served for Europeans as a kind of peg where they could go and hang their egos on (1958: 700). This is evinced when reading classics such as Blixen's *Out of Africa* or Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," archetypal stories of European dreams and failures in which Africa and Africans are mere background and where even the exuberant or pristine landscapes are viewed from a Eurocentric perspective. Chinua Achebe resents this attitude since he considers that Africa is presented in an unfavourable light, "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (1989: 4).

Heart of Darkness is arguably the best known Western yarn set in Africa. Its 2002 centennial proved the popularity of a work that might otherwise be considered as elitist, if only due to stylistic and thematic complexities. On that occasion, major newspapers and TV channels included surveys of Conrad's work, providing the general public with an opportunity to approach Conrad as well as related issues such as the Congo's colonial and postcolonial history. Another important source of popularity for *Heart of Darkness* in the contemporary age has been the recreation of the story in Coppola's (1979) *Apocalypse Now*, already a classic film that has been recently reissued (2001) with some extra scenes. Similarly, Peter Jackson's 2005 remake of *King Kong* features some scenes that echo the jungle passages in *Heart of Darkness*.

On the other hand, recent political and cultural events have also placed this work in the limelight. Troubled times in the now independent Democratic Republic of the Congo (for a time known as Zaire), with the fall of the long-standing dictator Mobutu and subsequent coups-de-état and guerrilla warfare, have led many to believe that the colonial darkness mentioned by Conrad is still casting its shadow on this country. In fact, Kurtz' ambition and anxiety about possession can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the Europeans' belief that they were the legitimate owners of Africa, drawing artificial maps and sharing out portions of territory. The corruption of European imperialism seems to have been inherited by most of the African post-colonial regimes whose abuse of human rights and lack of civil liberties is a sad epilogue of the colonial oppression and an anarchic independence process. In this sense, *Heart of Darkness* is frequently mentioned in any discussion on Africa's recent past. Similarly, the editorial success of *King Leopold's Ghost*, by Adam Hochschild (1998), a book denouncing the appalling circumstances of colonialism, especially the hypocrisy that meant surrounding in a halo of spiritual and cultural enlightenment the most cruel forms of slavery, has increased the critical attention paid to *Heart of Darkness*.

Therefore, we can say that Conrad has become over the past century one of the leading figures in English literature, a peculiar circumstance if we take into account that his mother tongue was Polish and the first foreign language he spoke was French. It was only in his maturity that he came into contact with English, starting the fruitful career we now admire. Apart from the popular impact of his work mentioned above, the

scholarly interest is reflected in the existence of several academic journals entirely devoted to him, such as *Conradiana*, *Joseph Conrad Today*, *L'époque conradienne*, or *The Conradian*; the last decade has also produced myriads of articles, papers in journals and conferences, as well as reviews. Among the critical volumes recently published we can mention those by Firchow (2000), Hawkins and Shaffer (2002) and Moore (2004); Nakai (2000) has carried out a survey on the influence of *Heart of Darkness* on Postcolonial Literatures. There are also two useful companions that deal extensively with *Heart of Darkness*: Stape's (1996) and Knowles' & Moore's (2000). As was to be expected, there have been many reprints of the original text; both Goonetilleke's (1995) and Murfin's (1996) editions include challenging introductions, bibliographical references and several appendices with materials such as Conrad's comments on his work, reviews from the time of publication, historical and geographical documents and academic essays.

Critical production on *Heart of Darkness* in Spain has not been so extensive; an interesting volume, *Planeta Kurtz* (ed. J.L. Marzo and M. Roig 2002), consists mainly of articles by leading international scholars such as Achebe and Said, and materials such as Orson Welles's script for a radio broadcast of *Heart of Darkness*. In contrast, Conrad's novella is one of the most readily available texts in Spanish translation, especially after being offered in promotional collections by leading quality newspapers. The most well-known edition in Spanish so far was published in 1997 by Alianza Editorial, with a translation of the original text by Araceli García Ríos and Isabel Sánchez Araujo, and a very brief introduction by Enrique Vila-Matas. It also includes a final section with detailed biographical information on Conrad, as well as assorted photographs, maps and other anthropological, historical and literary documents. Spanish scholars have to be credited for other interesting editions, as is the case with Rodríguez Celada in Ed. Colegio de España (1995).

Fernando Galván and José Santiago Fernández have now edited for Cátedra another Spanish edition that will probably remain a reference for scholars and members of the public for a long time. The text itself is a reprint of the translation mentioned above; however, this new edition includes a long introduction that acquaints the reader with Conrad's life and writing career, emphasizing how some details are especially relevant for a critical reading of *Heart of Darkness*. As expected, Conrad's sailing years, the basis of most of the plots and themes in his fictional writing, feature prominently.

In the introduction by Galván and Fernández Vázquez there is also wide coverage of the myriad critical interpretations of the novella published so far. It is clear from some of Conrad's letters that when he started writing the story he had in mind a plot with a clear socio-political preoccupation; he had not even thought of including Kurtz, so that some psychological and symbolic implications of the story seem to have developed later, while the composition of the work was actually taking place. However, Conrad himself wrote in one of his letters that "A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning [since] it acquires a symbolic character" (Jean-Aubry 1927: 204-5). This explains the reason why *Heart of Darkness* has been described by Robert Burden as "the ideal early modernist set text, brief yet heavy with meaning; a book containing within its covers many of the concerns that were to preoccupy in one way or another a whole generation of writers" (1991: ix).

Thus, we can read that Marlow's voyage has been taken as a kind of quest for self-knowledge, a reflection of the inner life of the protagonist in an atmosphere of dream and eventually nightmare, developed with the help of a rich imagery, especially of light and colour. The work has also been related to myths enshrined in the literary tradition such as the quest for the Holy Grail, an interpretation that is supported by the references to Marlow as an apostle or to the colonists as pilgrims. The myth of the descent into hell is present from the moment Marlow says he feels about to set off for the centre of the earth, reminding us of classical works as Virgil's *Aeneid* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Various psychological interpretations derive from Freud's or Jung's theories. In this way, Marlow's journey along the river Congo is explained by Kimbrough (1988) as a fulfilment of an erotic dream conveyed in the phallic image of the river as a curling snake, while Kurtz has been considered as a manifestation of the Freudian *id*. On the other hand, the *unspeakable rites* performed by Kurtz have obvious satanic overtones that have prompted critics such as Watt (1979) to say that behind Kurtz stands the Christian legend of Lucifer, while Guerard (1958) interprets Kurtz's final cry as an act of repentance in Catholic terms. We can also see Kurtz as a kind of Faustian figure who becomes a supernatural being for the natives, adding a new dimension to his stay in Africa and suggesting the existence of a pact with the wilderness.

The interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* would never be complete, however, if we did not consider the political issues raised in the text. For a long time, there has been a common belief that this is one of the most emblematic anti-colonial literary works, although it was written at a time when major writers such as Kipling were still extolling the imperial adventure. As is indicated in Galván and Fernández's edition, Poland's occupation by Russia and the personal suffering inflicted on Conrad by this circumstance (his parents, who were patriotic nationalists, were sent into exile where they promptly died) is considered as the main reason for the publication of a work with an obvious anti-colonial slant. Along these lines, it is thought that Marlow, the protagonist, embodies Conrad's own vision of the colonial malady, while the first unnamed narrator serves to reflect in the book the traditional Eurocentric perception of colonialism as an achievement.

In the final section of the introduction to the present edition there is also coverage of the most recent critical perspectives on the study of *Heart of Darkness* from the postcolonial field, such as Achebe's seminal "An Image of Africa," which was the starting point for the ideological reappraisal of Conrad's work, highlighting the biased European view of the continent and its inhabitants. However, the editors follow the view of leading postcolonial intellectuals such as Phillips (2003) or Sarvan (1980) that Achebe is probably taking his criticism too far; henceforth several examples, such as the favourable description of Kurtz's African lover, are provided to confirm this view.

The volume edited by Fernando Galván and José Santiago Vázquez also marks a significant contribution in Spanish publishing because of the footnotes providing insightful explanations on the text. Some are concise and exclusively referential (so as to indicate that Deptford, Greenwich and Erith are coastal settlements between London and Gravesend, or the equivalence between the English and metric systems). Other notes are fully developed encyclopaedic entries such as the one that tells the story of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, two ships commanded by Sir John Franklin in his attempt to find a

North-West Passage to Asia through the Arctic. This note recalls the failure of the expedition and the possibility that the Englishmen involved, in utter desperation after being stranded for months, resorted to cannibalism; as is explained by the editors. This would call into question the assumed superiority of Western moral values and might reduce the *agents of civilization* to the category of pagan barbarians. This illustrative footnote also includes a suggestion for further reading; the reader would probably appreciate here a reference to Margaret Atwood's brilliant recreation of the story in "Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew" (1995). There are also other footnotes that are entirely devoted to a critical explanation of stylistic or thematic issues; thus, on page 145 the editors highlight a description of semi-nude dancing figures, since this scene, among others, has motivated the new line of postcolonial criticism mentioned above. There are hints about real characters that might have inspired fictional ones in Conrad's story, such as Kurtz (p. 242) and his fiancée (p. 249); and many other notes on personal, geographical or anthropological issues that link the novella with Conrad's stay in Africa.

This edition by Cátedra also features a general bibliography on Conrad's life and works, English editions of the text and a general survey of critical articles and books on *Heart of Darkness*. Spanish readers will also find useful the list of previous editions of the text, as well as the mention of translations into Catalan and Euskera. In this case, we would have appreciated the inclusion of a reference to the other two Iberian languages, Galician (there is a translation by Manuel Outeiriño 1997) and Portuguese (both in Portugal and Brazil several translations have been produced so far, among others by Aníbal Fernandes 1983, Teresa Amaro 2004 and Albino Poli 1997).

This final bibliographical section alongside the long, documented introduction (actually covering half of the volume) and the illustrative footnotes contribute to the idea that this volume prepared by Galván and Fernández Vázquez is the most significant edition of *Heart of Darkness* in Spanish so far. While it will be of interest for the general public, its true importance lies in the fact that this may become a first choice reference in the lists of prescribed books at schools and universities.

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