Between darkness and light: a cross reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Huxley's *Island*

Ensaio

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In a remarkable set of three talks on the unity of European culture, broadcast to a German audience just after the end of the second world war, the poet and essayist T. S. Eliot displayed a multicultural understanding of literature, by positing that "no one nation, no one language, would have achieved what it has, if the same art had not been cultivated in neighbouring countries and in different languages" (112). Eliot expounded this idea of a plural autonomous identity existing within a broader cultural interdependent unity on the basis of his own verbal awareness and poetic experience. Firstly by pointing out to the manifold historical, racial, cultural inputs and linguistic (sound and lexical) influences that lead to the making up of the modern English language and to its peculiar rhythmical appropriateness to literary and poetic expression. Secondly, and as if redeeming himself from the slightly parochial tone of his comments on the highly distinctive musical rarefaction of the English idiom, by postulating that the conditions for the persistence and renewal of the overall quality of any national literature depend not only on the learning and reviving of its own sources but also on its ability to assimilate foreign influences. In Eliot's sense, literature may therefore be viewed both as a verbal layout for the aesthetic potentialities of any national language (which is, after all, a dynamic and symbiotic structure of sounds and meanings), and a multicultural phenomenon of interplays and reversible influences between discrete verbal and literary traditions.

We started with Eliot's argument simply to recall that the sociological concept of multiculturalism may be productively applied to the phenomenology of literature and - since that has to do with the purpose of this paper - to the

reading of cultural distinctions, discontinuities and contradictions that may be narratively interwoven in the plot of fictional works. Our proposal implies thereby a conceptual import or transference of the coeval and dominant sociological meaning of multiculturalism, "the recognition and study of societies - [of literary works, we might say] - as comprising distinct but related cultural traditions and practices" (189), to the field of literary studies, in order that it may work as an hermeneutic device to decode, for instance, literary representations of "cultural-clashes" and "cultural-sympathies" (64). We chose two narratives from the western literary canon (although not mentioned in Harold Bloom's essay) to give an illustration of those possible clashes and sympathies: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Aldous Huxley's *Island*. Clearly, we are dealing here with texts historically non-contemporaneous, each of them carrying a distinct aesthetic profile, belonging to dissimilar, although traceable, literary memories, and evoking disparate speech genres. Nevertheless, the intercultural motif of both narratives allows for a constructive comparative reading that raises perplexing philosophical questions, particularly when they converge on their common topic on which we wish to ponder, namely that of the "Essential Horror".

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was originally published as a serial in three instalments in *Blackwood's Magazine*[1] in 1899, and later, in 1902, as the second story of the volume *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories*. It is a novella whose metaphorical title[2] is already an indicator of its predominant symbolism, both on the level of its verbal form, of its expressive and stylistic modulations, charged with connotative and double-edged sentences, and on the level of its plot, of its narrative construction which contains a wide spectrum of thematic configurations that allow various epistemological readings. Such readings may adopt different frames of reference, ranging from economic and political perspectives to sociological and psychological emphases, or from an ideological

and cultural focus to questions of philosophical and ethical principle. But, whatever the theoretical perspective, the analytical device or the hermeneutic medium one may employ to read *Heart of Darkness*, one cannot ignore the pervasive symbolism of the story, which can be interpreted as, just to mention a few possibilities, "an attack upon Belgian colonial methods, a moral tract, a study in race relationships" (Haugh 239); "a description of the ivory trade as the vilest scramble for loot" (McLauchlan 388), a "political autopsy of imperialist myths" (Stewart 358), a "spiritual voyage of self-discovery" (Guerard 244), or - more in line with our own argument - a striking literary example of what we have previously called "cultural clashes"; briefly, as an inverted, distorted representation of multiculturalism.

The symbolism of *Heart of Darkness* will resound and prevail in every way over all these readings, reaching beyond the core meaning of the story, which may be told as follows: a seaman named Marlow, teller of his own tale, employee of a European (Belgian) trade Company, journeys to colonial Africa (to the Belgian Congo); bewildered by the European administration's mismanagement and disgusted by the pitiless, racist and greedy conduct of the colonial agents and white traders, Marlow hears about Kurtz, a charismatic agent of the Company; intrigued and fascinated by the prospect of meeting Kurtz, Marlowe, as skipper of a steamboat, sails up the "mighty" river (the Congo river) into the depths of the jungle with the main mission to load the ivory, gathered and stored at a distant hinterland station by Kurtz; the latter, either due to his disgust at the disruptive white dominion over the native's way of life or simply due to his own desire to overcome western social restraints and to return to a more vital state of being, has left the Company behind to become himself a tribal leader, apparently untrammelled by conventional and moral restraints; the meeting between Marlow and Kurtz, in the heart of the African wilderness, constitutes the critical moment of Marlow's journey, which starts and ends at

the "whited sepulchral" city - a metaphorical characterization of an unnamed imperial European town (Brussels). All these narrative events are permeated with a chiaroscuro imagery and, in their rhetorical mode of composition, they exhibit a pictorial quality, sometimes a static contrast, sometimes a diffused amalgam, of dark and light black and white, symbolical meanings. Marlowe's style is therefore consonant with the multilayered content of the story he tells and with its ambivalent connotations: "to him - as it is stated by the main narrator´s voice - "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 gaze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (Conrad 9). The very first words of Marlow, when introducing the story of his own journey to his four listeners, on the deck of the sailboat *Nellie* at anchor in the river Thames near London, operates as a prefatory key to the predominant chiaroscuro symbolism of the narrative and its further complexity. In fact, Marlow's apparently dichotomous judgement on the darkness of the uncivilized pre-Roman London, versus the enlightened civilized Christian London is immediately derogated by his recognition that human history is ruled by some "quivering" or intermittently rhythmical law, whereby the predominant darkness (represented by the Schopenhauerian permanent antagonism between the egoist will-to-live and the pitiless survival of the stronger) seems to coexist with episodic flashes of light (represented by the Platonic cultural drive to socialize the egoist will-to-live and the rational primacy of law over force): "And this also - states Marlow when referring to London - has been one of the dark places of the earth. [...] Light came out of this river since - you say Knights? Yes, but it is a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker - may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling!" (9) This permanent flicker, which could mean either a subjective perception of unsteady states of social wisdom, or an

objective materialization of contradictory historical data, either consists of endless configurations of timeless patterns or, indeed, is our glimpsed perception of them.

The pattern of "cultural clash" is, undoubtedly, the very iterative flickering sight of man's historical experience, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* illustrates this to the limit. One of the most memorable passages denouncing the culture clash that was so redolent of colonialism, is precisely the one in which racial relationships, based on cultural oppression and brutal deprivation of human dignity, are presented not by means of any subtle or connotative device, but through an impressionist[3] black and white description of skin colour, the black of the slaves and the white of the European accountant, representative of colonial loot, the diligent organizer and preserver of the bureaucratic financial gains of racial exploitation. Side by side, in their respective antagonistic social roles, asymmetrical physical features and numerical disparity, black slaves and white accountant signify the ill effects of a counterfeited, unbalanced "encounter" between cultures. Conrad's use of the black and white motif is at its most intense - one could say to the point of dramatic redundancy - when Marlow first steps into the colonial reality. He sees black slaves lying under the darkness of tree shadows, a bundle of crawling and debased bodies tied up together like a set of dismantled and broken cog-wheels, and a white accountant strolling in his impeccable white suit, indifferent to the inhuman scenario that justifies his own role as an indispensable link in the machinery of colonial oppression. This impressionist realism is charged with ironic symbolism: ultimately, the dense but earthbound blackness and the upright but evanescent whiteness of their respective bodies evoke the heavy racial bondage of the African natives to the ungrounded and excrescent (dis)order of the European invader. "Black shapes crouched [...], clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair [...] bundles of acute

angles sat with their legs drawn up. [...] I met a white man [...] I saw a high, starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots." (Conrad 20-21).

The lasting quality of the light that flickers on and off or the durability of the dark shadows that flicker across the light, are both variations on a theme that can also be found in the other fictional work we have selected to further develop our argument, namely Aldous Huxley's last novel, *Island.* With *Island* we have reached "no man's land", that is to say, we are entering the realm of utopia which, from a purely literary point of view, evokes a distinct narrative paradigm - paraphrasing F. R. Leavis - from the great aesthetical tradition of the novel to which *Heart of Darkness b*elongs. That distinction leads us back to the eponymous seminal work of Thomas More, whose original full title - *Concerning the best state of a commonwealth and the new island of utopia* (More 1) - not only suggests the predominance of the descriptive quality of its content over the narrative fabrication of its plot, but also, due to its superlative characterization of a political mode of governance, suggests that a thematic emphasis be placed on the idealization of social and ethical relationships. Thus, while *Island* belongs to "this nameless and tricky genre" of utopia, as Wayne Booth called it (Elliot 103), both its organic literary consistency and its indispensable narrative framework are more than sufficient for it to be justifiably identified as a novel by its own author. We could therefore characterize *Island* as a utopian novel, or, at least, as a novel that incorporates some of the main traits belonging to a genre devoted to an imaginary presentation of an ideal society alternative to the one historically given.[4]

In the twentieth century, such a genre was to be known by its negative inversion and ironic transformation into an acrimonious satire against totalitarian conceptions of social arrangements and conditioned human behaviour. One of its most representative examples is, in fact, Huxley's own

Brave New World, published in 1932, depicting an ultra-technological anti-utopia. Thirty years later, with the full authority of having previously sloughed off the ill-effects of superficial utopianism, Huxley revisited the old humanist genre of utopia in *Island,* a novel which, in the broad field of utopian studies, has been viewed variously as a "post-modern vision of the good place" (Elliot 129), "a general softening [and] feminization of human life" (Kateb 249), "a contemporary ecotopia" (Kumar 408), an "admixture of Oriental religious teachings and pharmacological conditioning" (Manuel 803), or, more in line with the reading being attempted here, a literary representation of positive cultural syncretism, or a desirable encounter of cultures, that is, an idealized example of "cultural sympathies".

Following the canonical rules of the genre, the plot is set in an unmapped island, named Pala, somewhere in the East; there, a shipwrecked visitor, the journalist, business emissary and quintessential sceptical Will Farnaby - "the man who won't take yes for an answer" (276) - is rescued, healed and, as the narrative progresses, converted to the refined, ego-free and wise Palanese way of living, not through ideological inculcation by others but by his own observation and their empirical confirmation; the description of basic institutions - family, education, health care - the explanations of the fabric of economic, social and political activities, the references to the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the island, all unfold throughout the narrative not only as a means of illustrating the effective application of Pala's ruling principles of "Decency, Reason, Liberty" (172), but also to emphasise their negative counterpoint in the threatening, outside world - metonymically represented by the neighbouring country of Rendang-Lobo - where the darkness of selfish greed prevails as the source of all other common historical phenomena, the drive for power, material injustice, lack of political freedom, false knowledge, false spirituality, depletion of natural resources; eventually Pala is invaded by the military forces of colonel

Dipa, dictator of Rendang-Lobo, with the complicity of Murugan, legitimate heir apparent to the throne of Pala, a young man fascinated by the shallow ideology of progress and suffering from the esoteric brain-washing of his mother, the Reni, a pseudo-gifted spiritual woman and great detractor of Pala's way of life.

The special quality of Pala's way of living derived from a balanced and fruitful encounter of cultures since it was the result of a conscious multicultural cooperation between eastern spirituality and western science. The fabric of its social system was originally outlined by the complementary stocks of knowledge and personal qualities of a Buddhist monarch and a Scottish ex-Calvinist doctor converted to atheism. Instead of having been thought up and concretised in a monocephalous polity, as in the cases of King Utopus in Utopia or King Saloman in New Atlantis, the ideal order of Pala had a bicephalous conception: the Raja of the Reform, as he was later called, and Dr. Andrew MacPhail worked together in order to "make the best of both worlds - the Oriental and the European, the ancient and the modern" or rather "to make the best of *all* the worlds - already realized within the various cultures and, beyond them, the worlds of still unrealized potentialities" (151). The ultimate purpose of this perfect marriage of cultural potentialities was to generate a sort of collective enlightenment; that is, to heighten the social consciousness of the bi-lingual[5] citizens of Pala towards a full recognition and gratitude for life in general, and, most especially, to make them aware of the transcendental quality of the ever present now. For this, they were invited to participate freely in a continuous and wide-ranging educational programme to enlarge their field of consciousness and to transcend their egotistical perception of the world.

A possible comparison of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Huxley's *Island* could lead us to a systematic collation of narrative segments derived from this "cultural-clash" and "cultural-sympathy" reading and from their dystopian and utopian thematic contrasts. As a sort of metonymical approach to this

interpretation, one could start by juxtaposing the generalized chaos that resulted from the colonial administration in Africa, with the efficient decentralized self government of Pala. The former can be exemplified by Marlow's narration of his arrival at the colonial Company's coastal Station; the scenario he is confronted with - a disorganized and slave-labour compound - was so ghastly and shocking that it seemed to him that he "had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno" (20). The whole area was covered with negligent signs of arbitrary rule; the work that was going on was pure entropy and the few humans he viewed were but spectres of "criminal" negroes subjected to forced labour under the guard of a despondent white man: "I came aside upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a [...] railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. [...] A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path. [...] Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently carrying a rifle by its middle" (19). The same sort of mismanagement was duplicated further on in another colonial setting, the so-called Central Station, where white men with staves, the "pilgrims of progress", strolled around with no other purpose than getting a chance to enrich themselves with the looting of ivory: "the first glance at the place was enough to let you see the flabby devil was running that show" (24). And in between these colonial compounds, no signs of villages, the suggestion for such a depopulation being the subduing and drudgery of the natives: "Paths, paths, everywhere [...] and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut" (23). Besides these references to the colonial mal-administration, there are also two other spatial signs in *Heart of Darkness* heavily charged with negative connotations: the European colonial city, on the one hand, and, of course, the African jungle, epitomised by the description of Kurtz's settlement fence made

out of human skulls, on the other. The town, metonymically characterized by the street where the Company's office stands, is gloomily lacking any signs of life like a huge ill-cared-for, cold mausoleum: "A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar" (13). The African jungle, as if intensifying the "deep shadow" and the "dead silence" foreshadowed by the description of the European imperial city, is darkness itself, a place that, even gazed at from a distance, is fearful and full of unseen mysteries and of unimagined dangers. In Marlow's experience, the jungle becomes more and more tenebrous: first, from the sea, fringing the African coast, it looked "so dark green as to be almost black" (16); then, once within it, going up river, it became a "strange world of plants and water and silence, [...] an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (36); finally, in its inner depths it appeared to him "so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (55).

In contrast to this dark and threatening wilderness, the welcoming and bright natural environment of Pala is depicted in benign and pleasant terms. The disorderly and chaotic African stations and the ill management of colonial rule give way to the good administration of the island and to the well devised architecture of the Palanese settlements. These positive references not only reveal the success and the self sufficiency of the Palanese agricultural system but also a careful endeavour to shape harmoniously the natural environment to meet human needs. That is what is observed by Will Farnaby, both at the so-called Experimental Station - conceived in line with an English unit famous for its successful agricultural experiments - and at the High Altitude Station - a mountain unit designed "to grow practically anything that grows in southern Europe" (184). Above it stands an Eastern temple - "A thing of symmetry in

contrast with the rocks, but regular [...] with the pragmatic geometry of a living thing" (185) - dedicated to Shiva Nataraja, the Hindu God of the dance, symbol of the cosmic laws of creation and destruction, presiding to the performance of the youth initiation rites of the "yoga of danger" and of the "yoga of the jungle". Both stations, in the fulfilment of their different functions, combine the use of a geometrical spatial organization - which, by the way, has become a classic utopian cliché since More's description of "the almost square in shape" (46) Amaurot, the capital of Utopia - with the natural irregularities of the natural environment. The Experimental Station is described from a bird's eye point of view as a "wide plain checkered with fields, dotted with clumps of trees and clustered houses. [...] Nature here was no longer merely natural; the landscape had been composed, had been reduced to its geometrical essences and rendered, by what in a painter would have been a miracle of virtuosity, in terms of these sinuous lines, these streaks of pure bright colour" (27). In contrast to the enclosed and claustrophobic spaces perceived by Marlow's narration, it is also from above, as if the experience of vast spatial expanses were in reference to the prevalent Palanese sense of personal and collective freedom, that Pala's capital city, Shivapuram, is viewed by Will Farnaby. "Beyond the jungle [...] stretched a considerable city. Seen from this high vantage point in its shining completeness, it looked like the tiny meticulous painting of a city in a medieval book of hours" (188-189).

Indeed painting is the second thematic motif that merits our attention in this metonymical comparative reading. Apart from the fact that both narratives, particularly Conrad's, contain descriptive fragments that seem to actualize the famous, although inaccurate, Horacian equivalence between poetic discourse and painting,[6] they both make use of paintings as central symbols for the static and figurative illustration of their respective stories. Each narrative provides us with an identification of the painters: Kurtz, in Marlow's story, and Gobind Singh,

"the best landscape painter Pala ever produced" (211). Kurtz's painting is both a demonstration of his multifarious talents, artistic, rhetorical, leadership, organisational, trading, and of his multifaceted, contradictory "round" character - as in E. M. Forster famous character-fictional classification. In fact, the theme of Kurtz's painting is a sort of contradictory, negative illustration of his own verbal rhetoric, an ironical figurative counterpart to the "eloquent, vibrating [...] magic current of phrases" (50-51) of the report he himself had been entrusted to write by some liberal international society, imbued with a paternalistic colonial ideology - the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs". In contrast to his own verbal praise for the supposedly enlightened and enlightening white dominion over Africans' dark primitivism, Kurtz had painted an allegorical image representing the (self-)ignorant, (self-)misguiding and (self-) destructive role of the pretentious western civilizing mission - "a small sketch in oils, on a panel representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre - almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the light on the face was sinister" (27-28). Having been painted some time before at the Central Station, where Marlow saw it in the room of an envious, intriguing and useless colonial agent - a brickmaker who, as yet, made no bricks - this chiaroscuro (self-)image of mental unquietness and axiological disbelief exhibits an ironical inversion of the current, positive symbolical qualities of the torchlight: it reveals nothing to nobody except the self-reflexive rigid and "sinister" blindfulness of the bearer of the light. The contents of Kurtz's painting are therefore an oxymoron: it is the lighted exhibition of darkness itself.

Gobind Singh's painting shows, of course, something quite different: a landscape, but a very special kind of landscape, in which the gift of the artist was able to combine different technical devices from disparate cultural traditions - Chinese Sung school of painting and French impressionism - with the creative

output of his mindful state of consciousness - the highest objective of Palanese educational practice - as a means to represent a "genuinely religious image" (212). That is, Gobind Singh's "large oil painting"(211), hanging on the wall of the meditation room at the Temple located above Pala's High Altitude Station, is neither a political or philosophical allegory, as in the case of Kurtz's painting, much less a religious allegory, but an enlivened picture showing exactly what it shows, a bright and dark Palanese landscape perceived as a manifestation of "Mind with a large M in an individual mind in relation to a landscape, to canvas, and to experience of painting" (212). In other words, Gobind's painting is at the same time the artistic objectivation of a disclosed state of nature and the materialization of a very special state of consciousness, the one that, according to Schopenhauer's theory of knowledge, characterizes both the knowing condition of the true artist when he is at work and the knowing condition of the true observer (reader, listener) when he is contemplating/perceiving either a piece of art or a natural phenomenon: a pure, transpersonal insight into the essence of the object, a state beyond the urges of self-satisfaction, a sort of powerful contemplative and peaceful state of mind in which the (pure) subject of knowing and the (essence of the) object known merge into a glimpse (an Idea) of the real and eternal nature of things.[7] When commenting on Gobind's painting, Vijaya, one of Will's guides in his journey across Pala and one of his initiators into Palanese way of living, emphasises precisely the transpersonal nature of the contemplative act of knowing recorded by the image of the landscape: more than a snapshot of a personal transitive perception of an external object, it is a timeless representation of a state of being. And this seems to be the kind of state that precisely imbues Gobind's picture with its religious quality. By showing the "light [...] of the last hour before dusk [,] [b]right with the preternatural brightness of slanting light under a ceiling of cloud [...] that stipples every surface it touches and deepens every shadow" (212), the painting compelled the

observer "to perform an act of self-knowing" (213), since its view "is a view as it exists above and below the level of personal history" (213). The contents of Gobind's painting are therefore an oxymoron: it is a re-presentation of a direct and timeless view.[8] A view without conceptual mediation and without imaginative transfiguration of an external, natural landscape and of a inner, ontological landscape, both interpenetrated by the dual quality that underlies or is contained within the unity of life itself: "Mysteries of darkness: but the darkness teems with life. Apocalypses of light: and the light shines out as brightly from the flimsy little houses as from the trees the grass, the blue spaces between the clouds" (213).

Mysteries of darkness", "Apocalypses of light" are appropriate metaphors to illustrate the turning point from a political / social to a psychological / philosophical reading of both narratives. We could therefore paraphrase Michael Levenson's words, from his essay *The value of facts in the Heart of Darkness,* and say that both Conrad and Huxley envision "that form of community in which social organization becomes psychological expression" (401). Now, these metaphors closely connected as they both are to the composition and with the role of the main characters in both fictions, Marlow / Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and Will Farnaby in *Island,* are obviously articulated with divergent narrative strategies, But they are also articulated with the significance of the last common topic we wish to ponder on, of the "Essential Horror". This, strange though it may seem within the context of a utopia, is one of *Island*'s recurrent narrative motifs; it is an expression to which Will Farnaby resorts again and again to justify his quintessential scepticism; somehow it is also an analogue to the famous hopeless words uttered by Kurtz before dying: "The horror! The horror!" (68).

Whether from a social or from a mental point of view, Kurtz's permanence in the jungle and among the African natives made him transgress every sort of ethical boundary and go far beyond the congruent limits of human conduct. In

the course of his ideological radicalization against the European (pseudo) civilizing role in Africa and in his growing revolt and despise against the (un)reason(able) dominion of the coercive parasitism of the whites' culture over the self-sustained vitalism of the blacks' culture, Kurtz abandoned the reasoning schemes of (irrational) socialization and (questionable) individuation and let himself sink into an unsound abyss of ego-dissolution and unbridled behaviour. The collapse of Kurtz's reason together with the loss of his rhetorical gift – (against Marlow's expectations regarding Kurtz's eloquence, the former is hardly able to listen to the enfeebled voice of the latter after they meet each other) – turned him into an almost speechless diabolical deity. He becomes an incarnation of the overwhelming darkness of the jungle, an irresistible magnetic force against whom Marlow desperately has to wrestle in order to escape from his tremendous, disturbing appeal and ego dis-structuring force. Kurtz's passions had driven him – says Marlow – "towards the drone of weird incantations […]. He had kicked himself loose of the earth" – "he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone – and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the hair" (65). Notwithstanding Marlow's resistance, he himself had been on the brink of following Kurtz' destiny. Marlow does not give any details as to the causes of his own imminent death, but he describes how he traversed it and how he came back to acknowledge the meaning of Kurtz's last pronouncement. It marked, in Marlow's opinion, "a moral victory" since it exhibited not only a sincere, wise and courageous self-judgement, but also, and mainly, a judgment "wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (69). These seem to be – following Marlow's line of thinking – all the hearts that, unaware of their mean and petty surviving schemes, stupidly show their indifference towards the "essential horror" of life and blindly participate in its continuous reproduction.

Just like the image of the blind woman he had painted, Kurtz, when stepping "over the threshold of the invisible" (69), carries with him the torchlight of his revealed truth, of his essential understanding of life, albeit unable to see the flame of the candle that illuminates his own sinister glare. At the moment of his dying, Kurtz has thus the revelation that life is essentially suffering caused by unquenchable greed – the so-called Buddha's first noble truth. The teaching is transmitted to his disciple Marlow, who, henceforth, seems to assume it: "It is his [Kurtz's] extremity that I seem to have lived through" (69), says Marlow to his listeners, to whom he has been recounting his journey in Africa in a semi-meditative Buddha-like posture.

Will Farnaby's epiphany is of a different nature. He had long been aware of the "immortality of suffering" (324). He himself had actually experienced the multiple forms of the horror vision: through the pain he personally felt by the loss of his dear ones, starting with the loss, still in his childhood, of the only being he had been able to feel at ease with, his dog, Tiger; then with the death of his martyred, unhappy mother, and most specially with the remorse caused by the killing in a car accident of Molly, his broken-hearted partner that he had left for another young woman. In his post-shipwrecking and confusing awakening on the "only sandy beach […] of Pala's rock bound coast" (13), Will, while trying to discern where he is, is haunted by disparate images of his past life, some of them evoking the flicker – in Marlow's words – of the "Essential Horror". When remembering, for instance, the effect of the red and green winking of Porter's Gin advertisement in the bedroom of his young lover, Babs, he associates it with the dual, basic physical principles of sexual pleasure and death's pain, of life's affirmation and life's denial: "for ten seconds the alcove was the Sacred Heart. […] Then came the yet profounder transfiguration of darkness. One, two, three, four … […]. But punctually at the count of ten the electric clock would turn on another revelation – but of death, of the Essential Horror; for the lights, this

time, were green, and for ten hideous seconds Bab's rosy alcove became a womb of mud and, on the bed, Babs herself was corpse-coloured, a cadaver galvanized into posthumous epilepsy" (9). As an observer, as a "well-paid pilgrim" journalist, Will had also found plenty of reasons to nourish his irretrievable scepticism towards any possible affirmative answer to the enlightened dimension of life. He had witnessed everywhere local variations of the universal theme of the "Essential Horror", enough to justify to himself the attribution of a dire quality to the general principle of life: "Negroes in South Africa, the man in San Quentin gas chamber, mangled bodies in an Algerian farmhouse, and everywhere mobs, everywhere policemen and paratroopers, everywhere those dark-skinned children, stick-legged, pot-bellied, with flies on their eyelids, everywhere the nauseating smells of hunger and disease, the awful stench of death" (272). As a culmination of his progressive conversion to the selfless Palanese way of living, founded on a mindful perception and on a spiritual vigilance of the "now" and of the "suchness" of life, that is, founded on a continuous educational programme for the apprehension of the underlying unity of existence, Will Farnaby experiments the revelation of such-now-unity induced by the ingestion of the so-called "moksha" medicine – a sort of drug made to expand one's field of consciousness and to liberate or open up one's conditioned and limited mechanisms of perception. And the revelation brought him both a "luminous bliss", when listening to Johann Sebastian Bach's Fourth Brandenburg Concert, and a confrontation with the "Essential Horror", induced by his actually gazing at an act of copulation between a pair of mantis, followed by the eating up of the male by the female element. "Openness to bliss and understanding was also, he realized, an openness to terror, to total incomprehension" (319). In his experience of being "blissfully one with oneness" (308), Will, epitomizing his direct and revealed understanding of the very underpinning law of life, eventually comes to the understanding, when gazing at his female initiator,

Susila Macphail's half illuminated face, that what "he was seeing now was the paradox of opposites indissolubly wedded, of light shining out of darkness, of darkness at the very heart of light" (328).

The end of Huxley's novel is resonant to this enlightened realization of Will's process of individuation in his stay in Pala. At the moment he has just transcended his ingrained and justifiable scepticism by becoming genuinely grateful to life itself and reconciled with his own dualistic nature, Pala is invaded by Rendang-Lobo's army. Together with Susila, they both watch from a distance the nocturnal progress of the military vehicles that have to pass by the "great stone Buddha by the lotus pool" (334), a symbol of the spiritual transcendence from "human infinite suffering" (324) and from "the paradox of opposites indissolubly wedded" (328). The paradox now is that each vehicle of the invading brutal and dark forces that have come to destroy in a single night the work of one hundred years devoted to the social enlightenment of Pala has involuntary to lit up Pala's supreme emblematic figuration, the stone Buddha's enlightened face. "For an instant only, and then the beam moved on. And here was the Tathagata for the second time, the third, the fourth, the fifth. The last of the cars passed by. Disregarded in the darkness the fact of enlightenment remained" (336).

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* curiously enough ends with the ambiguous message that Marlow had gone far enough in his understanding that the flicker of light is not only, as it could be inferred from his introduction to his African journey, an oscillation between historical periods of dark barbarism and civilizing enlightenment. After concluding his story, he assumes a detached Buddha-like posture as if he had attained some kind of existential realization. And it is the main narrator, when referring to the turning of the tide, who picks up the pernicious and gloomy tone of Marlow's narration to transmit an ultimate symbolic message as to the prevalent darkness of mankind's historical course:

"The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (76). A darkness such as it is represented by Conrad's symbolical narrative: as a figure for a great variety of less laudable human feats, traversing historical and continental boundaries, including those perpetrated as an effect of the cultural clash pattern: but a darkness that, ultimately, is not permanent and is not dissociable from light with its benign existential effects, including those that transgress the limitations of the common sense and that may be the outcome of an ideal syncretic or cultural-sympathy phenomenon - such as it is represented by Huxley.

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[1] Known as well as 'the Maga', an abbreviation used by Conrad himself in his letters, it was a prestigious and controversial monthly periodical, published in Edinburgh, between 1817 and 1980. Founded as a Tory magazine by the Scots publisher William Blackwood, it became in 1830 a purely literary review.

[2] Discussing the meaning of the title *Heart of Darkness*, Ian Watt says that "we are somehow impelled to see the title as much more than a combination of two stock metaphors" (Watt 331); he adds that the combination of those two nouns "generates a sense of puzzlement which prepares us for something beyond our usual expectation: if the words do not name what we know, they must be asking us to know what has, as yet, no name" (331).

[3] In his famous and previously mentioned essay *Conrad's in the Nineteenth Century*, Ian Watt defines the narrative method used in *Heart of Darkness* as "subjective moral impressionism" (316), due to the kind of inward and experiential understanding it displays, and also due to its "approach to visual descriptions" and the "preoccupation with the problematic relation of individual sense impressions to meaning" (316).

[4] Among various definitions of utopia as a literary genre, we give the following one from Darko Survin: "Utopia is the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of alternative historical hypothesis" (Suvin 49).

[5] The long-term educational programme that led the Palanese to speak two languages fluently is another "cultural-sympathy" example. Dr Robert, a distinguished Palanese citizen, explains to Will the functions and the advantages of the bilingual system: "We speak Palanese when we're cooking, when we're telling funny stories, when we're talking about love or making it. [...] But

when it comes to business, or science, or speculative philosophy, we generally speak English" (153).

[6] We use the word "inaccurate" here because Horace does not actually seek to establish a technical equivalence between poetry and painting in that most quoted sentence from his *Ars Poetica* (361-365) "ut pictura poesis" - "as with a picture, so with poetry". He uses this sentence not to judge poetry in terms of the effects that paint has, but rather as a means of accounting for the varieties and qualities of the poetic discourse. It was mainly the neo-classic critics who enlarged the content of this analogy, to the point of regarding both the theme of the literary text as analogous to the particular form of the painting, and poetic diction and imagery analogous to the colour variations employed. The following quote, from the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* provides an excellent example of this seemingly Horacian device: "The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in ted clusters of canvas, sharply peaked with gleams of varnished sprits, A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness" (7).

[7] In this parenthesis, we resort to specifically Shopenhauerian terminology, because this exceptional state of consciousness is described by him in his major work *The World as Will and Representation* (Volume 1, Book 3, Chapter 34). The following passage succinctly sums up what is meant by this concept: "Raised up by the power of the mind, we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things [...]. Further, we do not let abstract thought, the concepts of reason, take possession of our consciousness, but, instead, devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape [...] or anything else" (178).

[8] Huxley expounded this topic of the direct view or direct experience in his famous essay *The Doors of Perception*, at the end of which he wrote: "We must learn how to handle words effectively; but at the same time we must preserve, and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half-opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction" (59).

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