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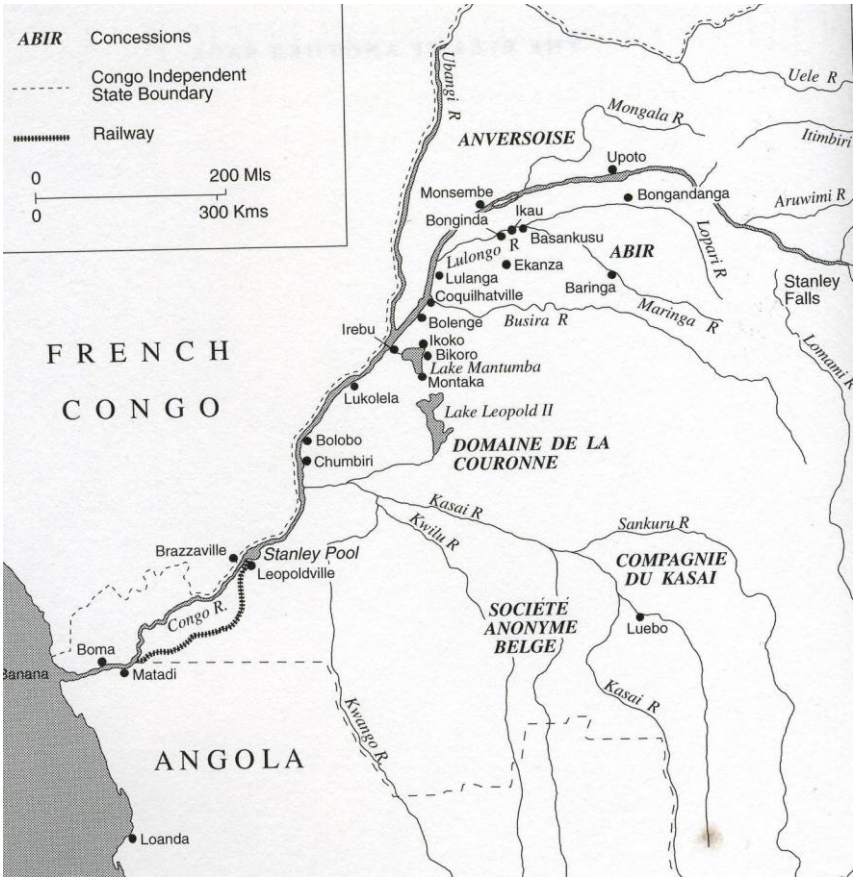
Conrad's African Experiences and their Relevance to *Heart of Darkness*.

On 12 June 1890, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski arrived in Boma, the capital of the Congo Free State, under a contract from the 'Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo'. Almost ten years later, between December 1898 and February 1899, Joseph Conrad would write *Heart of Darkness*. What is the relevance of Korzeniowski's experience in the Congo to Conrad's later novella? To answer this question, it is necessary to first look at the historical background and the situation in the Congo around that time; then at Conrad's life, his personal history and the details of his sojourn in Congo, as well as the time around which *Heart of Darkness* was composed. After these preliminaries, I will focus on the novella itself: the representation of the Congo and Africa as well as the characters of Marlow and Kurtz primarily; but also other aspects which give an understanding of how the literary composition relates to reality, and what motivated Conrad when he chose to represent his experiences in this way.



A Map of Congo, around 1903 (*Eyes of Another Race*, p. ii)

Hochschild argues that the Congo Free State came into being largely because of the thirst for fame of an explorer and the greed of a king. In the 1860s, Central Africa was largely terra incognita, a white patch on the white man's maps. African explorers, like Livingstone, or Burton and Speke, were the celebrities of the time. Concurrently, the Great Powers had started to get interested in the potential riches, although they were cautious to disguise their motives by invoking the 'civilising mission' into which they were embarking: the Scramble for Africa had begun. Henry Morton Stanley, an orphan, a former seaman, and an ambitious journalist (note the similarities with Conrad, cf. Karl, 1979, p.275), became famous for finding Livingstone in Africa, and for his subsequent expeditions across the Congo. He attracted the attention of the Belgian king, Leopold II,

who, under philanthropic and scientific pretences, cunningly manoeuvred him into establishing what was to become secretly his own private colony, officially described as a 'free state' and recognised as such internationally in 1885 by the main powers. In reality, it was nothing but ruthless exploitation and slave labour, for ivory, then rubber, as would be revealed by Roger Casement's 1903 Report. The human toll, Hochschild claims, may have reached ten million deaths (*King Leopold's Ghost*, pp.225-234).

According to Karl, Conrad had three lives: as a Pole, then as a sailor, and finally as a writer; an orphan and an émigré from a martyred nation, answering the call of the sea in his teens, he started to write only in his thirties. He had also a complex personality, unsure of his own identity, prone to passions and pessimism (Cox, 1974, p.7, about 'The Question of Suicide'), redeemed in his own eyes by his sense of duty; in his own words: "[...] but the fact is that I have a positive *horror* of losing even for one moving moment that full possession of myself which is the first condition of good service" (Watt, 1980, p.30, my italics). As Karl points out, in the summer and fall of 1889, Conrad was at a threshold: he had started to write (*Almayer's Folly*) and was unsuccessfully looking for a command. Mostly by accident (the death of Captain Freiesleben), and only with the help of his cousin's wife Marguerite Pobrowska ('his aunt'), he would find himself going to that "spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa" about which he had "declared that some day I would go there" (Watt, 1980, p.146), leaving Bordeaux on 10 May 1890, a few months after Stanley had returned from his "Emin Pasha Relief Expedition", embroiled in controversy about the human losses and atrocities committed under his command (*King Leopold's Ghost*, pp.97-100).

The *Roi Des Belges*, on which Conrad travelled (Karl, 1979, p.411)

The thirty-two-year old Conrad arrived in Boma on 12 June 1890, and in Matadi, the 'Company Station' of *Heart of Darkness*, the next day. There he met Roger Casement who was then supervising the railway being built between Matadi and Leopoldville (the 'Central Station'), as told in his *Congo Diary*. This diary is a collection of succinct notes about the 200-mile walk to Leopoldville, reached on 2 August. Some of them, though, are quite haunting: 'saw [...] the dead body of a Backongo. Shot?'; 'Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose'; 'On the road today passed a skeleton tied-up to a post' (*Congo Diary*, pp.152, 153 and 158). He was 'glad to see the end of this stupid tramp' (*Congo Diary*, p.161). He had previously learned that the steamer he was supposed to command was wrecked, and instead, after only a few days,

he left on another one, the *Roi des Belges*, on a routine trip to various trading posts to deliver supplies and pick up ivory, to learn about river navigation. The local manager, on the same boat, Camille Delcommune, took an immediate dislike to him: "The manager is a common ivory dealer with base instincts who consider himself to be a merchant when he is only a kind of African shopkeeper" (letter to Marguerite Podorowska, quoted in Karl, 1979, p.294). At Stanley Falls (the 'Inner Station'), they picked up an ill agent, Klein, who died of dysentery during the return journey. After his return to Leopoldville on 24 September, Conrad realised that he would not get the command he was wishing for in the planned expedition to the Kasai River because of his enmity with the manager. Gravely ill with dysentery and tropical gout (an illness which would plague him all his life), very depressed, he broke his three-year contract on medical ground. He left the Congo in December 1890, about six months after his arrival, in bad health and with low spirits. He also had in his pocket the manuscript of his first novel: *Almayer's Folly* (biographical notes from Watt, 1980, pp.135-136, and Karl, 1979, pp.265-301).

Flogging with chicotte (*Eyes of Another Race*, p. 176)

This Congo experience would mature for almost ten years in Conrad's mind, for it was only around the beginning of 1899 that he wrote *Heart of Darkness*, in only two months and a half, for publication in *Blackwood's Magazine*. In the meantime he had also evolved into a novelist. By that time rumours about the atrocities in the Congo Free State, and the rest of Africa, had started to leak in the European press. Conrad wrote to Blackwood that "The subject is of our time distinctly" (Watts, 1980, p.140), and that "The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilising work in Africa is a justifiable idea" (Watts, 1980, p.148). As Watt points out, however, Conrad had an ambivalent attitude towards colonialism, due to his Polish heritage and his English citizenship: dubious about British involvement in Africa, for Spain in its war against America in 1898, for his adopted country in the Boer Wars in 1899. This ideological contradiction is also found in Marlow and Kurtz, as I will show later. It also means that the colonisation of the Congo would become a parable of 'bad' colonisation in general in *Heart of Darkness*.

An ivory gathering post in the Congo around 1890 (*King Leopold's Ghost*, p.116)

Karl argues that there are three Congos: Leopold's deceptive Congo Free State, hiding behind the smokescreen of a civilising mission, Casement's lucid and terrible picture in his 1903 Report, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* vision, somewhere between the previous two: a mix of illusion and brutal reality (Karl, 1979, p.286). The Congo, or even Africa, is actually never named in the novella; it is referred to as a blank space in an atlas, where the 'mighty big river' uncoils like a snake, the spot in the centre of the office map, or the continent that the French man-of-war is shelling (*Heart of Darkness* pp.22, 25, 30). Places have no name, only functions: the whited sepulchre, Company Station, Central Station or Inner Station. However, there can be no doubt that this is the Congo, because it is possible to decipher the correspondences: Brussels, Matadi, Leopoldville and Stanley Falls, by comparing Marlow's descriptions to Conrad's *Congo Diary* and his life. Marlow actually follows Conrad's footsteps quite closely, up to Central Station; afterwards their paths diverge. Some aspects are amplified: the jungle becomes more primeval, more exuberant, more threatening. Immutability is underlined: be it the shelled continent, the indestructible cliff face, the invincible hippopotamus or the useless gunfire of the pilgrims. Stations are made to look less developed than they actually were, as Watt points out: there were around 170 Europeans in Matadi (Central Station) of various nationalities; the railway to Leopoldville was being built; Stanley Falls (Inner Station), far from being a single hut, was in fact a large settlement. The sense of isolation stressed in *Heart of Darkness* would certainly not have been so acute in reality: there were over twenty steamers in operation on the Upper Congo at the time, and the jungle was quite populated, with several trading posts along the way (Watts, 1980, p.140). One aspect of the Congo Free State is not exaggerated, though: its pointless brutality, and the terrible

human cost, which Conrad had glimpsed during his time there, as well as what was being denounced in the newspapers at the time of *Heart of Darkness*'s composition. He could not have missed the railway labourers, who paid a hefty price for its completion. He had acknowledged the dead porters in his *Diary.* They all appear in the novella.

Only three characters in *Heart of Darkness* are given a name: Fresleven, the unfortunate steamer captain (quite close to the actual Freiesleben); Kurtz (a pun on Klein, the agent who died on Conrad's steamer); and of course Marlow himself. All other characters are identified by their function (like the places): Marlow's listeners, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant; the aunt (an echo of Marguerite Podorowska?); the doctor, the manager, the agent, the 'pilgrims', the 'harlequin' (a jester in the court of Kurtz?), the Intended... They are denied any resonance with reality, which by contrast make the other three, and especially Kurtz and Marlow, even more salient. As for Marlow, how close is he to Conrad? He shares his sense of duty, although it is in him pushed almost to the point of machismo, to the caricature of the 'stiff upper lip', a trait also underlined by his dismissive attitude towards women - unlike Conrad, who had great respect for 'his aunt'. However, he lacks Conrad's imagination and emotions, as Karl points out (Karl, 1979, p.265). Marlow is an incarnation of restraint; he does not give up, or even fall sick, unlike Conrad, but he shares the same indignation when faced with the brutal inefficiencies of the Congo. Although he follows roughly the same course as Conrad, his experience is made more negative: he meets no one that he does not despise, finds no enjoyment. Conrad had met Europeans he liked, like Casement, or missionaries. This again increases the sense of isolation and the urgency of his need to meet Kurtz.

Léon Rom, a possible model for Kurtz? (*King Leopold's Ghost* p.116)

What about Kurtz, then? As Cox argues, he could be the mirror image of Marlow (Cox, 1974, p.7): a man who has lost all restraint, who has become dominated by his passions, by his primal emotions. There is little, if any, exaggeration in the depiction of Kurtz, and indeed several actual individuals may have inspired him. His death was the same as Klein. Watts proposes Hodister, an intrepid explorer, a reformer, a very successful collector of ivory, who like Kurtz used native tribes, and ended up being beheaded; or Emin Pasha, in reality Eduard Schnitzer, brilliant linguist, married to a native woman, reluctantly 'rescued' by Stanley in 1889; or Barttelot, part of that rescue expedition, gone mad and assassinated by a tribesman because of his brutality; or Stanley himself, whose enthusiastic use of the Maxim gun in his expeditions had scandalised Britain around that time(Watts, 1980, p.143). Hochschild gives an even closer example with Léon Rom, a fast-rising agent, who in 1890 was station manager of Leopoldville, and in 1895 of Stanley Falls, and who had around that time decorated a flower-bed in front of his house with twenty-one human heads (a story published in British magazines around the end of 1898). Rom, interestingly, painted landscapes and portraits, collected

butterflies, and would publish a book in 1899, not unlike Kurtz's report in tone. Kurtz is probably a composite image of all these, but a very plausible one. In some ways, Conrad also put in Kurtz some aspects of his own passionate personality, and Kurtz's last words echo Conrad's horror of losing his own restraint.

As Conrad said himself: "[*Heart of Darkness* is] experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosom of the readers" (Watt, 1980, p.141). It is distilled experience: some aspects of reality have come out stronger than they were, and some have disappeared altogether. Marlow and Kurtz can also be seen as two contradictory facets of Conrad's own personality, two imaginary projections of his impressions of Africa, and an illustration of his ambivalent views about colonisation. The powerful symbolism of *Heart of Darkness*, with its many contrasts between light and darkness, closed and open spaces, inside and outside, adds many dimensions to the real Congo, which is itself turned into a symbol of what is wrong in colonialism, although it stops short of a full condemnation. Detached from time and space by the abstraction of the places and characters, it also acquires universality: from his personal African experiences, Conrad draws a tale transposable to other times and other places.

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