

Guney Y. Yildirim

Subject: "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad

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**"The horror! The horror!"**

Condemning the entire universe and the hearts of all men, Kurtz "cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, (...) a cry that was no more than a breath, 'The horror! The horror!'" (178). We come face to face with the loathsome visage of a black ghost: The Universe. And it appears to our small eyes in all its dark vastness and its ominous inevitability. No one can escape it. Once caught the glimpse of it, it is absolute even to the most convinced skeptic. "Heart of Darkness" is the heart of Universe, which is imprinted into every matter that is contained within the Universe. It is filled with pitch-black darkness and galaxies are sprinkled here and there, and are in constant struggle against their own existence in this darkness with their violent explosions in order to create some light, which results in hardly perceptible twinkles, shyly ignited and instantly extinguished – and invaded again, inevitably, by the interminable darkness. The result is the destruction and spread of matter, attracted and carefully positioned according to each other's mass with the inexplicable force of magnetic energy. We are of the dead stars, indeed. Conrad must have seen or sensed this horrific visage of the universe, for "Heart of Darkness", as it seems to me, is an attempt to describe certain effects of the horror that is inflicted by the Universe on human beings.

It takes "a wanderer" (105) to recognize this phenomenon with its appropriate name: The Horror. A wanderer to recognize it because for everyone else journeying

on this planet is a residence that is best left unquestioned. Everyone else is in the same group as the seamen that Conrad describes in contrast to Marlow. "...Most seamen lead...a sedentary life" (105), says the anonymous narrator, "Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them" (105). Their senses are "veiled...by a slightly disdainful ignorance" towards "the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life" and to them "the sea is mistress of [their] existence and as inscrutable as Destiny" (105). A wanderer, on the other hand, is charmed and puzzled by the same foreign shores and foreign faces and by the element that governs their lives. A wanderer, then, strives to solve the puzzle – first recognizes it and then revolts against it. Exposing the puzzle is the task of a storyteller. Marlow fulfils the task of storytelling, as well. He is the one who perceives the "...vibrating note of revolt in Kurtz's whisper" (179), a recognition that indicates Kurtz as a peer to Marlow, or vice versa, in the status of being a wanderer.

Marlow acknowledges the presence of the same elements in him that made Kurtz what he was and pushed him "...over the edge" (179), for Marlow is aware of being spared from crossing to the other side. My interpretation of the edge is that it must be the border where one faces the mask-less and abominable face of the Universe, feels being completely surrounded by its eternal cruelty yet still maintains the compassion in his human heart and his head cool, remembering perhaps the old doctor's advice, "Du Calm, du calm" (112) when faced by the horror. Noting that Marlow and Kurtz are peers on this dimension is important because in order to challenge the Universe as the supreme horror in Marlow's tale, we must single out

what he distinguishes from Kurtz's state of being and words. What Marlow recognizes in Kurtz is in the foundation of the tale.

When minimized to the scales of locality and individual, horror is dealt with as a naturally given situation. It is thought of in human life-span measures. People deal with this scale of horror in a manner of game, a ridiculous but a serious game. If they encounter any horror, they think that they can avoid it if they work hard enough: Work hard enough to please that which is horrific, as the subjects of Kurtz had done at his station or as any worshipper of (and sacrificer to) any god does anywhere in the world. Work hard enough to escape from where the horror reigns – to another country for example. Work hard enough to be an equal ally with the horror. Work hard enough to be greater than the horror itself. Be the soul horrifier – declare yourself as god or its chosen representative.

No one escapes the indifferent wrath of horror, however. This might be why Conrad uses a sarcastic language both towards white Europeans and black Africans. The sarcastic language describes the place that these people occupy in the Earth somewhat more accurately, for they are all insignificant beings frantically trying to get at something, which makes them ridiculous figures in a moving picture. The sarcasm sometimes extends to contempt in Marlow, who recalls “I found myself in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams.”

While Africans are dealing with their misery under the horrific exploitation and oppression of Europeans, the ruthless competition among kingdoms and colonial

powers of Europe (with capitalism flourishing and over-boarding their national borders, which is partly responsible for the frenzy of colonization) does not leave much chance of peace for Europeans either. Horror is abounding in Europe, as well, in all strata of the society. One of the great capitals of Europe “makes [Marlow] think of a whited sepulchre” (110), for example. And there is also the horror of inflicting horror and witnessing horror even if it is caused by you or one of your kin. When Marlow is trying “to stroll into the shade for a moment”, for example, he feels as if stumbled “into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (118). He notices dying and decaying corpses of African slaves “scattered in every pose of contorted collapse as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence”. Standing “horror-struck” (119), he is sharply introduced to the world that had big impact in Kurtz’s spectacular madness.

Kurtz and Marlow himself seem to be spared from being mentioned with a mocking tone in the tale, both of whom arrived at that edge and in naked frankness faced the “truth stripped of its cloak of time”. Kurtz’s soul “had looked within itself”, only to be confront by the horror of the Universe and “it had gone mad” (174). “I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. I kept my head pretty well” (174), Marlow recounts with a familiarity to the experience.

The difference between Kurtz and Marlow is that Kurtz is accused of not having any restraint. Remembering the cause of his helmsman’s death, Marlow remarks, “He had no restraint, no restraint -- just like Kurtz” (156), who “...had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while [Marlow] had been permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot” (179). It’s the fine and fragile line

connecting Tao and Te. It is the point where you realize that you exist only as an inseparable part of this Universe; you are one with it and with all its horror. It is the virtue that you could hold onto in order not to slip into the dark side of the Universe and be consumed by the horror. It is also the virtue that perhaps lends itself as the source of strength to preserve any sanity that is left after this horrific encounter.

The reason why Kurtz was lost in and unrecoverable from the heart of darkness is that he had broken all the laws of earth. “There was nothing either above or below him... He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces” (174). He had joined the horror yet he apparently had always hated it and that is perhaps why he unleashed the great horror that he was capable of generating upon those who failed to challenge the concept of horror. In fact, some of them were now worshiping his horrific majesty. When Marlow encounters him, even he is perplexed with the feelings that he notices. “I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air” (174), he admits.

Despite what could be called a lack of restraint on Kurtz’s part, Marlow respects him. “He was a remarkable man” (179), marks Marlow, whose stare “...was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up -- he had judged. 'The horror!'" (179). Perhaps it was a relief with a deep sigh for Marlow, who must have deeply needed a glimpse or a sign of virtue in the thick darkness, to hear Kurtz’s cry in a whisper, “The horror! The horror!” with “a vibrating note of revolt” (179). Calling it all a horror, without seeking any word of justification for the horror, was the condemnation of that darkness. It was “a moral victory paid for by innumerable

defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!” (179). What Marlow considers as “victory” on Kurtz’s side is the fact that Kurtz finally realized the accurate title for the sum of all his actions: The horror. Kurtz acknowledges that he had stepped over the edge. By uttering, “The horror!” he also acknowledges the horror that had been around before him, besides him, and the horror that is yet to become. He had seen the horrific set up of exploitation by Europeans and bewildering rapport between the natives and the Europeans.

The horror that is eminently roaming in all Europe and Africa is mainly the work of colonists, who are bound only very thinly by the laws of human ethics. They largely operate under the codes of greed, and selfish deliverance, which makes the entire earth a battleground that is devoid of any trace of dignity. Kurtz too is affected by and is a product of this environment where horror breeds healthily. As Conrad remark, “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (154) and was left to struggle with his own soul and conscientiousness. It is a struggle that many of his fellow Europeans never conceived of waging.

As for the blacks of Africa, two points can be made of their misery under the horror: Firstly, there was horror before even the Europeans made any attempt to colonize the regions of Africa. Conrad carefully alludes to cannibalism among them. His men on the boat do not hide their appetite for the natives on the bank of the river. Before even Europeans, these people had weapons and took pride in being warriors, which were not developed only out of hunting traditions. The feuding tribes did engage in atrocious and protracted wars with each other and I do not think any of

them had any international law guide lining and enforcing the humane treatment of the prisoners of war.

Secondly, fear is the element that makes horror stick its head out of darkness with vile laughter. And Africans were afraid of Europeans. The natives easily assumed and accepted that the Europeans were of a godly nature, which must be worshiped and obeyed as “the supernatural being” (109). Both individually and as a mass, they were paralyzed by the seizure of their fears. Fear turned them into something akin to what the Europeans were: frantically seeking deliverance in most selfish ways.

The mindless quest for selfish salvation from what is feared made them individually opportunist creatures. With thousand and one tricks they sought to deal with the small scale horror that they were capable of conceiving instead of revolting against the great horror of the Universe or at least against the horror of any other man kind, either a tribesman or a metropolitan European.

Thus, we can conclude that the virtue belongs to that who dares to rebel against any bearer of horror and is capable of preserving the virtue even when face to face with the abominable visage of the Universe. Horror finds no ground to land itself when the fear is defied. We can also conclude that slavery is a state of mind, comes to birth when fear is capitalized in the presence or threat of horror, urging us to opportunistically seek individual salvation instead of total sovereignty even at the cost of death. Since no one can escape the all-covering darkness of the Universe, since we are one with it, death means nothing, especially considering that death is an inevitable stage. And if there is a phenomenon such as immortality, then why bow

down before the horror with the repugnant smell and appearance of fear when we can immortally and nobly fight against it? If we are mortal, on the other hand, and going down anyways, why go down humiliated? An uncompromising loyalty to the individual dignity might be the insurance for freedom and enchantment.