



Jornades de Foment de la Investigació

**CONRAD'S  
HORROR IN  
ELIOT'S WASTE  
LAND**

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## 1.-THE WASTE LAND AND HEART OF DARKNESS: SOME EXTERNAL CONNECTIONS

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, has accumulated since then a multiplicity of readings and interpretations, sometimes contradictory. Tracing the poem's reception is a fascinating object of study. The fact that it appeared in a post-war situation caused the poem to immediately strike a chord with a readership shocked by the horrors of World War I. *The Waste Land* has come down in literary history as the poem that best reflects the collective feeling of hopelessness that ensued, in spite of the fact that the young poet who produced it never intended to become the spokesman of his generation. Eliot's confession to Theodore Spencer has often been put forward:

Various critics have done me the honour to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.<sup>1</sup>

David A. Moody thinks of *The Waste Land* as an attempt to rationalise a moment of intensity of feeling, in order to transcend it, exorcise it even. To Moody and most critics, the section "Death by Water" is the heart of the poem: it expresses the beginning of the transformation that will result in a new state of being. According to Moody, Eliot's poem expresses primarily the individual poet's anguish, amplified by those aspects of the poem that best characterise it, namely: the variety of voices, the references to different historic moments, the abundance of literary allusions... all contribute to objectifying the personal experience at the core:

We have the agony of the poet given us in the poem, at the heart of its matter and in all the process of its transmutation.

If, in that action, the poem becomes a critique of its culture, it does so in order to give the fullest possible expression to the poet's own mind and feelings. What we are given is not a world 'in itself', as the anthropologist or historian would observe it, but the world as the poet sees it. And what he is seeing is primarily himself. He is completing the objectification and analysis of his experience by magnifying it into a vision of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot was very fond of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and an excerpt from it can be read on the first page of the original typescripts of *The Waste Land*, although it was suppressed before the poem's publication, as we will explain. The novel had appeared in 1902 and it has traditionally been considered to bridge Victorian and modernist fiction. Conrad's work transcends the strictly individual (i.e. the story of Charles Marlow's joining the colonialist trade, voyaging to Africa and meeting the fascinating Mr Kurtz) in order to provide the reader with a powerful complete world vision—the world towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically. According to Cedric Watts, this is true of most fiction by Conrad: "one source of the power of Conrad's novels is that they offer simultaneously

<sup>1</sup> Valerie Eliot chose these lines to open (page 1) her facsimile edition of her husband's poem (see "Works Cited" for publication details).

<sup>2</sup> David A. Moody, *Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, rev. 1994) 79, 80.

public and private histories: they are simultaneously political, psychological and moral analyses of life”<sup>3</sup>. We stated above that *The Waste Land* has inevitably been associated with the post-war or the inter-war period (1918-1939); it is no less true that the story of Marlow and Kurtz has been, to use Moody's term, *objectified* by readers and critics as one of the most compelling condemnations of European imperialism and colonialism.

Conrad had been part of the colonialist system himself: in 1890, he was employed by the “*Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut Congo*” and during a journey from Stanley Falls to Kinshasa (where the fictional Central Station is supposed to be located), he collected a sick agent, named Georges Antoine Klein, who died on board of the steamer where he was captain, this episode obviously being the basic inspiration for the novel's plot<sup>4</sup>. Conrad was shocked by a situation of exploitation and slavery in the heart of Africa; at the beginning of his narration, Marlow refers to imperialism in the following terms:

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. (10)<sup>5</sup>

But Conrad was not the only author to denounce the situation of the Belgian Congo, which at the time was the private property of King Leopold of Belgium. In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Hank Morgan's travel in time allegorises the counterproductive endeavours of colonialists who, in the name of progress and development, ended up causing havoc in the areas where they settled:

The climactic barbarities of King Leopold's Congo, to which Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as well as Twain's own journalism was a response, is already visible in *Connecticut Yankee*. Offering to develop the Arthurian world and rid it of superstition, Hank Morgan brings it war and destruction. Twain's book, like his great denunciations of the exploitation of the Congo in the early 1900s, was a thoughtful account of that most pressing of late nineteenth-century travel forms: the final mad scramble of the European powers to grab up and modernize whatever scraps were left of the underdeveloped world. Like his contemporaries Kipling and Conrad, Twain wrote, in *A Connecticut Yankee*, a parable of cultural arrogance and its self-destructive naïveté that has its place alongside *Heart of Darkness* with its idealist turned savage, Kurtz.<sup>6</sup>

The use of the word “scramble” here, to refer to the competition between European powers in order to gain control over as much colonial territory as possible, has obvious Conradian echoes. He

<sup>3</sup> Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1982) 65.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Hampson, “Introduction,” *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) xxii, xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> All references to Conrad's work are to the following edition: *Heart of Darkness*, Reading: Penguin, Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Emory Elliott (ed.), *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 643.

described the situation that became the temporal setting of his novel as “*the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration.*”<sup>7</sup>

Niall Ferguson has examined the causes of World War I and more specifically, the reasons why Britain entered the conflict. Two aspects on which he dwells are of interest to the present study: first the fear of British interventionists that Germany had Napoleonic ambitions for Europe as well as the intention to control central Africa; second, the alarm of the British government over the German threats to stir secessionist revolutions in the British colonies, although Ferguson does not give much credit to these (49, 50). Despite the complexity of the political situation in Europe at the turn of the century, it would not be far from the truth to say that the death throes of imperialism and colonialism resulted in a large scale conflict.

But let us go back to Conrad's novella. The conventional definition of an odyssey as “a journey out of which the traveller learns something” fails to convey successfully the effects of the African expedition on Marlow: meeting the dying Kurtz will alter his psyche dramatically. He is warned by the doctor who examines him before his departure and annoys him by asking whether there are any antecedents of madness in his family. The doctor's words somehow anticipate the story's conclusion:

“It would be,” he said, without taking notice of my irritation, “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but...” (17)

The bright prospects of the highly lucrative colonial trade, his love of sailing and his desire to see the world attract Marlow into becoming one of the company's new recruits. Kurtz has been by far the most successful ivory dealer in the company that Marlow joins; he is admired, envied, feared. In recent years, however, he has been enthroned by the natives as their mighty white god. He has become an authoritarian cruel ruler—and a hindrance for his superiors, who are at a loss as to what to do about him.

Shortly after Marlow's arrival in Africa, he will be commanded an unexpected mission: to bring Kurtz out of the jungle where he has settled. The general assumption is that this is the best thing for him, given the fact that he is seriously ill, but the reader cannot help feeling that the manager and the other agents are taking advantage of the fact that Kurtz can offer little resistance, in order to get rid of him as a competitor.

It will be illuminating to examine the portrayal of the character who had such a strong impact on the teller of this story, but before we do that, we will consider the novel's setting, since connections can be established both with Kurtz's personality and with Eliot's symbolic Waste Land.

## 2.-DESERT AND JUNGLE AS DEMONIC SETTINGS

In his analysis of biblical imagery in *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye applies the term “demonic” to the settings inhabited by the peoples who do not worship the god of the Israelites (chiefly Egypt) or to the inevitable degradation of idyllic nature, the epitome of which would be the garden of Eden<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Hampson's “Introduction,” xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Hartcourt Brace, 1982) 140.

. Drought, suffocating heat, withering vegetation, unproductive land, predatory fauna... can all be labelled “demonic imagery,” as described by Frye, of which *WL*<sup>9</sup> partakes:

Here is no water but only rock  
 Rock and no water and the sandy road  
 The road winding above among the mountains  
 Which are mountains of rock without water  
 If there were water we should stop and drink  
 Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
 Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
 If there were only water amongst the rock  
 Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit  
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 (“What the Thunder Said,” ll. 331-342, *WL*)<sup>10</sup>

Rock, sand and lack of water: paradise has become a desert, standing for God’s anger at human sin, for men turning their backs on God, for their frail faith, their spiritual apathy. The desert, or Eliot’s version of it, the Waste Land, is the setting where the poet, immersed in great confusion, timidly begins the purgative process that will cleanse the soul. The symbolism echoes the Israelites’ wandering in the desert, keeping the faith in the face of adversity and eventually settling down in the Promised Land.

This desert and the jungle which surrounds Marlow could be considered demonic counterparts of the biblical garden. The following paragraph (in which words consistent with demonic imagery have been highlighted) is Marlow’s first description of the asphyxiating atmosphere shrouding his steamer, as he sails the African river. The feelings of danger, hopelessness and both physical and psychological oppression are effectively rendered. We believe the passage is one of the peaks of Conrad’s prose, culminating in a memorable phrase that defines the main character’s adventure:

We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of **death** and trade goes on in a **still** and earthy atmosphere as of an **overheated catacomb**; all along the **formless coast** bordered by **dangerous surf**, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, **streams of death in life**, whose banks were **rotting into mud**, whose waters, thickened into slime invaded the **contorted mangroves**, that seemed to **writhe** at us in the extremity of an **impotent despair**. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of **vague and oppressive wonder** grew upon me. It was like **a weary pilgrimage amongst hints of nightmares**. (20, 21)

Passages like this abound in Marlow’s narrative, in which realistic description is often tinged with oniric, surrealist imagery; at one point, the narrator declares: “*We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings;...*” (51). Marlow compares the actual surroundings to the virgin nature that must

<sup>9</sup> The titles of the two works studied may be subsequently abbreviated to *WL* (*The Waste Land*) and *HD* (*Heart of Darkness*).

<sup>10</sup> In our quotations, we indicate section and line numbers. We refer to T.S. Eliot’s *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

have existed before the origins of the human race. Although this image of almighty vegetation cannot be reconciled with man's rule over nature in the garden of Eden, we believe that the lines below, especially the first sentence, are reminiscent of the Creation verses in Genesis:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. (48)

Nature that is out of control or not in harmony with man would also rank as a demonic Eden. Eliot's *WL* alludes to Ecclesiastes, where old age is referred to as "the days of darkness." The Preacher assures his readers that when they grow old, they will perceive their environment as hostile and will obtain no satisfaction from it. In "the Burial of the Dead," the anticipation of a gloomy future is no longer such: the simple present is used, indicating that the reigning disillusionment is here:

<p>... also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail. (Eccles. 12, 5) <sup>11A</sup></p>	<p>What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, You cannot say, or guess, for you know only A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, And the dry stone no sound of water [...] ("The Burial of the Dead," ll. 19-24, <i>WL</i>)</p>
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The imagery of these lines is strikingly similar to that displayed in Marlow's description above, where the general tone and the use of the past tense, as opposed to the future tense in the verses from Ecclesiastes and the present tense in *WL*, gives his words an air of reversed prophecy of the past, as it were. Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness, it would make sense to argue, starts the days of darkness for him: he will not be the same again after his contact with an uninviting nature, after becoming acquainted with Kurtz, whose last words will echo in his mind forever.

Can the adjective "demonic," used by Frye to classify settings such as the ones considered above, be extended to Kurtz, the man who has chosen to establish his kingdom "amongst hints of nightmares?" In the following section, we will attempt to find an answer to this question by looking at several facets of Kurtz's characterisation.

<sup>11A</sup> We quote from the King James Bible (see "Works Cited").

### 3.-KURTZ, OR THE APPEAL OF EVIL

Marlow's encounter with Kurtz, the climax of the novel, is masterly suspended for about two thirds of Conrad's novella. Before meeting him, Marlow can only perceive him as a powerful voice, like God's in Genesis, which completes creation through mere naming. The main narrator suggests that Kurtz owes everything he has achieved to his voice, equally able to communicate the blessing of light or the horrors of darkness:

The man presented himself as a voice ... The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (67, 68)

The richness of the description of Kurtz's voice is indicative of the man's uniqueness, which has charmed Europeans and Africans alike. The Russian boy whom Marlow meets before confronting the fiendish ivory dealer, both fascinated and terrified by the man with the powerful voice, declares that *"He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr Kurtz as you would an ordinary man"* (80). Later in the novel, Marlow refers to Kurtz as *"a remarkable man"* (101); other references to him set his preternatural side into relief: an *"apparition shining darkly far,"* *"an image of death"* (85), a *"shadow"* (92) seen off by his worshippers who, facing the steamer from the shore, *"shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany"* (96).

Kurtz's characterization shows satanic overtones, as the quoted lines exemplify. *"He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land,"* according to Marlow (70). We could say that the myth of the fallen angel is being reworked in a colonial setting: Kurtz comes across as the exemplary tradesman (for European, imperialist, 19<sup>th</sup> century standards, of course) until he rebels extravagantly against the establishment and chooses the way of evil. Although the phrase *"demonic divinity"* may sound like a contradiction in terms, we believe that Kurtz could be referred to as one: he is the king of a parallel realm of horror, a lord of darkness.

Despite the diabolic elements observable in Kurtz's portrayal, his kingdom cannot be flatly identified with hell: it does not exist as the opposite of heaven. We may think of it, from a Judaic / Christian perspective, as one of its degradations—that is precisely what the adjective *"demonic"* hints at. It is clear to Marlow, the only person who has access to Kurtz's soul in the last moment, that the man he is about to face has succeeded in cutting himself off from heaven, hell and even earth. Kurtz, the only guru of his own religion, has come to belong exclusively to darkness and the wilderness; his radical isolation is awe-inspiring:

I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces. (95)

Marlow is deeply fascinated by Kurtz's personality and behaviour. The manager and the other traders, ironically referred to as "the pilgrims" (because of the stakes they always carry around) are no examples of moral righteousness either, and in their jealousy, inefficiency and mediocrity, they are more repulsive to Marlow than the demonic Kurtz. The pilgrims are not in a position to condemn the man whom they envy. Marlow's determination to take sides with Kurtz, to which he repeatedly refers as his "choice of nightmares," follows a tense conversation with the manager:

It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief—positively for relief. "Nevertheless I think Mr Kurtz is a remarkable man," I said with emphasis. He started, dropped on me a cold heavy glance, said very quietly, "He *was*," and turned his back on me. My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped among with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! But it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares. (89)

Interestingly, in an essay on Charles Baudelaire, Eliot had claimed that it is actually preferable to commit oneself to evil, rather than letting life pass by in spiritual apathy, without a solid desire to progress spiritually. He considers the French poet's satanism as "*an attempt to get into Christianity by the back door*" and his blasphemy as "*the product of partial belief*" (337)<sup>11</sup>. Eliot goes on to state that Baudelaire's inability to deal with psychological or emotional pain leads to his close association with it, to his fatal rejoicing in it, even (338, 339)—the same may be said of Kurtz and his commitment to the horror. The choice of damnation strikes Eliot as an escape from materialistic self-satisfaction; it requires braveness and a certain degree of heroism that not everyone can boast:

So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation: it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough for damnation ... In all its humiliating traffic with other beings, he [*Baudelaire*] walked secure in this high vocation, that he was capable of a damnation denied to the politicians and newspaper editors of Paris. (344)

According to Cedric Watts, the paradox of reaching glory through damnation is one of the strongest links between *HD* and Eliot's *WL* and *The Hollow Men* (we will come back to this poem in our conclusion) and would explain the Anglo-American poet's choice of Conradian quotations for these two poems:

The paradox of the virtue of evil, so vividly dramatised in *Heart of Darkness*, was developed further by both T. S. Eliot and Graham Greene. The paradox, which stems both from orthodox Roman Catholic theology and from the Romantic emphasis on the value of intensity, is that it is better to be intensely

<sup>11</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932.



evil than to be mediocre or secularly good. In the intensity of his corruption, Kurtz has a stature denied to the mediocre figures around him. This paradox is at the heart of *The Waste Land*, and Eliot indicated his debt by alluding in the poem to the tale's opening and, more famously, by choosing a passage culminating in Kurtz's words 'The horror!' as the original epigraph to the poem. (172)

This provocative idea is illustrated in "The Burial of the Dead" by the image of a row of London citizens heading for their offices in the City:

Unreal City  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
(“The Burial of the Dead,” ll.60-63, *WL*)

The lines are almost quoted from the third canto of *Inferno*. On trespassing the gate of Hell, Dante is confronted with the poignant misery of “the neutrals,” those “*che visser senza infamia e senza lodo*” (*Inf.* III. 1.36)<sup>12</sup>, those who lived without disgrace and without praise. The procession of these modern neutrals is set in the “Unreal City,” so called, as Eliot indicates in one of his notes, after Baudelaire's “*Fourmillante cité*,” the setting for one of the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

In our opinion, this City inhabited by living people whom the poet considers to be spiritually dead, bears striking resemblance with the city where Marlow sorts matters out before setting off and where he comes back as a messenger to Kurtz's Intended. Given the strong autobiographical content of *Heart of Darkness*, we may assume that the real city behind the one described is Brussels, where the headquarters of most trading companies exploiting the Belgian Congo were located, at the time when Conrad entered the business. “*I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre*” (14), we read at the beginning of the novel. Towards its conclusion, and although Kurtz's last words have shocked Marlow numb, city life is almost painful to him in all its emptiness. He feels like an intruder among ghosts (or rather, he feels like a ghost himself, ensnared in “real” life); ghosts that could be compared to the neutrals in Dante's *Inferno* or the dwellers of Eliot's Unreal City:

I found myself back 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. (102)

This is the effect of Kurtz's last words on Marlow. As we have explained, he is given the responsibility to remove from the jungle the man who is challenging the trading companies' control over it, under the pretext that his health is poor and he needs medical attention. On his deathbed, in Marlow's cabin, Kurtz seems to become fully aware of his immorality, both as part of the colonialist system and as an outsider of it and exclaims “The horror! The Horror!” His final exclamation encapsulates both the

<sup>12</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. I: Inferno*. Biling. ed., ed. and trans. John D. Sinclair. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.

atrocities of colonial advances (in which he has played a prominent role) and his unexpected answer to them as self-deification and tyranny—the most shocking image of his cruelty being his use of natives' heads to mark the bounds of his home in the jungle. After witnessing Kurtz die, Marlow wonders:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,—he cried out at twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—  
'The horror! The horror!' (99, 100)

It is well known that Eliot had decided to use these lines as an introductory quotation to *The Waste Land*. We will now look into the reasons for his choice and explain why the poet finally changed his mind.

#### 4.-THE STORY OF A CITATION

Eliot was convinced that the lines from *HD* captured to perfection the spirit of his poem, i.e. the lucid recognition that a corrupt environment can offer no hope and must therefore be transcended. The American poet Ezra Pound had been Eliot's mentor since the latter's arrival in London and had edited most of his early production. Valerie Eliot's facsimile edition of the poem contains Pound's annotations, as well as his lines crossing whole stanzas out.

Pound did not approve of Eliot's choice of Conrad's prose to open such an ambitious poem and, in a letter dated 24 December 1920, he suggests a graver, perhaps classical allusion: "*I doubt if Conrad is weighty enough to stand the citation*"<sup>13</sup>. In his response to this letter, one month later, Eliot shows a certain reluctance to do away with his original citation: "*Do you mean not use Conrad quot. or simply not put Conrad's name to it? It is much the most appropriate I can find, and somewhat elucidative*" (504). Finally, Pound, who had ironised about the original poem's length and had caused it to be considerably shorter, seems to give in about Conrad:

Do as you like about my obstetric effort.  
Ditto re de Conrad; who am I to grudge him his laurel crown. (505)

This reply seemed to settle the question; nevertheless, the text of the first edition of *WL* is preceded by the Sybil's lament over her immortality, taken from Petronius' *Satyricon*:

Nam Sybillam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω.

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<sup>13</sup> Valerie Eliot, ed. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot. Volume I (1898-1922)* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) 497.

<sup>14</sup> *For once I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her "Sibyl, what do you want?" she replied "I want to die."* This translation is provided as a footnote in the edition of *The Waste Land* contained in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Volume 2*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994) 1270. The translation of "ampulla" ("bottle") as "cage" is rather surprising.

The Sybils were oracle priestesses, and the Sybil of Cumae was the most popular. Apollo granted her immortality in exchange for her virginity, but the god's love being later unrequited, he deprived her of perpetual youth. She grew ever smaller, shrank to the size of a cicada and was shown around inside a bottle—that is how Trimalcyon, the character who speaks the lines chosen by Eliot, saw her<sup>15</sup>. In the fourteenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Cumean Sybil tells Aeneas her story: she took a handful of sand and asked Apollo/Phoebus to let her live for as many years as sand grains her hand could hold, not thinking that the god's gift would not prevent her from ageing. The Sybil assures Aeneas that she has lived for seven hundred years and that her lifetime will in fact be a millennium<sup>16</sup>.

The Sybil's tiredness of a life that offers no satisfaction makes her wish for death. For both Kurtz and the Sybil, death means the end to their respective horrors, so it could be argued that the two citations are equivalent, in terms of their content at least; not so in terms of the poem's reception: Harriet Davidson has noted that the change of citation reinforced Eliot's reputation as an intellectual, scholarly author:

More than accessibility was lost with the decision to begin with Petronius rather than Conrad. The change suppresses Eliot's appreciation of his contemporaries, instead impressing upon the reader the seriousness of classical scholarship.<sup>17</sup>

In any case, both epigraphs allow for a mystic reading of the poem: moral degradation (the Sybil's greedy vanity, her attempt to deceive the gods; the horror that upsets Kurtz at the moment of his death and finally, its modern version oppressing the poet in *WL*) surrounds us, permeates our souls and must be counteracted through purgation, at the end of which (symbolic) death makes spiritual rebirth possible.

So this is the story of Eliot's frustrated reference to Conrad. Even though the poem was published without it, despite Eliot's conviction that it was becoming and in tune with his poem's content, we hope to have proved up to this point that the poem's general atmosphere still alludes tacitly to Conrad's work.

## 5.-FULL ALLUSIVE CIRCLE: APOCALYPSE NOW

In 1925 Eliot published *The Hollow Men*, a poem close to *WL* in its thematic core; the essence of the former poem is in it, but it lacks its multiple allusions and complex imagery. These hollow men could be considered the 20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts of Dante's neutrals: a group of voices (the first person plural is used) who address a reader/listener/witness and display their sheer spiritual void.

Unlike the *WL*, *The Hollow Men* does have an epigraph from Conrad's *HD*: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead" (100), spoken by the general manager's impudent assistant. This single line, in all its simplicity,

<sup>15</sup> Julio Picasso, ed. and trans. "Índice de lugares y de personajes históricos y mitológicos," *El Satiricón* (Madrid: Cátedra Letras Universales, 1991) 293, 294.

<sup>16</sup> See Book XIV, ll. 101-153. Ovidio Nasón, *Metamorfosis III* (Salamanca: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1994) 130-132.

<sup>17</sup> Harriet Davidson, "Improper desire: reading *The Waste Land*," *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. A. DAVID MOODY (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 122.

emphasises the view of death as a means to transcend the horror maintained by the hollow men. Kurtz is not one of them: it is precisely hollow men (the pilgrims, the men at the Central Station) whom he abhors. Marlow is especially hard on the aristocratic agent whose prospects to promote have been frustrated by Kurtz's arrival and dazzling success as an agent. As an embodiment of evil, he is grotesque and ridiculous, compared to Kurtz; this agent is a genuine hollow man:

I let him run on, this papier-maché Mephistopheles, and it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my finger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe... (37)

In the end, Eliot's wish to allude to *HD* prevailed. We would also like to consider briefly Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the skilful transposition of Marlow's odyssey to the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the film's Kurtz is an American general who, after a brilliant performance in several campaigns of the Vietnam war, has decided to ignore orders from his superiors and has settled down in Cambodia among the natives, who adore him as their god. Several missions have been planned in order to kill Kurtz—Captain Willard (Marlow in *HD*) is in charge of the one that will succeed.

It is obvious that Coppola was fully aware of the implicit reference in *WL* and the explicit one in *The Hollow Men*. Towards the end of the film, after Willard has found Kurtz, we hear the latter reciting Eliot's verse:

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;  
[...] <sup>18</sup>

In another scene, we are shown Kurtz's chamber and his possessions: among them, the two books that most influenced Eliot's major poem: Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Eliot begins his "Notes on The Waste Land" by explicitly acknowledging their influence:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie Weston's book on the Grail legend:

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 79.

*From Ritual to Romance* ...To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough*; ...<sup>19</sup>

In initially choosing the climax of Conrad's novella as the opening of his poem, Eliot was equating two horrors that emanate from two different sources and that, as we have pointed out at the beginning, can be easily associated with two specific historic moments: the sheer injustice of the imperialist world, which destroyed many people's lives, on the one hand, and what we could call "spiritual barrenness," on the other, intensified by a warring aggressive world that has become a prey to radical materialism.

Kurtz's reaction was to answer horror with horror; to be master of his own horror, rather than being an accomplice of the anonymous "mainstream" horror. Eliot's *The Waste Land* represents the opposite reaction: the moment we become aware of the horror is the starting point for spiritual purgation, a central and structuring idea in Eliot's work: "*The rite of The Waste Land is one to save the self alone from an alien world*" (Moody 111).

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<sup>19</sup> Eliot, "Notes on *The Waste Land*," *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 70.

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