

Literature and myth.

A Bachofen-inspired reading

of Heart of Darkness

Giampiero Moretti*

ABSTRACT

The contribution examines *Heart of Darkness*, the famous novella by Joseph Conrad. Its interpretive key, however, does not lie in biographical or historical-literary reconstructions, nor in criticism in the strict sense, but rather in reference to what we may call the hidden substrata of the text, namely, the relationship, as manifold as it is secret, between literature and mythology, or, more precisely, between literature and symbol.

What emerges is an unprecedented portrait of Conrad's writing, marked by very distant "sources": not a direct influence, but an inevitable inspiration for what we may call "great literature", such as Conrad's novella itself. In particular, aspects of the works of Friedrich Creuzer (1819) and Johann Jakob Bachofen (1861) are analyzed in order to illuminate fundamental passages of *Heart of Darkness* that have often been overlooked.

KEYWORDS

Josef Conrad; Heart of Darkness; symbol; mythology; Johann J. Bachofen

The journey we are about to undertake requires a short premise, both theoretical and historical-critical, regarding the terms *literature* and *myth* which are intended here in a way that may not be common in our disciplines. As an example, it is difficult to fully appreciate the term *myth* if we neglect its correlation with the term *symbol*, especially according to the meaning Georg Friedrich Creuzer, the romantic historian of religions, assigned to the word in 1810. According to Creuzer *myth* manifests itself as the narrative articulation of the symbol. Bachofen, the prominent theorist of myth whose work we are now recalling, synthesizes the question in an exemplary way (1859): «...myth is the exegesis of symbol» (Bachofen [1859] 1954, p. 61).

If myth is the «exegesis of symbol» in the sense that myth articulates in poetic prose the symbol's austere silence and its enigmatic and emblematic nature, literature becomes the tendentially coherent

* Università di Napoli L'Orientale, gmoretti@unior.it.

and unitary narration of that fundamental and distinctive divine trace inherent in the symbol. That trace is certainly swathed in irrationality, fantasy and references to the natural-perceptible world, and yet it is never limited to its own self, but rather enters a dimension where, through the word, the meaning suddenly appears in a burst of bright light. In the words of Walter Friedrich Otto,

...from the inception and in the most ancient language, myth signifies in an absolute manner the word of what has happened or is about to happen, the word that relates the facts, and that must become fact by virtue of it being uttered, the normative word (Otto 1962, p. 268).

In Conrad's narrative, we frequently find the powerful sudden appearance of the symbolic-divine trait capable of shattering the traditional wall of the metaphor in order to – narratively and without human opposition – refer to myth's originary dimension. This has often given rise to the misunderstanding – in fact, the misconception – that his were adventure novels, abounding with metaphors and with the conversion of cultural and ideological events into images; informed by a specific narrative technique. This has happened to such an extent that the evocative power (hence intensely mythical-symbolical) of his *descriptive* style has often been mistaken for a tedious depiction and/or enumeration of objects, events, landscapes, and of dead or living things; in brief, of surfaces. To the contrary, what is construed as repetitive is instead deeply rooted in the cultural rituality of the magical-evocative formula, in the feeling of awe that the ritual awakens both in the officiant and the participant, and certainly not in an abstract and obsessive punctiliousness. Conrad's preoccupation with detail derives from a rituality rooted in his fear of forgetting any of the many mysterious mythical powers involved in his evocative narrative. The latter becomes literarily effective only on account of it being *rigorous* since, as the priest officiates the ritual (Conrad himself) under the auspices of the gods, he prevents not only himself but also his readers from committing careless omissions. In so doing he is also protecting his own artistic vein and therefore his *creature*: the novella. As he re-accesses myth through his narration, Marlowe's interpretive suggestions became increasingly relevant: «the meaning of an episode was not inside [...] but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze» (Conrad [1899], 1981, p. 8.). The meaning lies there, on the outside, in the world, by the silent and highly symbolic voice of the world, and of its divine secret profundities.

In 1861 Johann Jacob Bachofen, published his most famous work, *Mother Right* (Conrad [1899], 1981, p. 8). This work contains a mythical-symbolical interpretation of antiquity, and specifically the reliance on the element that is inherent in myth, can recreate this configuration, which Bachofen defines with concepts such as etherism, gynecocracy, amazonism, and dionysism. In his opinion, even though its roots can be found in any mythical trace, this reading refers to the interpretation of a constant and universal hope of eternal life that transcends both the life and the becoming represented by the circularity of the natural progression. He speculates that this hope, which the Ancients expressed in all their manifestations, either symbolical or mythical, had been fostered first by the women and then entrusted to the sensitive-feminine side of existence in the patriarchal age.

The connection between *Heart of Darkness* and Bachofen manifests itself in the matriarchal-etheric phenomenon which acts as the focal point for the many unexpected meanings of this extraordinary novella. Of these, the *forest* and the primitive and wild space-time that the civilized Kurtz penetrates and is ultimately swallowed by, provide the most significant. Bachofen's swamp and the forest, the *wilderness land*, Conrad's «great wall of vegetation», are nearly parallel and represent two extremes that clash, respectively, with the *superior* gynecocratic (and even more with the Hellenic-Apollonian) religiosity and with the *civilization* that Kurtz embodies. The main characteristic of the so-called traces of myth is almost certainly their extraordinary mimetic nature, their capacity to ensconce themselves in what seem to be literary recurrences. In reality, they convey a profound and often mythical-symbolical meaning under the innocuous semblance of a *motive*. In the first place, the forest seems still and soundless. Its silent life looks motionless and yet it expresses itself through an incessant production. Although destined to death and decay, this engendering transforms the undergrowth into the marsh from where the vegetation emerges and rises over the remnants of what has been generated and has the forlorn hope of conquering the light. Conrad writes:

The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not (Conrad [1899], 1981, p. 43).

The voice of the forest has no language or articulated, comprehensible, and communicable sounds. Rather, it appears as a

non-language, as pure sound-noise which *speaks* but does so holding its breath. However, there is at least one other significant passage in which the jungle itself seems to speak:

Going up that river was like traveling 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 sand-banks 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 – faraway – in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect (Ivi, pp. 48-49).

The land is completely self-reliant. It does not require the intrusive presence (Conrad talks a couple of times of a *fantastic invasion*) of a temporally different, conscious, and articulated *other*. The forest is devoid of time because – as symbol – has been the one to engender it. Contrary to what many critics would like us to believe, in this surreal and absurd intrusion and in the retaliation that ensues, the dominant topic is not the indisputable plundering of the earth's riches by a violent and arrogant colonialism. Quite the reverse, there is a compelling feeling that the fulfilled and autonomous religious-cultural system has been sacrilegiously and recklessly assaulted. In their modern and implicitly demythologized belief that they can simply trespass into a space ripe for exploitation, the intruders have irresponsibly invaded a time that does not belong to them, but to the symbol, as if the space they have violated was shielding an indifferent temporality, because essentially different. Hence, this conveys to the reader the feeling that such distinction safeguards not only the indigenous people, but also the invaders. More specifically, the natives are shielded from the material consequences of time, just as the invaders are shielded from the spiritual ones. Once the spatial-temporal spell is broken, the desecration demands Kurtz's sacrifice – the sacrifice of the perpetrator-redeemer. While the invaders' trespassing is only outwardly spatial, it is in fact temporal. The brilliance of the forest-swamp does not communicate tranquility and appears as a frustrated *Apollonian trait*: it is a full-fledged Dionysian light that resides in a temporality to which

it does not belong for it does not conform to it other than as an ominous and unsettling premonition. This uneasy state of mind affects all the protagonists, including the forest itself.

In fact, the civilizing mission Kurtz has undertaken reveals itself as primarily religious and mythical-symbolical when we ascribe it to the perspective outlined by Bachofen. Kurtz believes himself to be an Apollonian hero, an orphic seaman, a true argonaut who assumes the mission of rescuing the forest from pain (and its inhabitants, just like the vegetation that comprises it), and redeeming it from despair. This mission is too overt and announced to be simply ironic, absurd, or deceitful. Conrad is not speaking by metaphors: Kurtz is absolutely convinced to have been summoned by an actual cry that he has not only heard, but also understood. However, only the purity of the Apollonian hero could have ensured that what was in danger of appearing as an absurd invasion and a sacrilege (the forest perceives it as such) could instead become redemption, the collective and true delivery of hope and salvation. But is Kurtz *pure*? This is the last act of the *tragedy*. Kurtz is not pure, on the contrary, he is *hollow*. Inside this emptiness, he is at the mercy of that which he wanted to save and redeem. «He is hollow» Conrad writes. Kurtz is hollow, empty, his articulated and structured time is powerless against the symbolic time of an origin that swallows him. This is what the wild land has whispered in his ears. The forest has whispered to Kurtz their closeness, their virtual interchangeability, their likeness. The solar Apollonian hero distinguishes and conquers and, as he does so, he preserves the temporal leap. Kurtz, whose rituals Conrad only mysteriously hints to in his novella, morphs from a self-proclaimed Apollonian hero to a Dionysian hero. His *luminosity* gradually wanes until it completely vanishes perhaps because of the Dionysian presumption that he can approach the light without a gynocratic transition – that of the apparently unconstrained methodical cultivation-distinction of the land. The temporal leap is decidedly repelled and so is the invasion. The forest reclaims its independence from time.

Later on, Conrad focuses on the manifestation, the apparition of the bond between the woman and the forest appears as a splendid and wild image which materializes before Marlow on the shore. In that image, Conrad continues, the earth, wild but dejected, «seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul» (Ivi, p. 87). The forest, the desolate and desperate land seemed to find its own image in the woman. Time and the absence of time, the origin of time, hopelessly collide and the impact is devastating. Kurtz, the new Argonaut,

wanted to offer hope to the darkness but the latter has sinuously revealed to him his own hollowness and emptiness in a manner that seems almost compassionate.

Thus, Kurtz has fallen. His role as a quasi-Apollo has been reduced to that of a defeated Dionysius until he is ultimately swallowed by the vortex of *indistinction*. This is Kurtz's destiny: to offer the forest and the swamp the means to begin the process of distinction and the prerogative and hope that ensue by overcoming violence and the reliance on brute force. However, Kurtz eventually realizes that his own hollowness has destined him to become desperately close to the forest-swamp. Why? The symbolic absence of time and the time divested of mythological form come into conflict because of the impossibility of mediation. In the age of myth, these epics frequently depicted the rise and fall of heroes. Contrary to what he believed, Kurtz was not initiated into the Mysteries, but most importantly, are Mysteries still in existence? Conrad's story becomes the narrative space for a mediation with the origin. He accomplishes this by relying upon the time of the story, so similar and yet so different than that of myth.

If we assume that literature embraces the witness of the mythical-symbolic narration, as in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, then we are in the presence of a noteworthy outcome. The novella appears as a unique, gigantic imaginary sarcophagus, decorated with the tales of Kurtz's life and adventures. More and more often the author, the narrator, is called to speak as he navigates a de-structured and shifting horizon that at times appears and then vanishes. This horizon, whose existence is even questioned, can, at most, generate effective metaphors. On the eve of the twentieth century and despite being caught in a similar fluctuation, which he wholeheartedly advocated, Conrad has proven himself worthy of the creators of the most enigmatic ancient sepulchers.

References

- Bachofen J.J., *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten*, (1859), in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4, Basel 1954.
Bachofen J.J., *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*, Stuttgart 1861.
Conrad J., *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Middlesex 1981.
Creuzer F., *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker I. Allgemeine Beschreibung des symbolischen und mythischen Kreises*, Leipzig 1810-19.
Otto W.F., *Der Mythos*, in *Mythos und Welt*, Stuttgart 1962.