

THE SINISTER ORACLE. JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS* AND VIRGIL'S *AENEID*

Joanna Pyplacz

The Jagiellonian Library

Abstract: The aim of this article is to re-examine the links between *Heart of Darkness* and the *Aeneid*—the Latin epic which is already known to have served as the main hypotext for Joseph Conrad's novella. The transformation of several important motifs—such as those of the sacrifice, white worsted, the ivory gate and, finally, that of the prophetic voice—reveals that Conrad has shifted the focal point of Virgil's dark tale, placing the figure of the Oracle—who has been disguised and transformed in a highly sophisticated manner—to its very centre.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness*, *Aeneid*, Conrad, Virgil, oracle, Sibyl, Kurtz, *katabasis*, death, night

Duc nigras pecudes; ea prima piacula sunt.
(Lead black cattle; be these your first peace offerings.)

Virgil (*Aen.* 6. 153)

Thanks to the education he received in the years of his youth—first at home and then in one of Cracow's best grammar schools (which happened to excel in the teaching of Greek and Latin)—Joseph Conrad was familiar not only with these two ancient languages, but also with the greatest works of classical literature.¹ These included the works of authors such as Julius Caesar, whose military expedition to Britain is recalled by Marlow at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*.²

This reference to the Roman colonisation of the British Isles is much more than a merely aesthetic device that is designed to shroud the novella's introduction in an eerie atmosphere. It is loaded with historical meaning, carrying a parallel that cannot be ignored. Like Marlow's own account of the events in the Congo, the first chapter of Caesar's *Bellum Britannicum* tells the story of the subjugation of a nation of savages by a supposedly superior nation of civilized (and civilizing) conquerors.

¹ Cf. "An Interview with J. Conrad" [in:] *Conrad Under Familial Eyes*, eds. Z. Najder, H. Carroll-Najder, Cambridge-London-New York-New Rochelle-Melbourne-Sydney: Cambridge UP, 1983, pp. 196-200, at 198.

² The story based on Conrad's journey to the Congo in 1890. Cf. J. Conrad, *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces*, ed. and comments by Z. Najder, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1978.

Being familiar with the masterpieces of Greek and Latin literature,³ Conrad skillfully uses well-known classical motifs in order to convey messages which he does not need (or perhaps even does not wish) to express in a more direct manner. Apart from the initial reference to Roman history, he also makes frequent allusions to Roman mythology – and so to Roman literature.

Scholars have noted that *Heart of Darkness* also alludes to the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*—which the author read as a schoolboy⁴—as well as to the ninth book of *The Odyssey*, both of which contain accounts of descents into the Underworld.⁵ Numerous allusions to these two hypotexts (and to the Roman one in particular) have already been discovered and analysed. The most spectacular of these allusions would seem to be Marlow's encounter with two women knitting black wool,⁶ which quite obviously hints at Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁷

Progeniem sed enim Troiano a sanguine duci
audierat, Tyrias olim quae verteret arces;
hinc populum late regem belloque superbum
venturum excidio Libyae: sic volvere Parcas.

(Verg. *Aen.* 1, 19-22)

Yet in truth she had heard that a race was springing from Trojan blood, to overthrow some day the Tyrian towers; that from it a people, kings of broad realms and proud in war, should come forth for Libya's downfall: so rolled the wheel of fate.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)⁸

The Fates—known in Rome as *Parcae* and in Greece as *Moirai*—were believed to weave the threads of the lives of individual human beings as well as those of entire peoples. In the passage quoted above, they predict the destruction of Libya (during the Punic Wars) by the descendants of Aeneas, the Trojan hero who—after the burning down of his native city—travels to Italy, which he and his fellow Trojans subse-

³ Cf. K. Kosek, "Wpływ polskiej szkoły galicyjskiej (1868-1874) na umysłowość i kulturę literacką Josepha Conrada", *Rocznik Komisji Historycznoliterackiej* 1988, no. 25, pp. 49-82, at 57.

⁴ Cf. D. W. Tutein, *Joseph Conrad's Reading: An Annotated Biography*, Bruington, VA: Locust Hill Press, 1990, p. 101.

⁵ Cf. L. Feder, "Marlow's Descent into Hell", *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 9, no. 4 (Mar., 1955), pp. 280-292, *passim*; M. Kumar Ray, *Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006, p. 58; T. Bowers, "Conrad's 'Aeneid': 'Heart of Darkness' and the Classical Epic", *Conradiana* 2006, no. 38 (2), pp. 115-142.

⁶ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, ed. G. M. Moore, Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1999, p. 37.

⁷ Cf. L. Schnauder, *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*, Amsterdam & New York: Brill, 2009, p. 115; J. Conrad, *Youth; Heart of Darkness; The End of the Tether*, ed. O. Knowles, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010, p. 443; C. Watts, *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': A Critical and Contextual Discussion*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2012, p. 45.

⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid: Books 1-6*, transl. H. Rushton Fairclough, revised G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1916.

quently colonise.⁹ Indeed, the main subject of the *Aeneid* is the colonisation of Italy, i.e. the subjugation of its native tribes by invaders from Asia.

The context of this second allusion also suggests that colonies and conquest are the main theme of *Heart of Darkness*, as well as revealing Conrad's particular way of conveying his message. Here again, the writer winks to his audience, having addressed his novella to a model reader,¹⁰ who—like him—would have been familiar with all the ancient and modern hypotexts and would immediately have recognized motifs such as that of the two women who are knitting (which, may we add, also brings to mind Madame Defarge—Charles Dickens's sinister personification of social retribution in *The Tale of Two Cities*).¹¹ However, it would seem that the *Aeneid* has inspired *Heart of Darkness* to a much greater extent than any other work of literature. The studies of Cedric Watts¹² and Terence Bowers¹³ have shown just how much Conrad's novella owes to the Latin epic, both on a historiosophical level and on a purely literary level. The very title and main theme of the novella mirrors one of the great (if not the greatest) themes of the *Aeneid*, as Virgil is known for his remarkable ability to depict various shades of darkness.¹⁴

A close reading of *Heart of Darkness* brings further surprising results. It transpires that yet another possible allusion appears in the scene in which Marlow is shown a sombre oil painting which was made by Kurtz himself during the time he spent at the Central Station. Even at a first glance, the subject of this painting recalls motifs from Roman literature:

Then I noticed 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 torchlight on the face was sinister. "It arrested me, and he stood by civilly, holding an empty half-pint champagne bottle (medical comforts) with the candle stuck in it. To my question he said Mr. Kurtz had painted this—in this very station more than a year ago — while waiting for means to go to his trading post. 'Tell me, pray,' said I, 'who is this Mr. Kurtz?'"¹⁵

Scholars have tried to identify this mysterious figure and have suggested that she might have been modelled on the woman in Baudelaire's poem entitled *Le Cygne*.¹⁶

⁹ K. F. B. Fletcher, *Finding Italy: Travel, Nation and Colonisation in Vergil's 'Aeneid'*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 70.

¹⁰ U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979, p. 7ff.

¹¹ Cf. C. Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*

¹³ Cf. T. Bowers, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Cf.: *The Darkness without and within, the big darkness and the small—Vergil has found ways of imagining them; darkness, all kinds of darkness, is finally made visible. And the boundaries of poetry are extended immeasurably.* (W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's 'Aeneid'*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 99).

¹⁵ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁶ Cf. L. Schneider, *Conrad's Narratives of Difference: Not Exactly Tales for Boys*, New York & London: Routledge, 2003, p. 125.

However, she may just as well have had her origins in classical tradition. In Mediterranean iconography, a sombre woman carrying a torch was the traditional representation of Allecto—one of the Graeco-Roman goddesses of vengeance, who in Greece were known as the Erinyes and in Rome as the Furies.

In the *Aeneid*, it is Allecto who—at Juno’s command—aggravates the conflict between the Latins and the Trojans, which in turn leads to a cruel war between these two nations: the future conquerors and the future conquered. The dark background against which Kurtz has set his imaginary model might be a subtle allusion to the popular representations of Allecto on ancient Greek red figure pottery. Interestingly, Virgil’s description of the Fury is not unlike Marlow’s brief *ekphrasis* of the woman depicted in Kurtz’s weird painting:

Sic effata facem iuveni coniecit et atro
lumine fumantis fixit sub pectore taedas.

(Verg., *Aen.* 7. 456-457)

So saying, she hurled at the youth a torch, and fixed in his breast the brand, smoking with lurid light.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

In the first part of the novella there is yet another interesting scene that—viewed in the light of classical tradition—might have been rooted in Conrad’s readings of Latin texts when he was a schoolboy. This scene has perplexed scholars for many years and has been the subject of many discussions, none of which have so far yielded a satisfactory conclusion. The scene in question is, of course, Marlow’s meeting with a dying man—one of the black workers who have been enslaved and are being exploited by their Belgian overseers.

The telling detail which immediately arouses strong Antiquity-related suspicions is the white worsted tied around the young man’s neck:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it’s hard to tell. I found nothing else to do but to offer him one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket. The fingers closed slowly on it and held—there was no other movement and no other glance. He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.¹⁷

¹⁷ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

The whole depiction of the young man's emaciated body decorated with this quite peculiar ornament brings to mind the sacrificial animals which are often mentioned in classical literature. The *Aeneid* itself contains more than one passage in which a black sheep is offered to the gods of the Underworld. In the third book, for example, the Trojans sacrifice a black animal¹⁸ to the Earth and a white animal to the Winds:

Sic fatus meritos aris mactavit honores,
taurum Neptuno, taurum tibi, pulcher Apollo,
nigram Hiemi pecudem, Zephyris felicibus albam.

(Verg. *Aen.* 3, 118-120).

So he spoke, and on the altars slew the sacrifices due, a bull to Neptune, a bull to you, fair Apollo, a black sheep to the storm god, a white to the favouring Zephyrs.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, however, it is Aeneas himself who offers a black sheep to the Night deity:

[...] Ipse atri velleris agnam
Aeneas matri Eumenidum magnaenque sorori
ense ferit [...].

(Verg. *Aen.* 6. 249-251)

Aeneas himself slays with the sword a black-fleeced lamb to the mother.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

To a Conrad scholar—or at least to a reader who is familiar enough with this particular passage of Conrad's novella to be able to recognize the intertextual allusion which it contains—these lines are quite illuminating, as they offer a simple explanation of the mysterious and (dare I say) significant detail that has perplexed scholars for so many years: the dying young black man with a piece of white wool tied round his neck functions as a symbolic image of the sacrificial animal of classical literature—a black sheep offered to the Night deity, i.e. to Darkness. Indeed, the motif of the black animal is also more literally present in *Heart of Darkness*. The last words of Kurtz's report to the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs—"Exterminate all the brutes!"—are a direct reference to the black inhabitants of the Congo, who are to be 'sacrificed' like animals. The Latin word *pecus* used in the passage from the third book of the *Aeneid* has—in this context—exactly the same meaning as the word *brute* in English.¹⁹

Kurtz's exclamation also brings to mind the *Aeneid*, as it is a recognizable paraphrase of the words spoken by the Sibyl to *Aeneas* just before his descent into the Underworld:

¹⁸ The word *pecus* may refer to a sheep, goat or cow.

¹⁹ According to one of the best and most complete Latin dictionaries, i.e. that of Egidio Forcellini: Angl. *A beast, brute animal*. Cf. E. Forcellini, *Totius Latinitatis lexicon*, Londini 1828, vol. 2, p. 111.

Duc nigras pecudes; ea prima piacula sunt.
Sic demum lucos Stygis et regna in via vivis
aspicies.” dixit, pressoque obmutuit ore.

(Verg. *Aen.* 6. 153-155)

Lead black cattle; be these your first peace offerings. Only so will you survey the Stygian groves and realms the living may not tread.” She spoke, and with closed lips was silent.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

In the *Aeneid* there is yet another passage which—as it contains the motif of a white headband²⁰—may also cast some light on the passage in which Marlow meets the dying young black man:

Hic manus ob patriam pugnando vulnera passi,
quique sacerdotes casti, dum vita manebat,
quique pii vates et Phoebos digna locuti,
inventas aut qui vitam excoluere per artis
quique sui memores aliquos fecere merendo:
omnibus his nivea cinguntur tempora vitta.

(Verg. *Aen.* 6.660-665)

²⁰ Momentarily leaving aside the context of classical literature, with which a great many of Conrad’s first English-speaking readers would have been quite familiar, we cannot but remark that the manner in which Conrad writes about the intriguing piece of white cloth “from beyond the seas” which the dying black man wears around his neck is itself more than a little intriguing in that it well-nigh urges us to “look for the hidden symbols”. It is as if Conrad were challenging his readers to solve a puzzle:

“He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck—Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.”

Although Conrad was certainly not writing for the Polish reading public and—while working on *Heart of Darkness*, at least—he could hardly have imagined his prose being read by Poles (even in translation), he himself was necessarily the first reader of his work (his English wife Jessie being the second) and he of all people could not have been unaware that this piece of white cloth tied round the black man’s neck was a fairly obvious allusion to the quite peculiar (if not ‘startling’) Nałęcz coat of arms—a knotted piece of white cloth in a field of red—which was that of the Polish noble family to which he belonged and of which he was proud (indeed, he later declined the offer of a British knighthood on the grounds that he was already of noble birth).

Contemplating the dying African in his imagination, Conrad may well have reflected on the fact that—as a Pole—he himself was all too familiar with the woes of foreign subjugation. Had he not left his homeland as a seventeen-year-old, he would almost certainly have been conscripted for a long spell of harrowing service in the Russian army, as he was the child of a patriotic couple who had been convicted for their patriotic activities by a tsarist court. During the nineteenth century, Poles habitually spoke of the ‘enslavement’ of their nation, which Polish Romantic authors often compared to that of the ancient (and also contemporary) Greeks. Taking pity on the black man, Conrad’s narrator (i.e. Marlow) gives him one of his ship’s biscuits. Conrad himself, however—in a purely private capacity and moved, perhaps, by a momentary impulse of solidarity that would certainly have escaped his English readers—gives the African nothing less than his own identity, symbolised by that knotted piece of white cloth (which itself commemorated an act of royal solicitude for soldiers wounded on the battlefield).

Here is the band of those who suffered wounds, fighting for their country; those who in lifetime were priests and pure, good bards, whose songs were meet for Phoebus; or they who ennobled life by arts discovered and they who by service have won remembrance among men—the brows of all bound with headbands white as snow.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

Significantly, the three motifs of *katabasis*, the black sacrificial animal and the white adornment are all connected with entry into the Underworld and with the Sibyl who supervises Aeneas's descent. This prophetess is also the person who instructs the Trojan hero on animal sacrifice, which places her nearer to Kurtz than (as Lillian Feder argues) to the two 'Parcae' who are knitting.²¹

The two women do indeed *guard the way to hell*,²² but it is actually Kurtz himself who—just like the Virgilian Sibyl who resides in Cumae in Italy (i.e. in the land which was to be conquered by Aeneas's descendants) and unlike the two women who are knitting—resides *in situ*, i.e. in the Congo, guarding the all too real entrance to hell (as Feder herself observes: *finally hell and the Congo are equated*).²³ Moreover, it would seem that it is not the silent women, but Kurtz, who—using his extraordinary charisma (another Sibylline feature of Conrad's anti-hero)—acts as a spiritual guide whose words are to be heeded like those of an oracle.

Kurtz's residence itself—described as being almost completely ruined and practically windowless (*with three little square window-holes, no two of the same size*)—is eerily reminiscent of a cave—perhaps the Sibyl's cave which Aeneas enters in order to talk to the prophetess. The strange 'knobs' impaled on wooden stakes around Kurtz's house might be an allusion to the fourteen animals (seven young bulls and seven sheep) sacrificed by Aeneas at the behest of the priestess Deiphobe (who guards the Sibyl's cave) just before the Sibyl enters into her prophetic trance (Verg. *Aen.* 6. 38-39). Deiphobe herself would seem to have a male counterpart in the person of Kurtz's 'last disciple', i.e. the young and frightened Russian sailor to whom Marlow gives the nickname "The Harlequin" and who functions as a strange kind of priest in the novella. Tellingly, Conrad describes him as being the son of an arch-priest (*Russian ... son of an arch-priest*).

The Harlequin's servile attitude to his master—whom he practically treats like a divine being (Kurtz's house resembling a terrifying sanctuary)—places him in exactly the same position which Deiphobe holds in the *Aeneid*: he is the servant of a 'prophet'. Indeed, in ancient Greek the name Deiphobe means 'there is need to be afraid' (δεῖ + φοβώμαι)—and the Harlequin fears Kurtz as if he really were a supernatural being.²⁴ His fears are not unfounded, however, as from his abundant discourse we learn that Kurtz once tried to shoot him when he was in a rage.

²¹ Cf. L. Feder, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

²² Cf. *ibid.*

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 285.

²⁴ Cf. D. Galef, "On the Margin: The Peripheral Characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Summer, 1990), pp. 117-138, at 128.

On entering the cave, Aeneas and his men do not see the Sibyl, but only hear her mighty voice, which comes echoing from within the rock face:

Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum,
quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum,
unde ruunt totidem voces, responsa Sibyllae.

(Verg. *Aen.* 6. 42-44)

The huge side of the Euboian rock is hewn into a cavern, into which lead a hundred wide mouths, a hundred gateways, from which rush as many voices, the answers of the Sibyl.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

A very similar thing happens to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. He does not enter Kurtz's house—he merely hears the *deep voice* of its occupant peering at him through a field glass as he sits up on his stretcher.²⁵ Thus, he reinforces the previous portrayal of Kurtz as a voice (*I didn't say to myself, 'Now I will never see him,' or 'Now I will never shake him by the hand,' but, 'Now I will never hear him.' The man presented himself as a voice*).²⁶ The voice of the prophetess conveys the words of Apollo, whereas that of Kurtz merely conveys his own words, which in turn reflect the mentality of the European colonisers. As Marlow observes: *All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance*.²⁷ Like the Sibyl, who is the voice of Apollo, Kurtz is the voice of the colonisers—a sinister oracle whose abode is the gateway to death.

There is yet another motif in *Heart of Darkness* which—seen from the point of view of a classicist—also leads us back to Virgil's epic. This, of course, is the Homeric²⁸ motif of ivory—the ivory which brings death to so many of the Congo's subjugated natives. Michael Poliakoff has noted that Conrad alludes to the Ivory Gate through which Aeneas and the Sibyl leave the Underworld in the *Aeneid*.²⁹

Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.
His ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna,
ille viam secat ad navis sociosque revisit;

²⁵ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75. Cf. P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Horror of the West* [in:] *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and Contemporary Thought*, ed. N. Lawtoo, London-New Delhi-New York-Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012, pp. 111-122, at 114-115.

²⁷ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²⁸ Cf. *Il.* 5. 583; cf. M. Paschalis, *Virgil's Aeneid: Semantic Relations and Proper Names*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 225.

²⁹ Cf. M. Poliakoff, "Virgil and the 'Heart of Darkness': Observations on a Recurring Theme", *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, Third Series, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1992), pp. 73-97, at 82.

tum se ad Caietae recto fert litore portum.
ancora de prora iacitur; stant litore puppes.

(Verg. Aen. 6. 893-901)

Two gates of Sleep there are, whereof the one, they say, is horn and offers a ready exit to true shades, the other shining with the sheen of polished ivory, but delusive dreams issue upward through it from the world below. Thither Anchises, discoursing thus, escorts his son and with him the Sibyl, and sends them forth by the ivory gate: Aeneas speeds his way to the ships and rejoins his comrades; then straight along the shore he sails for Caieta's haven. The anchor is cast from the prow; the sterns stand ranged on the shore.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

But—we may ask—what about the charismatic leader who has the power to go through this gate, taking his companions with him? Could it be Marlow who plays this role? Or, if Marlow functions as a real-life Aeneas, could this role fall to the completely uncharismatic and rather grotesque Russian sailor?

The interesting thing about the Ivory Gate is that—as Michael Paschalis has brilliantly observed—the expression *candenti ... elephanto* is actually an interlinguistic pun on the ancient Greek word φάος / φαεινός, which means 'light' or 'full of light'. The Ivory Gate is therefore a symbol of release from darkness. In Conrad's intelligent travestition of this whole scene, Kurtz—the commander of an ivory trading post—turns the black workers who obtain that valuable commodity into his slaves and eventually leads them to their destruction.

Thus, while in the *Aeneid* it is through ivory that the prophetess leads Aeneas back to the light and to the conquest of Italy, in *Heart of Darkness* it is through ivory that Kurtz—Conrad's sinister counterpart of Virgil's Sibyl (who was a tall and formidable woman,³⁰ whereas Kurtz was a man who was short at least in name)³¹—leads the subjugated black inhabitants of the Congo to their doom, i.e. to a mass extermination that can be compared to a barbaric sacrifice. In this context, the whole encounter with the cannibals might be interpreted as a disturbing portent of things to come.

At this juncture it is perhaps worth mentioning that in the *Aeneid* the motif of ivory reappears later in a very interesting, albeit morally ambiguous context: namely that of Lavinia's engagement to the Rutulian king Turnus—the very man whom Aeneas slays at the end of the epic.³² In order to depict the young princess's blush at the mention of her future husband, Virgil uses the metaphor of ivory and blood:

Acceptit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris
flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem
subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora cucurrit.
Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro

³⁰ Cf. *maiorquevideri* (Verg. Aen. 6. 49).

³¹ Cf. J. Conrad, *Youth; Heart of Darkness; The End of the Tether*, op. cit., p. 446.

³² Cf. M. Poliakov, op. cit., p. 75.

si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa
 alba rosa, talis virgo dabat ore colores.
 (Verg. *Aen.* 12. 64-69)

Lavinia heard her mother's words, her burning cheeks steeped in tears, while a deep blush kindled its fire, and mantled her glowing face. As when someone stains Indian ivory with crimson dye, or white lilies blush when mingled with many a rose—such hues her maiden features showed.

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)³³

In *Heart of Darkness*, there is a close connection between ivory and blood. Although they do not appear together (as they do in the *Aeneid*), in the second part of the novella—as the steamer approaches the Inner Station—there is mention of a large pool of blood seeping from the body of the dying black helmsman who has been wounded by a spear.³⁴ In adjacent passages, before and after this gruesome description—notwithstanding the context of the cannibal attack (which has been inspired by Kurtz and which may be considered to be an ominous portent of doom)—ivory is mentioned quite frequently. Indeed, the motif of ivory—associated with death—also crops up in Marlow's very first 'eyewitness' description of Kurtz: *I could see the cage of his ribs all astir; the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze.*³⁵

The dishonourable murder of Turnus—which exposes Aeneas as a ruthless coloniser—also reverberates in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad alludes to it in a very particular way, using the previously established link between the Virgilian oracle and the European ivory trader. Although Kurtz's exclamation: "*The horror! The horror!*"³⁶—uttered in his dying hour, when he is consumed by fever—has been linked by scholars to Psalm Iv. 4-5³⁷ and even to Faust,³⁸ it might actually be a very strong echo of the words used by the Sibyl (in a prophetic trance) to refer to the terrible future conflict between the Italians and the Trojans:³⁹

O tandem magnis pelagi defuncte periculis
 (sed terrae graviora manent), in regna Lavini
 Dardanidae venient (mitte hanc de pectore curam),

³³ Virgil, *Aeneid*: Books 7-12. *Appendix Vergiliana*, transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1918.

³⁴ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & Other Stories*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁷ Cf. J. Conrad, *Youth; Heart of Darkness; The End of the Tether*, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

³⁸ Cf. C. Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

³⁹ Cf.: *The Sibyl predicted that Aeneas would witness in Italy "bella, horrida bella" and a new Achilles (6.86-90): in the context of the Sibyl's speech this must have referred to Turnus, 5 but in Books X and XII, Vergil made strong suggestions that the second Achilles was Aeneas himself. His similarity to the Greek warrior in the full paroxysm of his bloodlust is corroborated by a crucial allusion to Iliad 1.402-06 in Aeneid 10.565-70, when Aeneas was compared to Aegaeon.* (M. Poliakov, *op. cit.*, p. 77).

sed non et venisse volent. bella, horrida bella,
et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno.

(Verg. *Aen.* 6. 83-87)

“O you that have at length survived the great perils of the sea—yet by land more grievous woes lie in wait—into the realm of Lavinium the sons of Dardanus shall come, relieve your heart of this care. Yet they shall not also rejoice in their coming. Wars, grim wars I see, and the Tiber foaming with streams of blood. [...]”

(Transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough)

The foregoing analysis (based on close reading) shows that *Heart of Darkness* has even more in common with its Latin hypotext than has commonly been supposed. The surprising coincidence of significant motifs such as that of the Ivory Gate, that of the sacrificial animals, that of the white worsted (which links Conrad's dying black worker with the black sheep offered by the ancients to the gods of the Underworld)—and, finally, the echo of the prophetess's own words—show quite clearly that Kurtz—despite the numerous and obvious similarities that can be found between him and Virgil's Aeneas⁴⁰ (although to some extent Marlow also plays the role of the Trojan hero)⁴¹—is in fact an evil counterpart of the Cumaean Sibyl, i.e. the sinister oracle who opens the gate to hell.

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⁴⁰ Cf. T. Bowers, *op. cit.*, 127; M. Poliakoff, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁴¹ Cf. L. Feder, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

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