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Gnostic Secularocene: An Eco-Historical Reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract
This essay proposes an eco-historical reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, examining its depiction of colonial imperiality and its entanglement with the ecological and racial dimensions of secular modernity. Framing Conrad's novella within the concept of the Secularocene, as theorized by Mohamed Amer Meziane, and drawing on Bruno Latour's reinterpretation of Eric Voegelin's perspective of modernity as Gnostic, the study examines how the secular imperial project immanentizes a Gnostic-like dualism, thereby creating a world geography that is based on both the desirability and contempt for matter. In Europe, matter is supposed to be subjected to the realization of a "kingdom of perfection", while in Africa it embodies the "evil" that resists the secular ideal. The essay exposes how Conrad's novella unveils the nihilistic impasse that underlies this imperial geography, and thus the Secularocene. The transformation of a specific continent, in this case, Africa, into a symbol of evil, results in the pervasive devaluation of the human experience of earthiness.

Keywords
Postcolonial Ecocriticism; Gnosticism; Imperiality; Secularocene; Conrad.

Resumo
Este ensaio propõe uma leitura eco-histórica de *Heart of Darkness*, de Joseph Conrad, analisando a sua representação do imperialismo colonial e sua interconexão com as dimensões ecológicas e raciais da modernidade secular. Situando a novela de Conrad no conceito de Secularoceno, conforme teorizado por Mohamed Amer Meziane, e baseando-se na releitura de Bruno Latour sobre a perspectiva de Eric Voegelin da modernidade como gnóstica, o estudo investiga como o projeto imperial secular imanentiza um dualismo gnóstico, criando, assim, uma geografia mundial fundamentada tanto no desejo quanto no desprezo pela matéria. Na Europa, a matéria deveria ser submetida à realização de um "reino de perfeição", enquanto, na África, ela encarna o "mal" que resiste ao ideal secular. O ensaio revela como a novela de Conrad expõe o impasse niilista que sustenta essa geografia imperial e, por extensão, o Secularoceno. A transformação de um continente específico, neste caso, a África, em símbolo do mal resulta na desvalorização generalizada da experiência humana da terrestralidade.

Palavras-chave
Ecocrítica pós-colonial; Gnosticismo; Imperialismo; Secularoceno; Conrad.

Introduction. The two goddesses of the Empire

The life of Sir William Bradshaw, the distinguished psychiatrist in *Mrs. Dalloway* who ascends to the pinnacle of English society at the dawn of the

twentieth century, is governed by two sister goddesses: Proportion and Conversion. His worship of the former not only ensures his own personal prosperity but also that of England: his authority permits him to determine what is reasonable and what is not, thereby enabling him to lock up all those "prophetic Christs and Christesses who prophesied the end of the world or the coming of God" (Woolf, 2000, p. 84). More cantankerous and violent than her sister, the second goddess is at work everywhere – "in the heat and sands of India, in the mud and swamps of Africa (...) wherever, in short, the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true faith which is her own" (Woolf, 2000, pp. 84-85) –, devoted to destroying all cults and false gods that defy her stern rule. No matter how much she wraps herself in the garments of love and respect for others, her true intention is to gain power. It can thus be said that these two goddesses work in unison: while the first seeks to banish from Europe all apocalyptic fantasies of a Christian nature, the second intends to impose the true faith of civilization on Asia and Africa, against the native religions of those lands. These two missions reflect the same thinking, namely that the secular order, which promotes material prosperity, is the only effective one insofar as it embodies the realization of Christianity on earth. Because of this, it would be misleading to consider these two sisters as mere tutelary deities of Sir William Bradshaw: they are also the tutelary deities of the entire British Empire. It is therefore not only psychiatry, but also commerce, politics, law, and education which convey the idea that English civilization is already living on the other side of the apocalypse.

In contrast, Africa is portrayed as a continent still immersed in the depths of prehistory. Moreover, when Marlow, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness*, ventures into the depths of the Congolese jungle, he perceives the environment as unearthly: "We were wanderers (…) on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil" (Conrad, 2018, pp. 37-38).

This sense of complete estrangement from the planet, now represented as a place where evil is transformed into a bodily substance capable of contaminating those who inhabit it, reflects an experience that can be described as Gnostic, if by this term we mean a mode of existence that simultaneously places negative emphasis on "earthiness" and positive emphasis on the means of escaping it[1]. According to Marlow, it is difficult for individuals residing in

[1] Gnosticism was a religious movement contemporary with early Christianity and that persisted in various forms throughout the Middle Ages. Central to all Gnostic myths is a radical dualism that distinguishes between the malevolent creator God and the benevolent savior God. Accordingly, the two critical moments in the Gnostic drama of salvation are the redemption of all humans by the latter and the destruction of the material world created by the former. As far as humans are concerned, they are for the most part the creation of the evil demiurge. However, they bear within themselves a spark of their divine origin, the *pneuma*, which is attacked by all the worldly powers with the aim of extinguishing it. In Gnostic writings, the human condition is frequently likened to

London, "the greatest town on earth" (Conrad, 2018, p. 3), to comprehend the extent of this experience fully. In such circumstances, when all the elements that constitute civilization are absent and one is confronted with the onslaught of darkness, "you must fall back on your own innate strength, on your own capacity for faithfulness" (Conrad, 2018, p. 52).

Yet the inner strength that Marlow must remain faithful to does not originate from Christian faith but from *gnosis*, a knowledge destined to transform the world. Following Benita Parry's (1987) analysis, this particular gnosis may be defined as a manifestation of the "manicheanism of the imperialist imagination" (21), that is, as a knowledge that divides the Earth into two warring moral forces: good versus evil, civilization versus savagery, light versus darkness, whiteness versus blackness, the secular versus the religious, the West versus the East. There is thus a close connection between the embodiment of evil, on the one hand, and redemptory knowledge, on the other, for gnosis can only become a condition of salvation when evil takes on the aspect of a physical object that engulfs man from the outside. If the Gnostics of Antiquity believed that the divine spark at the heart of their individuality was their only means of escaping the evil universe in which they were lost, Marlow is also convinced that "the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes to bury the stuff in – your power of devotion not to yourself but to an obscure back breaking business" (Conrad, 2018: 53), that of colonization, is his only salvation amid the Congolese jungle.

How did these images of Africa come to be formulated? What were the conditions of possibility for their enunciation? What is the relationship between the secular order proclaimed by the colonial empire and the Gnostic experience of earthiness? How did the articulation of these two elements ultimately give rise to the Secularocene (Meziane, 2024), understood as the ongoing historical period during which Western fossil empires, in the name of their supposed superiority due to their secularization process, have taken over much of the world and have caused a large-scale ecological mutation of the Earth brought about by a system of industrial exploitation? How does Conrad's novella reveal the nihilistic foundation of this secular transformation of the earth? These questions prompt a re-reading of *Heart of Darkness* from both a postcolonial and ecocritical perspective, one that considers the intertwining of historical and ecological factors. To lay the foundation for this re-reading, the issue of the religious origins

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that of a person trapped in a dream, dispersed throughout the darkness of the material world, or contaminated by its substantial wickedness. To emerge from this state of numbness, humans require knowledge (*gnosis*). This knowledge concerns both their true origin and the deception that pervades the material world. Humans forget this knowledge during their earthly existence; however, a transcendent agent can remind them of this knowledge through a liberating message. They are then subjected to a great existential anguish, characterized by an experience of total estrangement from their surroundings, including their physical and psychic life, and by an urge to escape from the material world in order to achieve salvation in a transcendent world. For further details, see Hans Jonas (2001).

of modernity is revisited in the first two sections, with particular attention to the link between the gnostic nature of this era, the colonial avatars of Western imperialism, and the current ecological crisis. The examination of this link is justified if we consider Bruno Latour's (2017) reinterpretation of Eric Voegelin's (1987) perspective on modernity as Gnostic, which reveals that this epoch has immanentized the Christian transcendental eschaton by seeking to establish a realm of perfection on earth through human action**.** This preliminary analysis will establish a framework for situating my reading of *Heart of Darkness* and contribute to an ongoing discussion on the eco-historical dimensions of Conrad's novella (Huggand & Tiffin, 2015; Vandertop, 2018; Schneider-Rebozo et al., 2019).

1. Gnosticism *redivivus:* Latour revisits Voegelin

In attempting to avoid the grasp of one frightening monster, modernity has encountered another that is just as daunting, if not more so. In his lectures on Gaia, Bruno Latour (2017) employs this image, inspired by a dance performance, to depict the emergence of the modern age and its unexpected arrival in the Anthropocene. In the guise of the "Cosmocolossus", into whose arms modernity has finally rushed, it is possible to identify Gaia – the earth which, despite an entrenched modern belief, is moved and reacts to human actions (Latour, 2017: 60). It remains unclear, however, which figure the first monster corresponds to. If identifying its nature is more challenging, this may be because modernity has put forth a wide variety of monsters in order to explain its own emergence. To describe the trait all these modern monsters share, Latour (2017) is content to evoke the "archaic horror of the past" (2). Yet despite this uncertainty, the most important aspect is to understand that the image of the modern age as a process unfolding between two monsters intends to reopen an old question: that of the status of modernity itself.

Following a period of intense debate in the 1960s, particularly in Germany, and a subsequent decline in the 1990s, marked by the rise of postmodernism, the question of the origins and nature of modernity has once again become a prominent area of interest in recent decades. One of the most striking examples of this is Latour's work on Gaia, in which he revisited the distinctly Germanic discussion on the gnostic character of this epoch and its relation to the concept of secularization. What is of interest in this controversy, which may appear somewhat outdated in the present context, is the motivation behind Latour's decision to revisit it. Indeed, the question of the gnostic character of modernity assumes a different facet when analyzed through the lens of the current ecological mutation: it is not quite the same thing to defend the legitimacy of the modern age, as Hans Blumenberg (1985), for example, did against the criticisms levelled at it from a social and historical perspective, as it is to question the status

of this epoch when its development has led to the compromise of the planet's habitability for humans and non-humans alike.

Latour revisits Voegelin's thinking in an attempt to understand the lack of sensitivity shown by the inhabitants of industrialized countries in the face of the multiple evidence of the current ecological crisis. According to Latour (2017), this coldness cannot be attributed to mere inertia or discouragement resulting from the sheer scale of this crisis. Furthermore, since the outset of the industrial age, numerous voices have cautioned against the potential pitfalls and consequences of modernization, but their warnings have been consistently overlooked in the name of the inevitability of development. That means there must be something more deep-rooted behind this disinhibition and indifference vis-à-vis ecological mutation. Ultimately, these attitudes appear to originate from a conscious decision: that of remaining insensitive to the fate of all those beings considered as mere matter. The question then becomes: where does this decision come from? Latour suggests that the religious origins of modernity may be a key factor. According to him, "[i]f modernity were not so deeply religious, the call to adjust oneself to the earth would be easily heard" (Latour, 2017: 206).

This is how the question of the religious nature of modernity becomes topical once again, and with it Voegelin's thinking. In contrast to other intellectuals who view this period as a continuation of Christianity under profane masks, Voegelin (1987) claims that, far from being Christian, modernity rather exhibits Gnostic characteristics. What is meant by this term? The authors of the 1950s and 1960s who participated in the debate on the relationship between modernity and Gnosticism adopted slightly different approaches. In his analysis, Voegelin (1987) posits that Gnosticism represents a distortion of the "authentic" Christian experience. However, given that his exploration of this experience takes the form of a "psychology of experience" (Voegelin, 1987: 122), it would be more appropriate to address it from a historical perspective. The notion of a Christian regime of historicity, as formulated by the French historian François Hartog (2022), is invaluable for carrying out this analysis.

Defined as "apocalyptic presentism" (Hartog, 2022: 74), this temporal regime is characterized, on the one hand, by the fact that the incarnation of Christ entails the fulfillment of times – insofar as the world has reached its goal, i.e., salvation – but also, on the other hand, by the fact that the times have not ended yet, as Christians still wait for the Apocalypse. A messianic present is thus established, the horizon of which is formed by the expectation of Christ's imminent return. As the completion of this event proved more and more elusive, the Christian regime of historicity was forced to confront the growing gap between the time of the end and the end of times, a gap that was difficult to deal with, "a challenge to negotiate in one's daily life, and in perpetual need of reassessment. It will be, in a sense, the entire history of Christianity and, above all, the question of what Christianity can imagine as history" (Hartog, 2022: 46). The necessity for

the messianic present to learn to coexist with the passing of time, and, in so doing, to produce a distinctive Christian history, resulted in a call to live simultaneously according to two different temporal regimes: the first is characteristic of the time of the end, while the second is unique to the human condition, which fell into time as a consequence of the original sin. As Hartog (2022) points out,

> there is no knowing when this situation will change. Augustine's two cities will illuminate the consequences, his city of God and his city of humans, where two loves are found. This twofold form, fully elaborated, will inform the profound structure of medieval universal history (47).

Augustine's solution, whose influence would last throughout the Middle Ages, left the Church as the sole representative of the *Civitas Dei* in history, as the "flash of eternity in time" (Voegelin, 1987: 109). By the same token, it de-divinized secular power, which was henceforth understood as representing only that part of human nature destined to vanish with the transformation of time into eternity. Christian society was thus articulated between a spiritual order (the Church and its *amor dei*) and a temporal order (the Empire and its *libido dominandi*). In its temporal articulation, "it accepted the *conditio humana* without chiliastic fancies, while it heightened natural existence by the representation of spiritual destiny through the church" (Voegelin, 1987: 109).

The fact remains that, despite the efforts to reconcile secular history with the theological significance of the Incarnation of Christ, the tension between the time of the end and the end of times persisted, as the expectation of the Parousia remained the unsurpassable horizon of the Christian regime of historicity. Yet since the advent of Christ was a decision solely at the discretion of God, it remained unfathomable and could never be provoked or calculated (Hartog, 2022). For the individual it was therefore a matter of faith. With one foot in the world and the other outside it, caught up in the uncertain faith of eternity, of which he was nevertheless given a glimpse in the Church: this was the temporality of the medieval Christian. It is this uncertainty of faith, in which he is constantly submerged, that Voegelin (1987) sees as the "authentic" Christian experience – an experience, he adds, that is difficult to bear. If this is indeed a tension that can be difficult to live with on a personal level, Hartog's (2022) approach allows us to understand that it transcends individual psychology, insofar as it is constitutive of a regime of historicity. Once we grasp the structural nature of this tension, we better understand why Christian temporality was susceptible to being undermined from within, making Voegelin's own hypothesis more plausible.

For the latter argues that, from the twelfth century onwards, we observe the emergence of a millenarian theological movement for whom this uncertainty had become problematic, not least because material conditions of life had begun to improve, making it difficult to accept that the world was doomed to perish (Voegelin, 1987). Voegelin cites as evidence the theology of history developed by

Abbot Joachim de Flore (c. 1135-1202). Whereas the Augustinian concept of the two cities attached a minor importance to secular time, the ternary conception of history proposed by the Abbot ended up giving it a new dignity, however unwillingly. De Flore's extrapolation of the symbol of the Trinity to the course of history resulted in the following scheme: the age of the Father, represented by the laity, was followed by the age of the Son, led by the clergy, but this age, de Flore prophesied, was about to give way to the age of the Spirit, guided by the monks (Voegelin, 1987). The three ages of history are thus characterized by the fact that the passage from one to the other brings about an increasing spiritual perfection, so that the fullness of grace will be the prerogative of the monks, whose perfection will not only render the Church superfluous but will also pave the way for the end of times through the conversion of the Jews and the Muslims. While it is true that this fullness would come from a new transcendent outpouring of the Spirit, the fact remains that Joachim's speculation was an attempt to give a new meaning to the course of history. Indeed, as Hartog (2022) has observed, to assert that between the time of the end and the end of times

> one might find space for a history – a history of Salvation, yes, but still a history into which might flow all the aspirations of a new era in this world – can hardly be called inconsequential. Those who followed will return to these openings, extending them much further than had Abbot Joachim, and, in hastening things along, will bring distortions (92).

Accordingly, Voegelin (1987) asserts that the Abbot's theology of history represents the starting point for a long series of speculations that will distort the Christian experience of time. Moreover, he considers this messianic theology and its modern derivatives to be "gnostic". Why so? Because, in contrast to the uncertainty of faith that distinguishes the Christian regime of historicity, they are based on gnosis, that is, on a knowledge that claims to be infallible about the ultimate goal of history. For Voegelin (1987), this gnostic attitude reflects a form of impatience with the completion of the end of times. The purpose of gnosis is precisely to provide an answer that eradicates the uncertainty inherent in the Christian regime of historicity. In other words, it is to identify a more concrete form of knowledge regarding the transcendent eschaton than that which is permitted by faith. Gnostic experiences have the potential to provide this knowledge, "insofar as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man" (Voegelin, 1987: 124). This is why it can be reasonably argued that moderns' philosophies of history *à la de Flore* have finally overcome "the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intra-mundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfillment" (Voegelin, 1987: 129). Modernity may therefore be characterized as gnostic insofar as it purports to liberate humanity from the "misery" of the world by establishing a realm of perfection on earth through

human agency, particularly through political and industrial action. This process of gradual immanentization of the Christian eschaton is what Voegelin (1987) refers to as "secularization" (119).

The desire to realize paradise on earth thus emerges as the fundamental religious trait of modernity. What is the relationship between this religious attitude and the present ecological mutation? Latour (2017) sums it up in two lapidary formulas. Here is the first: "Telling Westerners (…) that the time has come, that their world has ended (…) can only produce a feeling of total incomprehension, because, for them, *the Apocalypse has already taken place*. The world of the beyond has been achieved" (Latour, 2017: 206; my emphasis). Here is the second formula: "*for those who have immanentized Heaven, there is no longer any accessible earth*" (Latour, 2017: 200. Latour's emphasis). What does this mean? As the project of achieving salvation in this world took the form of industrial modernization, immanence was identified as "nature", conceived both as a stable framework for human activity and as a pure reservoir of material resources which, being deprived of any power to act, were susceptible to being extracted and shaped by the technical and economic objectives of development. However, the earth is not composed of inert matter but of a *materiality* that has both its own power to act and its own history, constituted by an infinite number of feedback loops (Latour, 2017). This implies that, in attempting to impose a celestial utopia on the terrestrial fabric, the moderns have persistently misinterpreted the status of the planet they live in, since, in fact, "the terrestrial is immanence freed of immanentization" (Latour, 2017: 212).

In light of these reflections, Latour elucidates an aspect of Voegelin's thought that the latter had only implicitly suggested, namely, the *immanentization of the gnostic transcendent dualism*. In his analysis, Voegelin (1987) identified the fundamental core of Gnosticism as a "horror of existence and a desire to escape from it" (167). This led him to describe secular societies as living in a "dream world" (167), yet it remained unclear what other "evil" world this "reign of perfection" was opposed to *here on earth*. Now, as Latour (2017) makes clear, the most critical consequence of immanentization is that industrial modernity superimposes upon "materiality the contempt for matter [...] It is as though [modern] Gnosticism had rendered matter at once desirable and contemptible – *desirable* because it has to embody the ideal, *contemptible* because in the long run it proves unsuited for that task" (208; Latour's emphasis). Nevertheless, neither Latour nor Voegelin addresses the question of *which* beings modernity associates with the desirable and contemptible worlds of matter, nor *where* it distributes them geographically, and this is because both conceive of the process of secularization as the matrix of modernity as a phenomenon related only to Christianity and its heresies.

2.Gnostic Secularocene

Mohamed Amer Meziane (2024) has recently argued that this process cannot be fully understood without considering its extra-European dimension, i.e. its imperial and colonial dimension. According to him, "it was neither the progressive de-Christianization of Europe nor the persistence of Christianity that brought our world into being. This false alternative prevents us from understanding how secularization developed from the colonial mutations of empire" (Meziane, 2014: 255). This is not to say, however, that modernity has no connection with Christianity, because what we need to understand is the way in which our world was born from "from the entrails of a determinate Christian order":

> The Christian world from which the secular world of the moderns emerged should be thought of as the becoming of powers that aimed to construct and to unify this world. The powers of the Western-Christian world were two in number: Church and empire. The political, and thus effective, existence of a Christian world as a world of laity and clerics was dependent on universal monarchy, and did not pre-exist it. And, because this monarchy never existed, the Western-Christian world never empirically existed either: *it existed only as an indefinite concept and project of unification*. Empire was one of the political forms taken by this unification on a global scale. (Meziane, 2024: 256; emphasis)

To the extent that it existed solely as a political ideal, designed to bring Christianity together through the unification of Christian kingdoms and the conversion of infidels, the universal empire can be considered a "spectral ghost" that has haunted the West since the Middle Ages (Meziane, 2024). In his analysis, Meziane (2024) refers to this ghost as "imperiality", defining it as follows:

> [Imperiality] is not a uniform concept of empire that can be reduced to a pagan, Jewish, or Christian origin, but the multiplicity of ways in which the defunct Roman Empire inspired ideologies of its rebirth. A multitude of afterlives compose the word empire, as I use it to speak of the West or of colonialism: world domination, the peaceful integration of a plurality of peoples, the continuous transfer of power, political fulfilment of prophecies, messianism, etc. (p. 261)

Now, the political theology of imperiality was reinvigorated with the emergence of Joachimism. Although the Abbot's prophecy never linked the advent of the Age of the Spirit to the question of empire, the flexibility of his theology of history gave rise, between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, to a prophetic messianism whose aim was to associate this third age with the reign of a "last emperor" who, in order to pave the way for the Parousia, would reunite all Christians under his wing thanks to the destruction of the Antichrist, most often represented by the infidel Turks (Reeves, 1961). The attempt to re-

divinize the political sphere, through which the sovereigns proclaimed themselves to be both the heirs of Rome and the representatives of God on earth, was nonetheless doomed to failure because of the fragmentation of the Western Christian Empire that took place during the reign of Charles V, particularly as a result of the Reformation (Reeves, 1961).

The fact remains that the *real* death of the empire did not liquidate the *spectre* of messianic imperiality. It was at this point that the empire's colonial future proved decisive:

> the imperiality of power, which, in Christendom, had until then been the prerogative of the pope or the emperor, was claimed by European monarchs who declared that their kingdoms were empires. The materialization of this empire implied the possession of colonies. Thus, the medieval imperial tradition was transformed, during the Classical Age, into a language of Western coloniality. (Meziane, 2024: 6).

As the possibility of realizing the empire faded in Europe, the colonies became the place where the specter of messianic imperiality rose from its ashes. Although the empire was subjected to fragmentation in the course of the colonization processes conducted by various European kingdoms, from the time of the conquest of America onwards it was transformed into a central political myth of modernity. However, this colonial imperialism, whose novelty lay among other things in the unprecedented violence it deployed, only reached its apogee when it transformed itself into a "secular empire". This is why Meziane (2024) asserts that "secularization refers to the particular transformations linked to the colonial dissemination of imperiality throughout the nineteenth century" (6).

This new avatar of empire openly proclaims that its mission lies in the realization of the Christian eschaton on earth through secularization and industrial modernization. The idea that Christianity was the only religion capable of establishing a new social order that could effectively distinguish between the political and religious spheres is essential for the specter of colonial imperiality to gain strength .The consequence of this is an imperial philosophy of history that linked the destiny of the modern West to the secularization of Christianity, but only at the cost of reducing Islam to a theocratic law, on the one hand, and of reducing so-called "sub-Saharan" Africa to a savagery of which the "fetishism" it was supposed to practice is the emblem, on the other (Meziane, 2024). Thus, seen through the prism of the West's racial representation of African "religions", the chronological coexistence between these religious forms and European civilization turns into a non-contemporaneity of the contemporary, allowing a series of neutral geographical facts to be ordered according to a diachronic sequence conceived as an ascending teleology. This means that, in the eyes of the philosophers who carry out this teleological historicization, non-European peoples embody a previous stage in a process whose most advanced realization

is the secularized Europe of their time. Hegel's philosophy of history remains the most striking example of this:

> Hegel's rationale for the supposed superiority of the West, and his pure and simple exclusion of the whole continent of Africa from humanity, is inseparable from the order to realize religion on earth (…). Hegel's philosophy of history was thus indissociably prophetic and colonial (…). History moved from east to west as the empires of the Orient transferred their power to those of the West (…). Progress became the name of this itinerary, which made geographical poles into two sequences of a history that travelled from east to west (...). Progress is identified with secularization by means of a geography of civilizations based on their supposed religious principle. (Meziane, 2024: 251)

Whereas the messianic imperiality of the late Middle Ages sought to pave the way for the advent of the end of times, the empire of the nineteenth century intended to inaugurate a new age of universal history whose subject would no longer be divine providence, but a being that was divine and human alike: humankind (Meziane, 2024). This entity subsequently assumed the authority to categorize various peoples by rendering judgment within a new ontological framework of space and time, henceforth asserted as the sole reality: History (Meziane, 2024). Secular imperialism thus justifies colonization not as a crusade to convert the infidels, but as a series of "civilization missions" designed to bring progress to Africa. Secularization is therefore far from being only a mere specter, because it refers to

> the materiality of the revolutions and reforms through which an order attempted to recreate the world in the image of Europe by dominating it industrially. It manifested geographically in drawing the racial borders of the world, hierarchically dividing the Orient and the West, the Souths and Norths, the Blackness and Whiteness it claimed to want to reunite. *But it has also expressed itself geologically, through the exploitation of fossil fuels by states that govern populations while destroying their lives.* (Meziane, 2024: xiv; my emphasis)

This illustrates that the term "Secularocene" is an appropriate one for the phenomenon of colonial imperiality. As Meziane (2024) suggests, this concept is intended to correct the blind spots in contemporary Marxian analyses of global warming: just as the generality of the notion of the Anthropocene runs the risk of overlooking the pivotal role played by certain actors in triggering the current ecological mutation, so the notion of the Capitalocene leads us to downplay the impact of colonial imperiality in the emergence of this crisis. In other words, "a critique of fossil capitalism without a critique of the imperialist states that made capital accumulation possible will remain blind to the role of violence in history"

(Meziane, 2024, p. 156).[2] The Secularocene thus refers to the process during which certain Western nation-states developed a fossil industrialism that led them to become "empires of the earth" in Africa, with the aim of achieving paradise in Europe. It also demonstrates that

> the secular is nothing other than the earth, in its state of upheaval by the system of its industrial exploitation. Secularization does not at all bring us back to a world that we would have lost by imagining the existence of illusory heavens. As an order by fossil empires, secularization acts on the world and transforms it. Through these empires, the critique of heaven overturns the earth. The Secularocene is the name and effect of this mutation, secularist ontologies being what codified the terrestrial by defining it as secular and opposing it to the heavens referred to as so-called religion. (Meziane, 2024: 277)

In order to gain insight into the ecological history of the Secularocene, it is necessary to address the concept of colonial imperiality through the lens of Voegelin's and Latour's analyses of the Gnostic status of modernity. The imperial philosophy of history that presides over the unfolding of the Secularocene not only presupposes a certain knowledge about the ultimate goals of historical development, but it also brings about the immanentization of gnostic dualism by establishing a world geography grounded on a principle of hierarchical and racialized differentiation of the world's religions. This cross-analysis leads us to the conclusion that the Secularocene can be defined as Gnostic. Indeed, competing secular empires agree on a dualistic perspective that differentiates between the "ideal" world of civilization, exemplified by Europe, and the "evil" world of savagery, epitomized by Africa. This gives rise to a world geography that is based on both desirability and contempt for matter: in Europe, thanks to the industrial expertise and capital that is able to seize the resources from across the globe, matter is subjected to the realization of a kingdom of perfection, giving rise to the belief that this continent has been saved from the "horror of existence", while Africa and its inhabitants, who nonetheless continue to supply the European world with raw materials, embody the "wilderness" that resists the secular ideal, and thus function as a reminder that the imperial Gnostics will never be able to conquer the earth once and for all, that they will never be able to fully realize their dreams. It is within this imperial and Gnostic geography that an eco-historical reading of *Heart of Darkness* must be set.

3.The Horror: The Secularocene's nihilistic impasse

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the motif of the "woman at the piano" became a prominent subject in numerous paintings. One of the most

[2] Meziane (2024) adds further: "The dissemination of imperiality through colonialism contributed to the birth of capitalism to the extent that imperiality sustained the practices of state violence that punctuated the unfolding of accumulation" (274).

celebrated examples is Renoir's canvas from 1876. As is often the case with this artist's portrayals of women, the setting is a domestic one, replete with richly decorated carpets, tapestries on the walls, and opulent curtains. A young woman sits at the piano, her almost translucent white fingers barely touching the keys, so her playing seems as effortless as her ethereal beauty. Yet Renoir's woman is not only the representation of an individual; she is also the image of an idealized being, transported almost out of the world, floating in the certainty that from now on nothing could happen to her. One is almost tempted to say that this woman could have been exhibited at a world's fair as a specimen of the European bourgeoisie living in the greatest empires the earth has ever known. The fact that colonial violence was on the increase at the same time is far from being incompatible with the motif of Renoir's painting, since secular imperiality revolved around this scene of perfect tranquility: that of the woman sitting at the piano, playing, protected from any external intrusion, and, above all, content with the thought that the worst was already behind her.

This music is linked to another, played at about the same time, and much more sinister: that of the chains worn by those rows of "workers" whom Marlow first meets on his arrival in the so-called Congo Free State:

> A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path (…) each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (Conrad, 2018: 16)

Before rubber extraction became the main activity of the private companies authorized by Leopold II to operate within his territory, ivory constituted the most coveted raw material (Huggand and Tiffin, 2015). Led by explorers hired by these companies or by state officials, all with the forced participation of some indigenous people, raids were conducted throughout the country to obtain industrial quantities of ivory. This was achieved through a variety of methods, including the directly killing of elephants, the purchase of their tusks from villagers for next to nothing, and the mere confiscation of them. In this regard, Adam Hochschild (1999) has observed that, at the end of the nineteenth century, ivory functioned as a kind of protoplastic, from which it was possible to produce a vast range of goods, including, of course, piano keys.

Although it is evident that the will for profit represented a fundamental drive behind this accumulation of raw materials (Huggand and Tiffin, 2015; Vandertop, 2018), an eco-historical analysis of the colonial enterprise as depicted in *Heart of Darkness* should not be confined to examining the way capital implements a distinct reorganization of the Congolese territory. It is also essential for it to undertake an analysis of the *imperial rationale* that enables this enterprise to come into being, as well as its impasses. The elucidation of these two facets will be the primary objective of an extraordinary sailor, Marlow, who, throughout his

narrative, will not refrain from criticizing the abuses and hypocrisies inherent to the colonial system, while positioning himself as a defender of the "purity" of the imperial idea in the face of individuals driven exclusively by the ambition of profit.

Nothing illustrates this latter aspect better than the beginning of the novella, where two major avatars of Western imperiality are invoked: the Roman Empire and English colonialism. Captivated by the spectacle of the Thames at dusk, the anonymous narrator recalls all those "hunters for gold or pursuers of fame" (Conrad, 2018: 4) who, from the sixteenth century onwards, took to the sea armed with their swords in order to sow "the germs of empires" (Conrad, 2018: 5) across the globe. If these words appear to suggest that the violent quest for gold and fame constitutes the heart of the imperial mission, the narrator immediately qualifies this idea when he refers to these adventurers as "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (Conrad, 2018: 5). The nature of this fire is revealed from the outset of Marlow's story, where he refers to the first Roman incursion into English territory. The glorious England of today was then a mass of "sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages (...) all that mysterious life of the wilderness which stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (Conrad, 2018: 6). It is therefore not difficult to envisage the reaction of the civilized Romans to this barbaric landscape, their difficulty in inhabiting "in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable" (Conrad, 2018: 6), their "longing to escape, the impotent disgust, the capitulation, the hatred" (Conrad, 2018: 6). If, despite all this, the Romans were "men enough to face the darkness" (Conrad, 2018: 6), the fact remains that they were only conquerors, "and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of when you have it, since your strength is only an accident arising from the weakness of others" (Conrad, 2018: 6). This is precisely the difference between Roman and colonial imperiality: "What redeems it [the latter] is only the idea. An idea behind it; not a sentimental pretence, but an idea; and a selfless belief in the idea – something to set up and bow down before and sacrifice to" (Conrad, 2018: 7).

These two references to the history of Western imperiality thus operate a kind of *translatio imperii*, at the end of which the colonial empire proves more legitimate than the Roman Empire in claiming the "conquest of the earth" (Conrad, 2018: 7). The religious language used by Marlow in the previous quotation, even after his return from Congo, is unambiguous in this respect: the colonial empire only makes sense if it becomes an enterprise of eschatological scope *here below*.[3]

[3] As Ahmet Süner (2021) has suggested, Marlow's religious language "intimates that, as opposed to a celestial, otherworldly origin, the idea in question originates in men themselves, as something initially reasoned out as if it were a manmade religion (…). A sincere, unselfish, resolute belief in such an idea, his words imply, will act as a semi-religious warrant for the redemption of all colonial crime" (212).

Nevertheless, this eschatological scope represents the primary focus of the attacks that Marlow consistently formulates against colonial practices. Consequently, a significant proportion of the criticism has sought to identify in Conrad's novella an indictment of this practice and of the ideology that bolsters it. It is argued that Marlow's exceptionality stems from his ability to discern the hackneyed slogans that are often presented as justification for colonialism (White, 1996). And it is true that, in his recollection of his time in the Congo, Marlow is keen to highlight the incongruity of the neo-biblical language used to justify the colonial empire's eschatological mission. For instance, when his aunt in Brussels urges him to embark for the Congo, Marlow derisively characterizes her view of him as an "emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (Conrad, 2018: 12). Furthermore, he is similarly scathing in his evaluation of the nineteenth century *sanctum sanctorum*: the idea of progress. These incisive critiques, however, do not result in his complete disavowal of the colonial enterprise. On the contrary, it could be argued that he remains engaged with imperialism at a more profound level, namely, that of the "idea" or *gnosis* that underlies it. What is this idea? The one that emanates from the Manicheanism of the imperialist imagination, which establishes a dualist geography of civilizations where Africa embodies evil, that is to say, contempt for matter and earthiness.

That Marlow sees Africa through this idea is clear from his descriptions of his experiences in the Congolese jungle. A postcolonial ecocritical perspective is invaluable for analyzing such descriptions, as it seeks to unveil "the imperial underpinnings of environmental practices and representations in (...) 'colonising' (...) societies" (Huggand & Tiffin, 2015: 3). Indeed, this critical approach reveals that, when confronted with the African environment, Marlow's reflections on his ability to cope with it through his own "true stuff" reappear. Even before arriving at the first station of the company for which he works, he remarks on the surrounding landscape:

> 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 (…). It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares. (Conrad, 2018: 15)

Later, at the Central Station, the outlines of these nightmares become clearer when he compares the "unreality" that reigns there with the jungle that surrounds it: "And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth" (Conrad, 2018: 24). That evil conceals its own truth is something Marlow will later discover in his encounter with Kurtz. Finally, to this type of imagery is added the association of the sensations produced by certain aspects of the environment with something primitive:

> The smell of mud, of primeval mud by Jove, was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forests was before my eyes (…). What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing or would it handle us? (Conrad, 2018: 28).

The amorphousness of the wilderness, the mixture of an excess of life and death within putrefaction, the dark times of the origins to which the mud and the jungle take him back, the mysterious and confusing power of that "dumb thing" which is the environment as a whole: from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, all these elements form a phenomenology of evil in which the latter takes the form of a viscous and stinking active substance which Marlow not only fears to be contaminated by, but also does not know whether to interpret as "an appeal or as a menace" (Conrad, 2018: 28). Thus, the disgust and the "fascination with abomination" that Marlow spoke of in relation to the feelings of the first Romans on their arrival in England seems to take hold of him. It is not surprising, then, that this phenomenology of the Congolese jungle leads to a passage such as the following:

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it. This suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar (…). What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage – who can tell? – but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time. (Conrad, 2018: 38)

This excerpt, which appears when Marlow ventures deep into the jungle on his way to the Inner Station where he will meet Kurtz, reveals the protagonist's intimate attachment to the dualistic geography of the secular empire: while in Europe the terrestrial monster has been tamed, in Africa it manifests in all its horror. Hence the astonishing oxymoron: in Congo, the Earth looked like another planet. Moreover, this same geographical division forms the basis of the philosophy of history of the colonial empire: the non-contemporaneity of the contemporary is revealed in the way in which the Congolese are indeed regarded as humans, but as humans belonging to prehistoric times. Marlow may therefore find the labels used by the colonial administration to classify the Congolese absurd and fallacious, he is nonetheless imbued with the same racist philosophy of history. So much so, in fact, that he admits that no principle will suffice to describe how a European must confront the terrible, timeless "truth" that resounds in the howling of the Congolese: "He must meet that truth with his own true stuff (…). You want a deliberate belief" (Conrad, 2018: 38). What is this

"belief" if not the same "spark of the sacred fire" that structures the eschatology of the secular empire and that was already within the hearts of the English colonizers of the sixteenth century?

But however distant it may be, the common kinship with these prehistoric beings poses a problem, because who tells us that the straight line of progress cannot be interrupted? Who tells us that we cannot fall back? That is the point of Kurtz's story. Patrick Brantingler (1988) has rightly pointed out that it revolves around the leitmotif of "going native" (262). Because of his English ancestry on his mother's side and French on his father's, Marlow claims that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad, 2018: 53). He is thus also said to be an eminent "emissary of pity and science, and progress" (Conrad, 2018, p. 27). If this means, first of all, that Kurtz has managed to obtain more ivory than any other agent by any possible means, for Marlow these words tends to evoke, however vaguely, the character's devotion to the colonial "idea". Not for nothing does Marlow imagine Kurtz as a pure voice before meeting him: like the Old Testament God, whose commandments are made known through hearing, Kurtz's voice embodies the promise of a decisive revelation. When he meets him, however, this revelation proves to be of a very different nature from the one he had expected:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and behold it was like a ball – an ivory ball (…). [It] had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. (Conrad, 2018: 52)

In Marlow's interpretation, then, the Congolese jungle has cast a mocking and irresistible spell on Kurtz: having become a human double of the commodity so coveted by the Europeans and a fetish worshipped by the Congolese, he has entered into an intimate trust with the "savagery" of the land and the "diabolical" customs of its inhabitants, a relationship that ultimately overcomes him. This is why Marlow also points out that Kurtz's going native constitutes in fact a punitive response on the part of the jungle: "the wilderness had found him out early and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion" (Conrad, 2018: 62). Thus, postcolonial ecocriticism demonstrates that the secular representation of nature is far from being, from the outset, that of a purely passive entity: it has the power to act, yet this power is linked, as in Gnosticism, with the seductive and mysterious influence of evil.[4] It is as if, in attempting to eradicate "primeval" nature within themselves, Europeans have instead become its more desirable prey.

[4] Patrick Brantingler (1988) is right when he asserts that Conrad's "version of evil —the form taken by Kurtz's Satanic behavior – is going native. Evil, in short, is African in Conrad's story; if it is also European, that is because some white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans. Conrad's stress on cannibalism, his identification of African customs with violence, lust, and madness, his metaphors of bestiality, death, and darkness, his suggestion that traveling in Africa is like traveling

In any case, if Marlow finds Kurtz a remarkable man despite his decline, it is because, at the moment of his death, he delivers an irrevocable judgment, casting a last glance at "the whole universe":

> He had summed up – he had judged. 'The horror!' […] After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief. It had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – the strange commingling of desire and hate […] It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory. (Conrad, 2018: 76)

Whereas Marlowe argued that the only means of confronting the truth revealed in the howling of the Congolese was to oppose it with another truth, that of the secular empire, Kurtz's last words mark the definitive failure of this attempt: the only truth that exists, in his eyes, is that of Africa, that part of the world where the earth, in its free state, discloses its hideousness. So much so, that the horror of existence revealed by this continent actually embodies the last word on the *earthly condition in its entirety*. If the messianic ideal of the empire proves thereby unattainable, including in Europe, what remains in Kurtz's judgement is a gesture of revolt against this universal truth. This is why the earth appears as both the place of his desire and his hatred: it remains the only place where the possibility of achieving salvation here below could be materially realized. This is the nihilistic impasse reached by the immanentization of transcendence brought about by imperial Gnosticism, whose only victory, unlike ancient Gnosticism, would be a sterile and hopeless uprising against matter and earthiness in general.

While Conrad's novella reveals the nihilism inherent in colonial imperiality, it also provides a detailed account of how this industrial enterprise disrupts the lives of the colonies in the pursuit of a utopian ideal. An ideal that, once implemented, creates a situation that appears to Marlow as a "fantastic invasion" because of its concrete consequences for both the land and its inhabitants. Indeed, the activities of the colonists, whether the laying out of railways, the transformation of the environment into percentages, the hunting of elephants, or the subjugation of the Congolese, impose on the whole of the Congolese territory an abstract logic which ends up re-enchanting it in accordance with the logic of capital (Vandertop, 2018). Furthermore, by becoming a purely quantifiable resource subject to generalized equivalence, the Congolese jungle and the labor of its inhabitants are stripped of any power to act. This is what Marlowe refers to as "the merry dance of death and trade" (Conrad, 2018: 15). This dance would be impossible, however, if the colonists were not imbued with the imperial

backward in time to primeval, infantile, but also hellish stages of existence-these features of the story are drawn from the repertoire of Victorian imperialism and racism that painted an entire continent dark" (p 262).

philosophy of history, and if their actions were not carried out with the explicit intention of taming the evil power attributed to the jungle through the "civilizing mission" of commodification. The deployment of capital's lethal logic is thus made possible by the violence inscribed in the imperial geography. If Marlowe repeatedly highlights the discrepancy between the colonists' ideal of efficiency and the crude reality of wasteful exploitation, this only underscores the fact that colonial imperiality is also a Roman-style enterprise of conquest, relying on brute force in order to tear as rapidly as possible the "treasure out of the bowels of the land" (Conrad, 2018: 32). In his report to the "International Association for the Suppression of Savage Customs", Kurtz draws all the consequences from this predatory behavior: while at the beginning he refers to all the benefits the Europeans can bring to the Congolese thanks to the supernatural character they assume in their eyes, an idea that leads Marlowe to imagine "an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence" (Conrad, 2018: 54), Kurtz adds a final sentence that reveals the fundamental logic of colonial imperiality: "Exterminate all the brutes!'' (Conrad, 2018: 54). The Secularocene may be based on an insurmountable impasse, but that does not prevent it from transforming the Earth according to a logic that is both genocidal and ecocidal.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, the woman at the piano is destined to remain in her sheltered world. In this occasion she assumes the form of Kurtz's fiancée, devastated by his death. When, at the end of the novella. Marlowe pays her a visit, she laments the fact that no one has been able to hear her beloved's last words. Marlowe replies to her that he stayed by his side until the end, but even though everything around him seems to be shouting the words: "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, 2018, p. 82), he is unable to reveal them: "I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether…" (Conrad, 2018: 83). The secret of the Secularocene is thus preserved, but not for long.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, much of the criticism devoted to Conrad's novella aims to demonstrate its condemnatory stance towards the colonial empire (White, 1996). But, as revealed by the preceding postcolonial ecocritical analysis of the novella, if any element of *Heart of Darkness* can be identified as anti-imperialist, it is not solely its assessment of the reality of colonial practice, but rather the fact that it unveils the insurmountable impasse of colonial imperiality itself: can one escape the horror of existence when Gnostic dualism has been immanentized? In other words, can one find salvation on earth when a part of it has been turned into a pure and simple symbol of evil? Doesn't this experience of Africa end up contaminating the experience of Europe itself? Probably without having this text in mind, Latour glosses over this problem to perfection:

> By seeking to achieve Paradise on Earth, one succeeds only in realizing Hell on Earth (…). The failure of this project leads those

> disappointed in Gnosticism to scorn matter even more, for its inability to rise to the level anticipated by the Ideal. Hence the strange position of objects, conceived at once as the sole reality and as the target of the deepest scorn. This is the most dangerous consequence of a counter-religion that, after turning against the divinities, then against the idea of God, turns once more against nature (…). The Gnostics can no longer enter into contact with the terrestrial. (Latour, 2017: 208-209)

The Secularocene is thus a deadly impasse. Once, however, the project of freeing ourselves from the earth within the earth itself proves impossible – as the current situation, marked by widespread ecological disaster, has made clear – , and earthiness has received its final verdict – The horror! The horror! –, the next step is to want to leave the earth for good. One only has to think of those contemporary Gnostics who dream of colonizing space.

So how do we get back to Earth? By liberating immanence from immanentization or, in other words, by giving up the desire to find salvation here below. Latour (2017) calls this new immanence, which takes into account the designs of all the actors on earth, "Gaia". If Gaia is opposed to utopia, if it "objects to any flight into the beyond" and "mistrusts the Apocalypse and everything that claims to jump to the end of time", if it is in one word "the great huntress of Gnostics", it is simply because it is the earth as finitude, "a very just and very worldly finitude" (Latour, 2017: 289).

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