



10.2478/abcsj-2025-0008

Tyrants at the Heart of Darkness:
Conradian Dictators in Golding, Steiner, Naipaul, and Foden

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Abstract

Since its publication in 1899, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been received as a fable addressing the nature of evil. However, Conrad's representation of Kurtz as a tyrannical figure and his indirect allusion to King Leopold II, the supreme ruler of the Congo Free State, also foreshadows the rise of 20th-century dictators, from Adolf Hitler to the military leaders in postcolonial countries such as Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin. In fact, whether set in Africa or elsewhere, post-war English novels, such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (1979), V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), and Giles Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), not only borrow and update the framework of Conrad's work but also critically expand its possibilities in a new context following Nazism and African decolonization. By shedding light on the intertextual relationships between *Heart of Darkness* and these later novels depicting dictatorship, this article reveals how these works respond to Conrad's legacy and draw on his mythical exploration of evil for their own critique of the problems of dictatorship or totalitarianism.

Keywords: dictators; *Heart of Darkness*, Africa; decolonization; Nazism

1. Introductory Issues

Since its publication in 1899, Joseph Conrad's classic novella *Heart of Darkness*, depicting the protagonist Marlow's journey to rescue the

“great” Kurtz dying in the deep jungle in the Congo Free State, “has acquired the status of a modern myth addressing the nature of evil” (Simmons 15). In fact, the work has been generally regarded as a fable that deals with various issues of human evil, from “the heart of darkness in the soul of civilization” to “the banal evil resident in the day-to-day conformity of ordinary, decent people like Marlow” (Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin 586).ⁱ Of course, Conrad’s portrayal of Africa as the setting of such exploration of human depravity has sometimes been criticized as a product of “the heyday of imperialism” (Watts 45). In his essay written in the 1970s, for instance, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe severely criticized Conrad’s depiction of the Congo natives as voiceless, enslaved savages in the text. Achebe denounces Conrad as a racist (12), claiming that “*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world,’ the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (3).

Despite such criticism, however, it is also true that a number of critics and writers have sought to defend *Heart of Darkness*,ⁱⁱ which was originally inspired by the author’s own experience of visiting the Congo from June to December 1890 (Knowles and Moore 82). One of the most important advocates of Conrad is V. S. Naipaul, a postcolonial writer of Indian descent, who was born in Trinidad under Britain in 1932. Naipaul emphasizes in his essay “Conrad’s Darkness” (1974) that his “rediscovery” of Conrad began when he reread *Heart of Darkness* and found the significance of its “African background,” or “‘the demoralized land’ of plunder and licensed cruelty.” Naipaul continues, “The background now seems to me to be the most effective part of the book” (*The Return* 215). Naipaul is also fascinated with Conrad’s treatment of the colonial world, describing it in his 1981 interview as follows: “[I]n a practical way I cannot imagine Virginia Woolf or Proust or any of the other writers we admire considering the world I come from as being of any value. It is remarkable that Conrad could look at that world with the utmost seriousness. What an achievement! Can you imagine the pressure not to see it?” (Jussawalla 80).

Naipaul's advocacy of *Heart of Darkness* reminds us of the important fact that Conrad's fiction is not a mere oversimplification of Africa but, rather, a "modern myth" about human evil that incorporates the grotesque images of actual colonial exploitation, violence, and massacres in the Congo Free State under Belgian King Leopold II. As scholars such as Marysa Demoor and Adam Hochschild have pointed out, *Heart of Darkness* avoids any overt ethical imperative or moral code, yet it lays bare the tyrant's cruel and inhuman treatment of the Congo population (Demoor 2; Hochschild 143). Therefore, considering Conrad's awareness of King Leopold's notorious colonial policy, Marlow's description of "black shadows of disease and starvation" – referring to dying enslaved Africans lying in the gloom – can be reevaluated as an attempt to expose the true atrocities in the Congo: "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" (Conrad 118).

In this sense, even though Conrad never mentions his name in the text, it is King Leopold's unseen but limitless power that influences almost every aspect of what Naipaul calls the "African background" of *Heart of Darkness*. In addition to this invisible supreme ruler, Conrad's "modern myth" also presents Kurtz, a first-rate ivory trader sent by a Belgian company as chief of the Inner Station in the Congo, as a potential tyrant that subjugates voiceless African people. In the novella, Kurtz, who has "the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour" (155-56), is praised as "a prodigy" and "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (127). And Kurtz's remarkable "ability to talk, his words" or "the gift of expression" strengthens his dark charisma (152). According to a young Russian sailor, whom Marlow encounters during the journey, Kurtz could make the African tribe adore him as a demigod due to his ability to "be very terrible" (162). While blindly admiring Kurtz, this Russian man reveals that Kurtz even threatened to shoot him one day. The man explains how he eventually yielded to Kurtz's unreasonable demand without losing his cult worship for this tyrannical, brutal figure:

Well, I had a small lot of ivory the chief of that village near my house gave me. You see I used to shoot game for them. Well, he wanted it, and wouldn't hear reason. He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country, because he could do so, and had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased. And it was true too. I gave him the ivory. (Conrad 162-63)

According to Cedric Watts, this complex characterization of “[t]he charismatic Kurtz, brilliant yet deprived, corrupted yet fascinating,” descends from the literary tradition of fictional “hero-villains,” such as Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), Montoni in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Faust in Goethe’s play (1809, 1833), and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) (47). Notably, William Shakespeare’s Richard III and Macbeth can also be added to this list. But more importantly, as Watts notes, “depiction of the ways in which men in Africa served, and died for, a remorseless organization” in *Heart of Darkness* poignantly foreshadows the tragic events of the future, from World War I to the totalitarian violence in Europe between the 1930s and the early 1940s (50). In fact, by stressing Conrad’s skillful portrayal of “men dwarfed by the system that dominates them and by an alien environment,” Watts further argues that “Hitlerism and the Holocaust seemed to have been anticipated in the depiction of Kurtz’s charismatic depravity” (50).

This article extends Watts’s discussion by showing how Conrad’s representations of the exploited Africans under the oppressive rule of the absent tyrant, King Leopold II, and his symbolic descriptions of Kurtz as a quasi-dictator, have influenced various writers after World War II, including not only Naipaul but also William Golding, George Steiner, and Giles Foden. Though previous studies have overlooked such intertextual relationships, the very framework and characterization that Conrad implemented in his novella had both direct and indirect impacts on the above authors’ later works, which dramatize the problems of evil in relation to dictatorship or totalitarianism in their times. Of course, neither King Leopold II nor Kurtz are actually “dictators” in the strict sense because the former is a monarch, and the latter is only a chief of the Inner Station. Nevertheless, Conrad’s portrayal of King Leopold’s horrible rule

and Kurtz's charismatic authority can be linked to the important aspects of literary dictators in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1979), Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), and Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), which critically deal with various types of evil, from Nazism to postcolonial violence.

Hence, by shedding light on these novels in the Conradian vein that fictionalize actual dictators, this article will explore their reinterpretations of Conrad's mythical exploration of evil in the new contexts of the late twentieth century. First, I will reveal how Golding and Steiner sought to update the framework of *Heart of Darkness* by responding to Conrad's legacies in their own novels about the historical trauma of Hitlerism and Nazism. Then, in order to examine the "afterlife" of Conrad's "modern myth" in postcolonial contexts, I will also discuss Naipaul and Foden, who created dictator(ship) novels set in Africa that satirize autocratic African leaders such as Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin.

2. The Ghosts of Hitler in Golding and Steiner

"We come after [the Holocaust]," Steiner once noted in his preface to *Language and Silence* (1967): "We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (ix). If Steiner was a critic considering the possibility of literature and art after the Nazis' complete destruction of Leavisian liberal humanism, Golding can be regarded as a writer who sought to dramatize his own pessimistic belief that he had gained during World War II: "[M]an produces evil as a bee produces honey" (*The Hot Gates* 87). Although Golding, like Steiner, views the war as a historical watershed that changed almost every aspect of human life, as will be expounded upon later, his awareness of evil can be linked to Conrad's "modern myth" written more than fifty years earlier. From this perspective, this section will reframe the works of Golding and Steiner, which depict Nazism as an epitome of human evil, in relation to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as their literary predecessor.

Golding contends that he was part of the generation that "did on the whole have a liberal and naïve belief in the perfectability [sic] of man" (*A*

Moving Target 163). However, his experiences of joining the Royal Navy and fighting in the war against the Nazis forced Golding to reconsider his initial view of humanity.ⁱⁱⁱ As the author himself states in an interview with Jack Biles, *Lord of the Flies*, his first and most famous novel published in 1954, “was an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of the individual” (41). The novel tells the story of a group of young English boys marooned on a South Pacific jungle island after their plane is shot down in the middle of a nuclear war. At first, in order to survive and eventually to be rescued, they try to form their own society on the isolated island by peacefully electing Ralph as their chief and by creating democratic rules. However, the younger group of boys begins to fear an imaginary creature called “the Beast.” Eventually, cooperation between the boys ends when Jack, the arrogant leader of the choir, organizes his followers into savage-like hunters and gradually gains autocratic power within the community. As Virginia Tiger notes, although Golding’s novel delineating Jack’s violence and authoritative rule “was written under the indirect presence of such great traumas as Belsen, Dachau, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the direct presence of the Cold War” (24), it can be argued that Hitler and Nazism are two crucial motifs for the text. For Golding, however, the novel is not merely a criticism of Hitler himself or his totalitarian regime itself. Rather, Golding’s focus is mainly on what he calls “the defects” that every human being has without exception. He explains the point as follows: “My book was to say: you think that now the war is over and an evil thing destroyed, you are safe because you are naturally kind and decent. But I [Golding] know why the thing rose in Germany. I know it could happen in any country. It could happen here” (*The Hot Gates* 89).

Yet, in his conversation with Biles, Golding does not reveal what “the defects” of the individual are. However, by taking into account S. J. Boyd’s investigation of the theme of “evil” symbolized by Jack (232),^{iv} the charismatic leader who becomes an absolute dictator not only by defeating the former chief, Ralph, but also by killing his “enemies” such as Simon and Piggy, it is possible to claim that Golding’s exploration of the dark side of humanity has something to do with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad's symbolic representation of evil does resonate with Golding's work. Even though Golding once denied having read Conrad's novella before writing his first novel (Keating 215), which is set not in Africa but on an uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean, there is a strong link between these works, both of which have similarly been described as a "modern myth."^v In other words, Golding might not have explicitly drawn inspiration directly from Conrad, but they do belong in the same literary legacy of depicting tyranny and human depravity. For example, denoting the final scene of *Lord of the Flies*, where Ralph weeps for "the darkness of man's heart" after being rescued by a naval officer (284), several critics have interpreted the phrase as an allusion to Conrad's novella (Boyd 201; George 15). Moreover, Golding's novel offers various other analogies with *Heart of Darkness* in terms of its fable-like structure, elaborate descriptions of nature, and representation of the innermost jungle as an abyss, where Simon, a Christ-like figure who is finally victimized, realizes that the Beast – as a symbol of evil – exists within all human beings. In the following excerpt, Simon, at the heart of darkness, comes across the pig's head that Jack and his hunters left as an offering for the Beast:

Simon's head was tilted slightly up. His eyes could not break away and the Lord of the Flies hung in space before him.
 "What are you doing out here all alone? Aren't you afraid of me?"
 Simon shook.
 "There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast."
 Simon's mouth labored, brought forth audible words.
 "Pig's head on a stick."
 "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!"
 said the head. For a moment or two the forest and the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (Golding, *Lord* 200)

In the above scene, the pig's head in the thick forest as the Lord of the Flies (Beelzebub) may remind readers of Kurtz's mysterious final words before his death: "The horror, the horror" (Conrad 178). Whereas *Heart of Darkness* implies almost nothing about Kurtz's final vision that horrifies

him, Golding's novel more directly visualizes the Conradian existence of evil within "civilized" English boys.

Although Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is unrelated to Africa and never portrays any Indigenous islanders, the novel does resemble Conrad's text in that it responds to the modern problems of Eurocentrism. In contrast to Conrad, whose seemingly apolitical description of King Leopold's oppressive colonial rule of the Congo may leave room for misinterpretation, Golding's sarcastic strategy to transform "great" English boys into bloody savages – to depict their "Nazification" – is much more direct and overt. As illustrated by his references in the novel to imperialistic sea adventure tales for children (41),^{vi} Golding's *Lord of the Flies* attempts to overthrow the longstanding literary tradition of portraying English boys as the exemplary bearers of the expansion of the "great" British Empire. In this sense, Jack and his hunters are the very antitheses of the "civilized" European figures in literature who justify their imperialist conquest of undeveloped lands to enlighten savages.^{vii} Hence, if Kurtz's "horror" refers to the evil within Europeans exploiting African colonies, it might be possible to link Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Golding's fiction, demythologizing the "greatness" of British/European civilization and emphasizing Jack's hunters becoming "boy Nazis" (Boyd 232). In this respect, Jack's following statement sounds quite ironic: "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English, and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things" (*Lord* 52-53).

In many ways, Kurtz and Jack are similarly portrayed as charismatic villains or ruthless tyrants, and the former's motto – "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 155) – resonates with the latter's slogan: "*Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!*" (Golding, *Lord* 213). What is important in this instance, however, is the fact that, in spite of Golding's denial of having read *Heart of Darkness*, his character Jack can be seen as a combination of Hitler, the real-life dictator whom he calls "an evil genius" (Biles 38), and Conrad's Kurtz.

Like Hitler, who legally gained power after the Nazis' victory in the March 1933 German federal election, Jack is democratically instated as leader of the choir by the elected chief, Ralph (Golding, *Lord* 23).

However, in addition to refusing to keep the signal fire burning and breaking the community's rules, this young dictator, with inborn "offhand authority" in his voice (20), also builds a fort for his hunters who colorfully paint their faces with mud, ousts Ralph from leadership, murders Simon and Piggy, and finally sets fire to the forest to find and "hunt" the former chief. Despite his frequent use of violence and negation of democracy — "Bollocks to the rules! We're strong — we hunt!" (123) — the starving boys blindly obey Jack because it is he, not Ralph, who gives them meat. The boys end up becoming his accomplices in killing innocent Simon and Piggy, which perfectly demonstrates Golding's own simple belief: "[E]very single one of us could be Nazis" (Biles 3).

Thus, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* can be situated within the same genealogy. While Jack is, like Kurtz and the Führer, "an evil genius," Golding also believes that every society or nation can produce the next Hitler. This segues to the discussion of Golding's contemporary critic and novelist, Steiner. In Steiner's controversial 1979 novel, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*,^{viii} this Jewish author seeks not only to connect Conrad's novella with Hitler more directly than Golding does but also to reexamine the German dictator's evil "geniusness" itself. Several critics, including Alvin H. Rosenfeld, have pointed out the Conradian aspect of Steiner's novel (84), which tells the story of Holocaust survivor Emmanuel Lieber's group of Jewish Nazi hunters in search of Hitler's hideout in the Amazon jungle in South America. Although the story is neither about King Leopold's Congo, nor about Africa, Steiner's dense and lengthy descriptions of swampland and forest are clearly evocative of *Heart of Darkness*, and the "Kurtzian role" is taken by the "aged but still eloquent Adolf Hitler" appearing in this novel (Watts 60).

Despite its initial commercial and critical success, Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* "was swamped by an avalanche of condemnation" (G. Rosenfeld 244), because the book attracted attention in the middle of the so-called "Hitler Wave," a "resurgence of interests in the deceased Führer" from the 1960s to the mid-1980s (217). At the time, there was a public desire to understand Hitler as "a human being" rather than as an unusual "demonic figure" (G. Rosenfeld 217-18). Significantly,

however, the novel presents a critical view of this trend. For example, Lieber's speech to his fellow hunters in the sixth chapter is evidently against such an attitude. Ordering them not to let Hitler speak (44), Lieber continues:

Gag him if necessary, or stop your ears as did the sailor. If he is allowed speech he will trick you and escape. Or find easy death. His tongue is like no other. It is the tongue of the basilisk, a-hundred-forked and quick as flame. As is written in the learned Nathaniel of Mainz: there shall come upon the earth in the time of night a man surpassing eloquent. . . . Do not let him speak freely. You will hear the crack of age in his voice. He is old. Old as the loathing which dogs us since Abraham. Let him speak to you and you will think of him as a man. (Steiner, *The Portage* 44-45)

Lieber's speech, which postulates "the distinction between Hitler and those who fight him" (Butter 160), serves to emphasize the dictator's inhumanity as the absolute Other. Here, Hitler's eloquence seems to overlap with Kurtz's "gift of expression" (Conrad 152).

However, it is not this statement by Lieber but Hitler's own message in the final chapter of the novel that has drawn various criticisms. In the speech, given by a ninety-year-old Hitler after being discovered in the depths of the jungle, the dictator seeks to justify his evil deeds in an extremely radical way. Hitler claims that his racism is nothing but a parody of the Jews' racism (Steiner, *The Portage* 164), and remarks that the Nazis' notorious idea of a "master race" behind the Holocaust originates from the Jewish notion of "a chosen people," or "[t]he only race on earth chosen, exalted, made singular among mankind" (161). After accusing the Jews of inventing Judaism, Christianity, and Marxism, and calling himself the "true Messiah" whose "final solution" made the state of Israel possible (169), Hitler eventually asserts: "Gentlemen of the tribunal: I took my doctrine from you. I fought the blackmail of the ideal with which you have hounded mankind. My crimes were matched and surpassed by those of others. The *Reich* begat Israel. These are my last words" (170). In *Imaging Hitler* (1985), A. H. Rosenfeld severely condemns this speech, arguing that what readers hear as Hitler's voice in the novel, which calls Nazism "a travesty of Judaism," is "recognizably Steiner's own" (98).^{ix} From this

perspective, according to him, such a statement could not have come from the real Hitler (98). A. H. Rosenfeld thus blames Steiner for fabricating Hitler's message and even implies a possible link between the novel and "the writings of the revisionists" (99). Nonetheless, Steiner never "revises" history because the very premise of this book – Hitler did not kill himself in Berlin in 1945 and survived for nearly forty years hiding in the Conradian jungle – is overtly fictional. Hence, Steiner's depiction of an aged, fictionalized Hitler in his nineties serves not as an authentic portrayal of the dictator during World War II but as an imaginative construct distinct from historical reality.

A. H. Rosenfeld puts too much emphasis on the fact that the novel ends with Hitler's voice without fully considering the importance of Lieber's speech (98). Hence, it is necessary to pay further attention to this contrasting statement in the earlier chapter, which creates perfect symmetry with the ex-Führer's final message. In fact, Lieber, ordering his companions not to listen to (or sympathize with) Hitler, sets a clear boundary between this demonic genius as the absolute Other and those who fight him, while the dictator's later remarks near the end of the novel emphasize the affinities between the Nazis and ordinary people, which happen to include the Jews. This very contrast implies a paradoxical dilemma in the period after Auschwitz. Lieber's attitude of viewing Hitler as an unusual and inhuman monster may, ironically, lead to the Nazism that victimized some groups of people (such as the Jews) as exceptionally inhuman. However, if one wholly agrees with Hitler's notion of Nazism not as a special kind of "evil" but as a mere product of human civilization, the conclusion of such agreement leads to blind support for the Nazis. In this respect, the reader must not take either of the speeches at face value. Instead, a more proper approach is to read Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* as a successor to Conrad's ambiguous myth that explores the problems of human evil in a new context after the Holocaust by dramatizing such a dilemma itself, rather than as realist fiction presenting an assertive discussion on Hitler. Steiner, in this sense, goes beyond Conrad and Golding because he effectively presents the ethical aporia of viewing Hitler as an inhumane epitome of evil.

3. African Dictators in Naipaul and Foden

Based on the overview presented in this article thus far, Golding and Steiner appear to have responded to *Heart of Darkness* in different ways by reinterpreting Conrad's modern myth about human evil in the European context of Nazism and Hitlerism in the twentieth century. Conversely, V. S. Naipaul and Giles Foden (the latter of whom is a British novelist born in Warwickshire in 1967) placed a much stronger emphasis on Africa as the Conradian topos in their works by fictionalizing President Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic (DR) of the Congo (Zaire at the time)^x and President Idi Amin in Uganda respectively, despite neither writer hailing from this continent. In Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) and Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), both authors utilize their own "outsiderness" by connecting their non-African narrators' observations about African dictatorship with Marlow's innocent view of King Leopold's colonial Congo and Kurtz's evil charisma that mesmerizes him. In this sense, these works can be defined as dictatorship fiction set in Africa, or simply dictator fiction, which focuses on "the dictator as a character in the text" or "includ[es] focalization through the dictator" (Armillas-Tiseyra 9).

The influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* on both Naipaul and Foden is apparent. Even at a superficial level, for example, Naipaul's novel, which is largely set in "the town at the bend in the river" (*A Bend* 4), modeled on the actual Congo River, skillfully incorporates the images of rivers in Conrad's classic work (Bruce 127; Coovadia 29). Moreover, *A Bend in the River*, which depicts events occurring in the DR of the Congo "against the backdrop of civil unrest" immediately after its independence from Belgium in 1960 (Krishnan 139), can also be viewed as a narrative about the nation's destiny, long after Marlow's journey to the heart of Africa.

In addition to Naipaul, who traced the footsteps of Conrad/Marlow by traveling through the DR of the Congo under Mobutu in 1965 and 1968 (Jussawalla 46), Foden also referred to Conrad as a source of literary inspiration (Metcalf 17). According to Oliver Lovesey, Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* "is a kind of latter-day *Heart of Darkness*, with a

sometimes charming monster at its center” (91). What Lovesey refers to as a “center” here is Ugandan President, Amin, who ruled the country for roughly eight years after launching a military coup against Milton Obote in 1971. Interestingly, according to Amin’s biography published in 2020, there is a clear link between this charismatic, eccentric dictator and *Heart of Darkness*: “Conrad’s story was actually inspired by events that took place near Amin’s home area in north-west Uganda, and which were to have a direct connection with his rule” (Leopold 2).

Importantly, while the Conradian motif of human evil is mostly associated with Nazism or Eurocentrism in Golding and Steiner, it also exists within the African postcolonial nations themselves in the aforementioned novels by Naipaul and Foden. It is obvious that both Foden’s fictionalized Amin and Naipaul’s Big Man, a Mobutu-like imaginary dictator figure, are evocative of the ominous image of King Leopold II, the tyrant of Conrad’s time, who epitomized the evil of European civilization. In his 1975 essay, for example, Naipaul overtly states that Mobutu, like King Leopold II, owned Zaire (*The Return* 176). In the same way that the Belgium tyrant indirectly casts a horrible shadow on almost every event in *Heart of Darkness*, the Big Man rules his people as the nation’s powerful “heart of darkness” without directly appearing in the text at all.

The fact that this anachronistic phantom of King Leopold II still underlies the fictional African dictators in *A Bend in the River* and *The Last King of Scotland* symbolically illustrates that many of the autocratic leaders in the postcolonial nations on the African continent had been the byproducts of European powers that abandoned their former colonies. In this sense, the period around the 1970s, when several African countries gained independence, was both the age of decolonization and of “recolonization” by newly established juntas and despotic regimes who were economically and militarily supported by Western powers (Spencer 1). While European colonial powers had withdrawn, Indigenous populations faced a new era of oppression under African dictatorships, which operated with the lingering influence and support of former colonial powers or other global superpowers.

Naipaul, who visited the DR of the Congo twice, witnessed in the landscape several years after decolonization “the ruins of civilization” (Jussawalla 46). He fictionalized them in his novel, published long after his final visit to the country, as the half-destroyed town near the river abandoned by the Belgians (*A Bend* 4). Even more significant here is his cynical depiction of the town’s radical transformation. As is implied in the way Naipaul represents what he describes as “a period of boom” in the area called the Domain (100), the author intends to find embodiments of evil in the rapid Westernization or Europeanization of Africa. Like Marlow on the *Nellie* on the River Thames – who narrates the story of his journey up the Congo River – Salim, the narrator of Naipaul’s novel, an Indian Muslim immigrant, not only talks about the local Africans’ traditional life near the river but also criticizes the government project of constructing “a two-hundred-mile ‘industrial park’” along it (9). Under the strong but authoritative leadership of the Big Man advocating developmental dictatorship, the newly built business areas in the town achieve economic growth and cultural prosperity. Additionally, due to the recommission and extension of “the airfield” and the “telephone system,” or of the development of “new means of transportation” (100–01), the town even begins to attract foreign businesspersons from the capital, who bring with them the sophisticated “touch of Europe and the big city” (102).

In *A Bend in the River*, Salim’s (or Naipaul’s) view of the Big Man’s propaganda about such a “New Africa” – “Under the rule of our new President the miracle had occurred: Africans had become modern men who built in concrete and glass and sat in cushioned chairs covered in imitation velvet” (116) – is quite cynical, even though a number of well-educated indigenous elites are full of “romantic” hope for the bright future of their country (138). Ironically enough, the Big Man’s vision for a “New Africa” is nothing but the Westernization of African society, a notion not that far removed from what Conrad portrayed in *Heart of Darkness* as the evil within European civilization in the age of imperialism and colonialism. Although the Big Man frequently resorts to violence and “conducts a Mao-style purge” to persecute political opponents in his country (Krishnan 147), this brutal dictator must nonetheless rely heavily on Europeans in many situations, as he is merely the leader of a small

developing country making efforts to survive the international conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs. Hence, in addition to hiring “white” soldiers to suppress a rebellion and maintain public order (86–90), the Big Man must also promote his project of building a new town in the bush by depending entirely on “European builders and artisans” rather than native Africans (*A Bend* 115).

The Big Man also symbolizes the contradiction that Africa faced at the time. As delineated in the latter part of the novel, he has gradually strengthened his nationalist tendencies, while promoting economic development supported by Europe during the Cold War. According to Raymond, the Big Man’s European advisor, the “photographs of him in African costume” are positively received by the public as “a picture of all Africans” (155). This “patriotic” president also intends to act as a representative of ordinary African people, delivering his speeches in a “mixed and simple language,” or “the language of the drinking booth and the street brawl” (241). Finally, as well as purging his advisor, Raymond, who has theoretically supported his political decisions and the “New Africa” project, the Big Man announces his radical policy of “taking away everything” from all foreigners in the nation (*A Bend* 299). As is apparent from the president’s bloody executions of political opponents, reverse discrimination against non-African people, and the strategic use of false propaganda, the country finds itself in the process of horrible “recolonization,” as if the evil deeds by King Leopold II were being repeated.

Naipaul critically represents the Big Man’s myopic vision for a “New Africa” as a mere revival of anachronistic Eurocentrism. At the same time, Naipaul also identifies the roots of human evil in the Big Man’s brand of exclusive nationalism. Of course, as Edward W. Said notably states in *Reflections on Exile* (2000),^{xi} it is possible to criticize Naipaul’s generally negative, cynical portrayal of postcolonial Africa and his seemingly ambiguous attitude towards it. Besides, despite Naipaul’s analytical depiction of the dilemma of a newly independent nation, or the political tension between nationalism and Westernization, the author’s interest in the Conradian human evil appears only in Salim’s indirect reference to the dictator’s policies and his despotic regime. Possibly

because the focus of Naipaul's exploration of evil is not just on a dictator himself but on dictatorship as a social system, the Big Man is – unlike Golding's Jack or Steiner's Hitler – presented as a powerful but invisible "center" never directly appearing in the text, even though his slogans and photographs are present almost everywhere in the country (*A Bend* 139). Naipaul's Big Man is thus an absent epitome of evil that reminds us not only of King Leopold II in Conrad's modern myth but also of other "invisible" tyrants in literary fiction, such as Arthur Koestler's Number One and George Orwell's Big Brother.

Conversely, Foden's *The Last King of Scotland*, considered one of the most successful English novels fictionalizing Idi Amin to have been published both inside and outside Uganda,^{xii} can be regarded as a text that takes a different approach to the problems of dictatorship and evil. By recreating the Kurtz–Marlow relationship in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the complex relationship between Amin and Nicholas Garrigan – an imaginary Scottish doctor who happens to become the president's medical advisor – Foden more directly explores the fascination of evil than Naipaul does. In other words, while Naipaul mainly pays attention to the horror of the dictatorial evil, Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* more explicitly reinterprets Kurtz's charismatic depravity attracting the Russian sailor and African natives in the new context of the twentieth century. Hence, it can be said that Foden's approach to this topic is not only faithful to Conrad's original novella but also similar to Golding's problematization of Hitler's attractive but dangerous "geniusness" in *Lord of the Flies*, as well as to Steiner's interest in what he calls "a subtle, corrupting fascination" of evil (*In Bluebeard's Castle* 32) shown in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*

As a matter of fact, Nicholas, the narrator/protagonist of Foden's novel, clearly admits that "Amin was a charismatic character" (Foden 327). Nicholas is overwhelmed by Amin's evil charisma and his Kurtzian power of expression. When he first sees Amin giving a speech in public, he feels that there is "something fascinating" about Amin (96) and realizes that the president's indescribable "aura" has "much more to do with the rhythms of his voice" than his traditional African costume (95). He also enthusiastically praises Amin's "quality of naked, visceral attraction that

commanded the attention, mustering assent, overcoming resistance – fostering the loss of oneself, or so it felt, in the very modulations of his voice” (Foden 96-97). Despite his status and closeness to Amin – and his intelligence and ethics as a doctor – Nicholas, highly trusted by the president, is slowly transformed into the president’s accomplice because he is both attracted and threatened by this brutal leader. Even after realizing the horrible fact that Amin is responsible for the genocide of his political opponents, Nicholas continues turning away from the reality without reacting to the following report from his friend Waziri: “I saw the lorries taking the bodies myself, even an arm sticking out from under the tailgate. It was disgusting. They say they have dumped them in the forest and that they had put them all in one room, with dynamite. . . . They cut the throats of those who survived” (Foden 106). Finally, Nicholas is even compelled to help Amin escape Uganda during the military coup and the catastrophic war with Tanzania.

Significantly, a key difference between Foden’s *The Last King of Scotland* and the other Conradian novels in this discussion is its first-person narration. In fact, narrated entirely by Nicholas, who has decided to write a book about his days in Uganda and about Amin’s past “deeds” (18), *The Last King of Scotland* can be interpreted as a story about the difficulty of dealing with a dictator as a charismatic, “attractive” evil in literary writing. Like the actual writers in the real world such as Golding, Steiner, Naipaul, and probably Foden himself, who represented dictators in their own fictional works, Nicholas in the novel is an author writing about a dictator with an awareness of the “fascination” of evil. He aims to expose the atrocious abyss of Amin’s rule by depicting burning houses (113), “a large pile of [dead] bodies” on the street (277), and “a faint yet piercing scream” from those who are arrested and cruelly tortured in a secret chamber (Foden 237).

Ironically, however, what is even more impressive and appealing in Nicholas’ writing is his portrayal of Amin as an insane, morbid, paranoid, and megalomaniac fool calling himself “the most powerful figure in the world” (11), “the greatest politician” (208), “the hero of Africa” (209), and the “last king” of Scotland (Foden 116). In this sense, the readers of Nicholas’s text may easily misread the narrator’s intention when they see

Amin in his narrative as “a sometimes charming monster” (Lovesey 91), or even as an attractive, comical buffoon. Moreover, Nicholas himself is so intensely trapped by a fascination with Amin that he realizes a terrible fact: he has “become enough like Amin to contemplate killing him for the sheer pleasure of it” (Foden 261). Foden’s novel thus seems to transform the Conradian notion of fascination with evil into a more specific problem – representing a dictator in literature. In this way, Foden’s novel can be read as dictator *metafiction* about the ethical difficulty of creating dictator fiction, because its narrator himself deeply feels that he cannot get the proper distance from the phantom of his charismatic former boss, Amin.

4. Conclusion

Although Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was written long before World Wars I and II, it can, as Birgit and Daniel Maier-Katkin suggest, be reinterpreted as a myth in the future context of a “modernity [that] produced Auschwitz, atomic and hydrogen bombs, napalm, ethnic cleansing, and ecological disasters” (590–91). Moreover, Conrad’s representation of the charismatic Kurtz and his indirect allusion to the absent tyrant, Belgian King Leopold II, also foreshadow the era of dictators from Hitler to the military leaders in postcolonial countries such as Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin. Although Conrad’s novella has not been entirely free from criticism, especially in terms of its depiction of African people and colonial Congo, the legacy of this modern myth and its probing of human evil can be found in the works of various later authors such as Golding, Steiner, Naipaul, and Foden.

Whether set in Africa or elsewhere, the novels by these writers did not merely borrow and update the framework of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by transforming Kurtz into new dictators or utilize Conrad’s original setting and motifs. It can be argued that the novels also critically expanded its possibilities in a new context following the Holocaust and African decolonization. In other words, their works have clearly shown that Conrad’s myth has never lost its actuality, and rereading and responding to it can still play a vital role when thinking about both universal and specific problems of human evil from Nazism to dictatorial

powers in developing nations. In fact, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* dramatizes the birth of evil among "great" English boys, led by the Hitlerian (or Kurtzian) character, Jack, and tells the story of their "Nazification" on an isolated island. Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*, set in South America, explores how one should treat Hitler's phantom as an epitome of evil. Furthermore, in addition to Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* satirizing Mobutu's DR of Congo, Foden's *The Last King of Scotland*, which fictionalizes the rise and fall of Ugandan President Amin, deals with the problems of evil in an African nation after its independence from Europe. The latter can also be interpreted as fiction about the difficulty of fictionalizing tyranny or dictatorship, which the actual authors from Conrad to Foden himself have challenged through their works. Accordingly, in the novels drawing inspiration from *Heart of Darkness* that this article has investigated, Conrad's original notion of evil is reconsidered in light of the new political contexts in the twentieth century, enabling the writers to uncover and tackle the dark side of humanity still very much extant in the contemporary world.

Notes:

ⁱ Birgit and Daniel Maier-Katkin argue as follows: "*Heart of Darkness* was written more than sixty years before Hannah Arendt's seminal discussion of the banality of evil. Nevertheless, Conrad captures the banal essence of evil in Marlow's lie as ordinary, common place, familiar, and perhaps even comfortable, rather than monstrous, spectacular, or satanic. That evil is banal does not diminish its overall impact, nor the harm it causes" (599–600).

ⁱⁱ Edward Said is one of them. His PhD thesis, published as *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) is on Conrad. Moreover, Said's reinterpretation of *Heart of Darkness* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is also influential (21-37).

ⁱⁱⁱ For Golding's war experiences, see John Carey's biography (82-110).

^{iv} Boyd states that "It is the exploration of Jack's 'next time' that will occupy much of the remainder of *Lord of the Flies*. By fixing incipient evil within Jack, Golding reverses the sanguine premise of nineteenth-century adventure stories that locate evil in the alien or mysterious forces of the outside world. . . . Hitler's gas chambers revealed man's inherent evil. His followers were not Ballantyne's savage cannibals or desperate pirates whose evil magically dissipated upon their conversion to Christianity. Rather they were products of that very Christian civilization that presumably guarantees their impossibility" (232).

^v K. Chellappan, for instance, is one of the critics who calls *Lord of the Flies* “a modern myth” (3).

^{vi} In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding refers to R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1857), R. L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), and Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* (1930). Golding’s critique of sea adventure novels for children can also be found in his nonfiction pieces (*The Hot Gates* 106; *A Moving Target* 163).

^{vii} This is represented by, for example, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.

^{viii} The novel first appeared in *The Kenyon Review* in 1979 and was published as a book in the UK in 1981 and in the US in 1982.

^{ix} Steiner surely shows this idea in the second chapter of *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (31-48).

^x In 1971, Mobutu displayed his supreme authority by changing the name of the country to Zaire. However, after the fall of Mobutu in 1997, it was changed back to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

^{xi} In *Reflections on Exile*, Said criticized Naipaul, calling him “a kind of belated Kipling” (115).

^{xii} According to Abasi Kiyimba’s article on “Amin fiction,” “For the literary character of Uganda, the Amin experience was a significant turning point, because it inspired large volumes of literature” (124).

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