
A Journey to « The Devil's Paradise »: Conrad and Rivera in the Rubber Boom Inferno

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Infernal places in the Americas

Across the vast American continent, many places venerated by Native-American people remain, to this day, branded with infernal names. One example is “The Grizzly Bear Lodge” in the U.S. state of Wyoming, which was officially renamed “The Devil’s Tower” by Colonel Irving Dodge in 1875. The mountain is sacred to many Native American tribes, who regard the official name as an insult to their cultures.

Another example is *El infiernito* in Villa de Leyva, Colombia, a fertility temple and an astronomical observatory built by the Muisca People. Spanish conquistadores branded it “Small inferno” and the site is still known by that name in the present day.

During the European conquest and colonization, the native deities were often associated with the devil, either owing to some vague iconic resemblance — as is the case of *El tío de la mina* in the Bolivian mines of Potosi — or to a purely arbitrary will to catechize. If one somewhat understands how these sacred places acquired infernal names in the distant past, it is less easy to understand why they retain them into the present.

This phenomenon can be considered as pertaining to the clear-cut separation of wilderness and civilization practiced by Western culture — a distinction that largely holds today, especially in many urban sectors in South America. This binary opposition sets the city, symbolizing order and civilization, Catholic or Christian religion, against the feared wilderness, which is often represented as savage, chaotic, corrupt, unchristian, and, certainly, diabolic. One of the first works of South American literature to articulate this separation is *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie*, by Argentina’s president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. *Facundo* was published in 1845, at a historical moment when the natives from the Pampas and the Patagonia were being exterminated in the name of civilization. With *Facundo*, it is clear that the mystery surrounding the wild had only deepened since the sixteenth-century Spanish chronicles of the Indies from the time of the Conquistadores. In the

nineteenth-century works, fictional and historical elements are recurrently merged, and mythical and monstrous creatures are often placed in the forests of the “New World.” These terrifying icons are cast with dreadful features drawn from canonical works of Western literature, such as the chivalry romances, *The Travels of Marco Polo* and the Bible.

The rainforest is, perhaps, the most iconic case of all. Feared and mysterious to this day, it is held to be a “green Inferno” or a “swallowing vortex” capable of devouring men like the Inferno of Dante. With respect to the Amazon, the forest’s reputation owes partly to the popularity of José Eustasio Rivera’s *La Vorágine* (1924), *The Vortex*,¹ which has earned a place in the canon of South American literature. Rivera’s work, however, is only one of several examples². There is no shortage of “infernal” names for places in the Amazon. These names often coincide with modern, industrial attempts to extract raw materials, as is the case of the rubber boom that *La Vorágine* describes. These “infernal” places are not only associated with difficulties of such extractive enterprises faced, but also with the great number of human losses incurred in the process.

The Devil’s Railway and *The Devil’s Paradise*

One of the most infamous “infernal” places in the Amazon jungle is “The Devil’s Railway” (*El ferrocarril del Diablo*). This railway was built to facilitate the export of Bolivia’s jungle products along the Amazon fluvial system. It connects the Madeira and Marmoré rivers near the Brazilian border, the two rivers being navigable only at certain points.

British and U.S. companies attempted to build this railway three times, in 1872, 1878, and 1907. Because of the abundance of the lethal kind of malaria, *plasmodium falciparum*, the region is one of the unhealthiest places on earth, and more than seven thousand people lost their lives constructing the railway lines. The danger was so great that in 1908 the Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish governments prohibited their citizens to travel and to work in that area. The railway operated from 1912 to 1972, and the first two attempts to build it failed because most of the workers were killed or incapacitated by malaria.³

The railway’s 366 kilometres were completed at a historical moment when wild rubber was at its highest peak of demand in the international markets. Such rubber

¹ Translated in 1928 as *The Vortex* by Earle K. James, see: Rivera, 2011.

² Other examples include *The Putumayo, the Devil’s Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed upon the Indians therein* (1907) by Walter Hardenburg and *Perdido en el Amazonas* (1978) by Germán Castro Caycedo.

³ Reverte, 2012, p. 279-282.

abounded in the region. People from all over the world were drawn to work on the Madeira-Marmoré railroad, which newspaper advertisements painted as “A New El Dorado.” But no one lasted for more than three months without getting sick with malaria. By 1908, even the papers began to call it “The Devil’s Railway.”⁴

Two young railroad technicians from the U.S., Walter B. Perkins and Walter E. Hardenburg, made the trip in 1907 from the south of Colombia, where they had been working on the construction of another railroad. They navigated down the Amazon tributaries hoping to get a job on the Madeira-Marmoré railway. During their canoe journey, Perkins got sick with malaria and they were forced to ask for help at a rubber station along the Putumayo River. The Putumayo territories were controlled by Julio Cesar Arana’s Peruvian rubber-trading company. Miguel Loayza, one of the foremen of La Casa Arana, learned of their presence and imprisoned them in the rubber-station of El Encanto, accusing them of being spies for the Colombian government. However, fearing problems with the U.S., Loayza soon set the two foreigners free. When they got to Brazil, Walter Hardenburg publicly denounced all the atrocities he had seen while prisoner in the rubber-station, but in Manaus no one dared defy Arana’s power. The young North American travelled to England, where humanitarian associations finally credited his descriptions.⁵ In 1907, he wrote a series of articles in the magazine *Truth*, the first of which had the title, *The Putumayo, the Devil’s Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed upon the Indians therein*. These articles, which later became a book, kindled public indignation, especially since the Putumayo territories were controlled by a company with British stakeholders. One of Hardenburg’s articles reports a phrase that indicates the persisting separation between civilization and barbarism in the Americas: “The Spaniard often regards the Indians as *animals*. Other European people may have abused the Indians of America, but none have that peculiar Spanish attitude towards them of frankly considering them as non-human. To-day the Indians are commonly referred to among Spaniards and Mestizos as *animales*. The present writer, in his travels in Peru and Mexico, has constantly been met with the half-impatient exclamation, on having protested against maltreatment of the Indian, of “They are animals, Señor; they are not folk [*Son animales, Señor; no son gentes*].” The torture or mutilation of the Indian is therefore regarded much as it would be in the case of an ox or a horse.⁶ Hardenburg reached a region that became known as “The Devil’s Paradise” after he revealed to the world the atrocities that took place in the Putumayo, while he was travelling towards “The Devil’s Railway.”

⁴ Reverte, 2012, p. 259.

⁵ Reverte, 2012, p. 170-172.

⁶ Hardenburg, 1912, p. 38.

Initially, the rumours regarding acts of brutality against rubber gatherers were thought to be the result of Colombian or Brazilian interests destined to discredit the Peruvian government, given the territorial dispute over the Putumayo region.⁷ Nevertheless, the Peruvian journalist Benjamín Saldaña Rocca had been publishing testimonies to the abuses of La Casa Arana, in his newspaper *La Felpa* in Iquitos since 1907. However, Arana's power in the whole Amazon region was unchallenged, and he succeeded in silencing journalists and even magistrates who denounced the atrocities committed by employees of his company in the Peruvian national courts. Arana was — and still is — considered by some as a defender of Peruvian national sovereignty. Nonetheless, after the publication of Hardenburg's writings, the matter was discussed in the English parliament. Edward Grey, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, subsequently appointed Roger Casement, the British consul in Brazil, to make a full investigation on the matter.⁸

Casement's inquiry resulted in the 1913 *Putumayo Report*. Casement's report officially confirmed the atrocities against rubber gatherers denounced by Hardenburg, including the slavery of natives in this region. English stakeholders withdrew from Arana's company. In spite of this loss, La Casa Arana continued to reign unchallenged in the Putumayo for another twenty years, persisting despite the fact that the price of South-American rubber sank after 1913. This economic shift was caused by the introduction of Malaysian rubber in the international markets. Malaysian rubber was cultivated by the British in their colonies:⁹ doubtless eliminating the South American competitor was a major motivation of the humanitarian case against La Casa Arana.

Casement's *Putumayo Report* sparked an international scandal and the atrocities of Arana's rubber industries were discussed in the papers. Many historical as well as literary works were written denouncing the situation. Among the literary treatments, the best known in South America is José Eustasio Rivera's *La Vorágine*.

⁷ Sawyer, 1984, p. 69-70 and 77-79.

⁸ Sawyer, 1984, p. 82.

⁹ It is one of the first historical cases of eco-piracy: English botanists smuggled rubber sprouts out of Brazil and succeeded in cultivating them in the Kew Gardens, in London. This allowed them to establish rubber tree plantations in their colonies of Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Previously, rubber trees had been an exclusively wild species that only grew in the tropical forests of Africa and South America.

The Inferno in *La Vorágine* and in *Heart of Darkness*

The expression “The Devil's Paradise” features in the title of this article not only because of Hardenburg's work, but also because the oxymoron accurately defines the voyage of Conrad's and Rivera's characters to the heart of the rainforest. These journeys are not just voyages to the underworld. Marlow and Cova often describe with wonder the sensation of traveling back in time, to the origins of humanity, and the uncontaminated nature they find is not always menacing. Sometimes, the tropical forest resembles the garden of Eden and its inhabitants, when they have not been enslaved, seem to live in a *primaeval* state, very close to the ideal of the Rousseauian noble savage. It is only the actions of tyrannical men that turn this Edenic forest into a Dantesque *selva oscura*, into an industrial Inferno where souls lose themselves in greed and violence, driven by the global and endless demand for rubber in *La Vorágine* and ivory in *Heart of Darkness*.

Rivera had travelled through the jungles as an employee of the Colombian government, a member of a commission appointed to map the frontier with neighbouring Venezuela.¹⁰ He was also acquainted with Hardenburg's *The Devil's Paradise*, which had been widely discussed in the papers. During his journey through the jungle, Rivera had the chance to closely study the archives of rubber tyrants such as Venezuelan Colonel Tomás Funes. In the words of one of Rivera's characters, Funes was a “bandit responsible for more than six-hundred killings. That's Christians, for nobody bothers to count dead Indians.”¹¹ Funes is one of many historical characters named in the novel, alongside Julio Cesar Arana. Their presence is no coincidence, since, long before he published *La Vorágine* in 1924, José E. Rivera had denounced the appropriation of Colombian land by Peruvian rubber industries in the papers, upbraiding his government's lack of action with respect to the injustices taking place in the Amazon regions.¹² However, his articles did not have the effect he had wished. This is one of the reasons why he employed the device of the found manuscript into the text of *La Vorágine*: in a prefatory letter, Rivera affirms that he is merely the editor of a diary found in the depths of the jungle and written by the main character, Arturo Cova, who had disappeared in the Amazon.

¹⁰ During his several voyages towards outposts and frontier bases, Rivera kept a diary that was to become the first version of *La Vorágine*. The manuscript was written between 1922 and 1924: see Rivera, 1924.

¹¹ Rivera, 2011, p. 329. It bears noting the term that the Spanish version uses for Christians: they are referred to as “rationals” to distinguish them from the natives, who are irrational beings (Rivera, 2006, p. 537: *Busté sabe que ese bandido debe más de seiscientas muertes. Puros racionales, porque a los indios no se les lleva número*). This sentence recalls Hardenburg's testimony about the Spaniard's treatment of Indians as *animals* (see footnote 5).

¹² Páramo Bonilla, 2009a, p. 18.

This diary includes the voices of other narrators that Cova documented, including the testimonies of enslaved rubber gatherers or witnesses to the violence perpetrated by rubber lords. Since Cova's malaria induces frequent attacks of madness that render his narration unreliable, Rivera included a choir of voices to attest to the injustices being narrated, much as Roger Casement used interviews with multiple witnesses in his reports. *La Vorágine's* first edition also included photos of the fictional characters; for many years, it was taken for true or even autobiographical,¹³ a confusion that the author didn't bother to set right. There are testimonies of jungle workers who affirm having met characters from the novel who today we know were fictitious.¹⁴ The inclusion of historical characters such as Julio C. Arana in his work enhanced the effectiveness of Rivera's denouncement of the atrocities against rubber gatherers; the main character's adventures and the vengeance he seeks against the rubber lords made the book more appealing for readers; and the metaphor of the journey to the underworld was a suitable means to transmit the horror that his characters witnessed in the jungle tyrant's empires.

As pointed out by Seymour Menton,¹⁵ the structure of *La Vorágine* recalls that of *La Divina Commedia*: the green Inferno is associated with a Dantesque dark forest and is opposed to the city, and hence to civilization. Cova and Alicia make a journey that might be considered an inversion of the one undertaken by the Florentine poet: they travel from Bogotá, in the height of the mountains where the sacred civilization lies, to the limbo of the plains, and finally they sink and vanish into the vortex of the infernal jungle.

In Conrad's work, Marlow also wanders from a city, described as a "whited sepulchre," all the way to the Congolese jungle. His entrance into the underworld, however, already begins when he walks into the offices of the Company in Brussels to sign his contract. At the door he will encounter: "Two women, one fat and the other slim, sitting in straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool."¹⁶ Owen Knowles notes that these women are a reference to the Fates of Greek mythology, "Clotho and Lachesis, who, respectively, spin and measure out the thread of each life before Atropos cuts it. In Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VI), the wise Cumaean Sibyl guards the door to the Underworld into which Aeneas will venture."¹⁷ In the same way, the inexpressive knitters with mysterious eyes guard the door that takes Marlow to the beginning of his journey into the land of the dead:

¹³ Wylie, 2006, p. 732.

¹⁴ Páramo Bonilla, 2012, p. 252.

¹⁵ Menton has also identified other common elements between the two works, such as the tripartite structure, several groups of three present among the characters and the symbolic elements, the presence of several guides of the main character, the boats to cross the infernal rivers and the circular patterns in the plots. See Menton, 1978, p. 163, 164.

¹⁶ Conrad, 2007, p. 12.

¹⁷ Conrad, 2007, p. 120, n. 28.

Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant.*¹⁸

This image will re-emerge from Marlow's unconscious at a crucial moment, the night he has to face Kurtz, alone, in the wilderness: "The knitting old woman with the cat obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair."¹⁹

Cova and Marlow advance in their journey along a river that, dark with fog and thick vegetation, becomes ever more terrifying and dangerous, ever closer to the Dantesque river Acheron. As he progressively immerses himself in the jungle, Cova becomes like a devil himself, a damned soul from the green Inferno. Madness pursues him as he observes devilish figures, tortured men and women, slaves, mutilated people, and lepers, until at last, he faces his enemy, Barrera, and kills him in a horrible way, biting his face and then leaving him to be eaten by piranhas. Finally, Cova will be swallowed by the vortex of the forest, together with his female companion Alicia and their new-born son.

For Cova, the voyage towards the green Inferno begins when Alicia runs off with Barrera, lured by the wealth the latter offers her in the jungle. She escapes together with Griselda, Franco's wife. When Franco finds out about their escape, he burns his own house down. While watching the fire, Cova feels himself abandoned by God and by love and experiences a sort of transformation: "What remained of my efforts, my ideals, my ambitions? What had my struggle against fate brought me? God had forsaken me and love had fled...! In the midst of the flames I laughed like a devil!"²⁰

The violence the jungle harbours peaks in an episode shared by both works. In both, the protagonists encounter the cadavers of the enemies of the jungle tyrants which have been exposed for rivals and slaves to see, as a warning and as an instrument of terror. Cova describes the sight of the corpses, a consequence of the rivalry between the followers of two tyrants:

"Whose bodies did they string up on the bluffs of the river?" "Bodies?" "Yes, sir, yes, sir! We saw them this morning — the vultures revealed them. They're hanging from palm trees, naked, hanging from wires tied to the jaws." "It's that Colonel Funes is always fighting El Cayeno."²¹

¹⁸ Conrad, 2007, p. 12.

¹⁹ Conrad, 2007, p. 81.

²⁰ Rivera, 2011, p. 153.

²¹ Rivera, 2011, p. 209.

This infernal scenery certainly recalls the chopped heads on the poles that Marlow sees in Kurtz's station:

You remember I told you I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the palace. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing — food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky [...] They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen — and there it was, black, dried sunken, with closed eyelids — a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.²²

Both scenes precede the main characters' encounters with the jungle tyrants who, just like the historical character Armando Normand, a station chief from the Putumayo, became monsters instead of "civilizers" in the course of their reigns of greed and fear. Only Cova's found diary tells his story, whereas Marlow returns to tell the tale after a near-death experience on the way back.

The jungle tyrants of both works — Kurtz, Barrera, Funes, and several others too — were inspired by historical figures like Normand. The infernal monsters that actually existed were the products of the economic conditions of the rubber boom, the pressure on the industry to increase production, as well as the isolation fostered by the jungle. Roger Casement, in his reports on the rubber regimes of the Putumayo and the Congo, accurately described many of the historical individuals that inspired Kurtz and other jungle tyrants.

Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad

Before the 1913 *Putumayo Report*, Casement wrote the 1904 *Congo Report*, which officially confirmed the many accusations of misgovernment and atrocities against rubber gatherers brought against the regime of Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo Free State. In 1885 the Belgian sovereign had obtained a personal colony four times the size of France after many political manoeuvres and in the name of philanthropy

²² Conrad, 2007, p. 71, 72.

and the battle against slavery.²³ Casement's reports link the regions of Putumayo and the Congo historically and economically, since native rubber gatherers suffered similar conditions in the isolated stations along the rivers of both tropical forests, owing to the pressing demand for rubber on the world market. This was the time when automobiles began to be manufactured at a massive scale. That said, the world depended on wild rubber not only for tires; it also needed it for industrial tubes, raincoats, shoes, kitchenware, among other things.

The economic pressure finally fell on the native rubber gatherers, who found themselves at the base of the economic pyramid. They were hardly paid at all, and were tied to the rubber industries through an economic system that rewarded unfair working conditions and slavery. In the Congo, people were essentially compelled to work to make their tax payments and war was waged against those villages that resisted. To force men to gather rubber in the forests, family members, particularly women, were held as hostages. In the Putumayo, a system of debt peonage was established, in which rubber gatherers were advanced overpriced goods that they then had to pay back with months or years of work. Since the account books were kept by the station chiefs, and the scales to weigh rubber were tampered with, a worker's debt would grow ceaselessly, passing on to the family should the worker die.

In both places there was ongoing slavery, masked behind taxes, laws, and contracts, as Casement clearly demonstrated in his reports. Sir Roger Casement helped to bring these conditions to the world's attention, but the end of his life was marked by tragedy: he was hung for treason by the British after being caught trying to smuggle guns into Ireland in 1916, before the Easter Rising. During his trial, he was vilified publicly as a homosexual. Recently, his work and his persona have been revalorized. Today, he is regarded as a father of human rights investigations. In his early years, before he became a consul, Casement had worked for Leopold II in the Congo. He observed the construction between 1889 and 1898 of a railroad between Kinshasa and Matadi. The circumstances of the construction were very similar to those of "The Devil's Railway," the Beni-Marmoré railway mentioned above. The Kinshasa-Matadi line was designed to circumvent the rapids and waterfalls of the Congo River, so that ivory and rubber from Leopold II's personal colony could be brought to the coast for export. The railway covers about the same distance as the Beni-Marmoré railway, around 400 km, and more than 4000 workers from all over the world died during its construction. A 1889 decree by Leopold II granted the railway company permission to form a militia to recruit workers from the surrounding area, a recruitment that was often accomplished through violence. "Every sleeper of the railroad represents a human life lost during the works of its construction:"²⁴ this

²³ Hochschild, 1998, p. 67.

famous sentence refers to the “The Devil’s Railway” between Bolivia and Brazil, but these words are equally applicable to the Kinshasa-Matadi railway. It is safe to say that a “Devil’s Railway” also serviced the Congo.

Joseph Conrad was working in the Congo as a steamship captain when the Kinshasa-Matadi railway went into construction. He met Roger Casement and they became friends. The Polish writer mentioned that his time in the Congo changed his perspective on the civilizing mission of Europeans in Africa, and Casement was undoubtedly part of this transformation: “He [Casement] could tell you things! Things I’ve tried to forget; things I never did know. He has had as many years of Africa as I had months — almost.”²⁵ Conrad also confessed that “before the Congo I was just a mere animal.”²⁶

Conrad personally witnessed the suffering of native workers. In *Heart of Darkness*, a passage describes the construction of the railway, with men working in chains, as slaves. However, the most striking episode evokes the victims of this enterprise, and it is no coincidence that, after seeing these men, Marlow makes a reference to Dante’s *Inferno*:

At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno [...]. Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly — it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now — nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish bloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, the sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest [...]. One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of controlled collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence.²⁷

This horrific description of dying men reduced to shadows is one of the first moments in which Marlow encounters violence and death, and immediately after he

²⁴ Reverte, 2012, p. 282.

²⁵ Letter from Joseph Conrad to R. Cunninghame Graham, December 26, 1903; quoted in Hochschild, 1998, p. 197 and 326.

²⁶ Jean-Aubry, 1927, p. 141.

²⁷ Conrad, 2007, p. 19, 20.

will hear the name of Kurtz for the first time. Marlow's voyage along the river will take him into the heart of the jungle towards Kurtz, one of literature's most cited and most enduring jungle tyrants.

Isolation in the rainforest and the tyrants

When speaking about isolation in the forest it is useful to remember a quote from Sartre's drama *Huis Clos*: "Hell is other people." This claim is true especially regarding states of isolation in which the guilty make each other miserable and drive each other to madness, just as in the existentialist's 1943 drama. In the isolated conditions of the commercial stations, small empires of tyrants proliferated in the heart of the jungle. Anthropologist Michael Taussig highlights the role of armed native sentries that the rubber station chiefs employed to guard and torture their own kind: *los muchachos* in the Putumayo and the native members of *La Force Publique* in the Congo. These men added to the climate of fear and terror around the station chiefs by recounting some of their most terrifying legends and by constantly inventing possibilities for attack and rebellion. This persistent state of fear and paranoia, combined with all the preconceptions Western culture had acquired about the jungle since the time of Conquistadors — the terrifying icons from the Spanish Chronicles of the Indies, for example — led the rubber-station chiefs and foremen to perpetuate unprecedented violence against natives. According to Taussig, in order to become fearful, these men became the monsters they feared.²⁸

One of the cruellest tyrants that reigned in the isolated rubber stations of the Putumayo was Armando Normand, Casement called him: "An absolute monster, capable from his face of any crime," adding that:

Most of these criminals I have met [in the Putumayo] are fools. This man is not. He has courage, courage of a dreadful kind, and cunning [...] he knows [...] that I am out here in an official journey, with an unknown purpose, and that I am obtaining very damaging evidence, both of the system of enslaving the Indians and of the individual crimes of the enslavers of whom he is one of the worst.²⁹

Normand's resemblance to Conrad's Kurtz has been highlighted by Angus Mitchell, editor of Casement's *Amazon Journal*:

Before leaving Iquitos, Casement had been warned that stations nearest the Colombian frontier were the most dangerous and of those Matanzas — The

²⁸ "A colonial mirror, which reflects back onto the colonists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonize," Taussig, 2002, p. 183.

²⁹ Casement, 1997, p. 280.

Slaughters or massacres — had the worse reputation. In a number of respects, it might be compared to the “Inner station” of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and if there is a single figure that resembles Kurtz in this journal it is Armando Normand.³⁰

Casement, recalling Hardenburg, writes the following about Matanzas:

This place, along with Abisinia, are those which occur most often in the dreadful record of crime and horror compiled by Hardenburg and Normand’s name probably more often than that of any other. The Commission and myself have for some time now come to the conclusion that the Hardenburg document is true.³¹

The common elements between Kurtz and Normand are many. As Páramo Bonilla emphasizes,³² Kurtz and Normand share many characteristics. Both were bright, educated Company agents. “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” Conrad wrote.³³ “Europe and South America contributed to the making of Normand,” one might add. Normand was Bolivian, studied accountancy in Argentina and London, and had foreign, probably French, origins. Just like Kurtz, he was a lover of arts and sometimes wrote articles that he would send to newspapers in Lima and London.³⁴ Just like Kurtz, his intentions were decent before his jungle experience. “The native’s feelings of resentment against whites,” Normand observed in an interview, “are due to the fact that we have stolen a land that was rightfully theirs.”³⁵ One may wonder then, what happened to these men such that a few years in the jungle as commercial-station chiefs sufficed to make them “absolute monsters.” A scene reported by one of Normand’s workers speaks for itself: “Often, while Normand was having lunch, he ordered someone to flog a victim, the victim’s blood would splash on Normand’s plate while he was eating, he did this to hinder any native rebellion.”³⁶

An eyewitness from the time of the rubber boom wonders whether it is the natives who are the true savages, or whether it is the rubber station chiefs and foremen, despite the fact that rubber tyrants like Normand and Arana never ceased affirming that they were “civilizers.”³⁷ This conviction is probably what is most disquieting about Normand. He was aware of the evil he performed and he believed that his actions were the only way to defeat the jungle and vanquish its multiple menaces in

³⁰ Casement, 1997, p. 253.

³¹ Casement, 1997, p. 255.

³² Páramo Bonilla, 2008, p. 64.

³³ Conrad, 2007, p. 61.

³⁴ Gómez, 1933, p. 85; quoted in: Páramo Bonilla, 2008, p. 64.

³⁵ Páramo Bonilla, 2008, p. 51 (my translation).

³⁶ Valcárcel, 2004, quoted in: Páramo Bonilla, 2008, p. 63 (my translation). Normand tried to project an image of himself as a cannibal in order to scare the natives, and often tried to make them believe the same about the black Barbadians that worked for him as foremen.

³⁷ Páramo Bonilla, 2008, p. 71.

the name of “civilization” — as if he were a modern Spanish inquisitor battling demons.

Casement dedicated many pages of the *Putumayo Report* and of his diary to Armando Normand. For the British consul, Normand's case became personal. Casement could hardly conceive how a well-educated man that had even studied in London could have become the bloodiest torturer in the Amazonian region. Before they were introduced, Casement was already familiar with various disquieting rumours about Normand and feared a personal meeting. This is the description Casement made of their first encounter:

“He came up, I must say, to all one had read or thought of him, a little being, slim, thin and quite short, say, 5'7” and with a face truly the most repulsive I have seen, I think. It was perfectly devilish in its cruelty and evil. I felt as if I were being introduced to a serpent.”³⁸

Casement certainly harks back to *The Devil's Paradise* in his description of Normand, but Casement could equally have had Kurtz and Conrad's work in mind since Mitchell affirms that, by 1904, Casement had read *Heart of Darkness* and liked it.³⁹ Casement may have been thinking of Marlow's statement before the African map, when Marlow compares the Congo River to a snake and ends by saying “the snake had charmed me.”⁴⁰

The intertextual links running between the historical context and the works of Conrad, Casement, and Rivera are numerous. The strong image of mutilation occurs in *La Vorágine*, even though mutilation was not as widely practiced in Amazon rubber regimes as it was in the Congo. A scene of mutilation closes the book as two rubber foremen take revenge on one another. The macabre scene is one of the most striking descriptions of violence in Rivera's work. The choice of this scene may have been influenced by images of mutilation in the Congo that had appeared in the newspapers all over the world — images at the centre of Casement and Edmund Morel's humanitarian campaign which resulted in the end of Leopold II's regime in the Congo Free State. Rivera writes:

He grabbed Pipa by the rope that bound his wrists, and dragged him off amid the cat-calls of the rubber workers; and then in boiling rage clipped his arms with one fierce two-handed blow of the machete, and then the two hands spun in the air, like livid and bloody festoons. Pipa, stupefied, rose from the dust as if searching for them, and waved over his head in stumps that shed forth blood into the stubble, like water jets from some barbaric garden.⁴¹

³⁸ Casement, 1997, p. 256.

³⁹ Mitchell, 2003, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Conrad, 2007, p. 9.

⁴¹ Rivera, 2011, p. 364.

Another interesting intertextual element between both works is the fact that Kurtz is often described as shadowy — vacuous, a mere shade, a hollow man.⁴² Kurtz's shadowiness may be linked to an important notion: many have attempted to identify the historical figure that inspired the creation of this character, but it is unlikely that Kurtz's origin was a single person. This fact recalls the Venezuelan tyrant Tomás Funes in *La Vorágine*: "don't think that when I talk of Funes I speak alone of an individual. Funes symbolized a system, a state of mind, the thirst for gold, blind envy. There are many Funeses, although only one bore the fateful name."⁴³ Many possible models for Kurtz have been identified, including the Belgian Captain Léon Rom, who decorated his flower garden with skulls, just as Kurtz did with shrunken heads. Patrick Brantlinger, however, suggests a more disquieting possibility: Conrad necessarily had many models for Kurtz, since, as Casement's report demonstrates, "all of the white officers in charge of Leopold's empire were in essence Kurtzes."⁴⁴ Casement too had concluded that the problem was not individuals but an unfair economical system that puts pressure on single men, driving them to extreme violence.

It should be added that the phenomenon of jungle tyrants did not originate during the rubber boom. The sixteenth century conquistador Lope de Aguirre⁴⁵ was such a tyrant, and today's war and drug lords have taken advantage of the isolation of the tropical forest to recreate the same empires of greed and terror. It is important to recall that, as at the time of the rubber boom, tropical forests remain the economic centre of the world. They supply raw materials to multinationals (coltan for high-tech industries, gold and diamonds), but they also supply the world's biggest illegal market: cocaine. The cocaine cartels run one of the most profitable businesses on the planet, a commerce that pulls the invisible threads of the most powerful economies in the world. There is no motive for making peace where cocaine abounds.⁴⁶ The workers in the jungles are still paying with their blood, sweat, and freedom for the pleasures, vanity, and vices of our cities — where civilization has come to represent the devouring vortex of natural resources and human souls that once it feared when it looked at the wild.

⁴² Conrad, 2007, p. 85, 91.

⁴³ Conrad, 2007, p. 329-330.

⁴⁴ Brantlinger, 1992, p. 439.

⁴⁵ See: Páramo Bonilla, 2009b.

⁴⁶ In his book *Zero, Zero, Zero*, Roberto Saviano illustrates that in 2012 an investment of 1000 euros in Apple shares in the stock market — a record year when these shares rose by 67 per cent — would have turned into 1670 euros by the end of the year. 2012 was a record year owing to the release of the iPhone 5 and the iPad mini — two devices that need, of course, coltan for their batteries. As astounding as such profits might seem, Saviano reminds us that if the same investment of 1000 euros had been made in cocaine, the investor, rather than the 1670 euros in Apple shares, would have had 182,000 euros at the end of the year: Saviano, 2013, p. 88.

Given the historical context in which Rivera's and Conrad's works were written, it is possible to affirm that the two authors entered the jungle and witnessed how the rubber and ivory extraction had turned it into a true Inferno. They both employ the metaphor of a voyage to the underworld and make use of infernal references, such as to Dante's *Inferno*, to express what they had seen. Just like Roger Casement, they penetrated into the entrails of the monster and felt compelled to narrate what they had witnessed. Like many other mythical and fictional characters who have dared to enter the underworld, they had to pay a price. All fell ill with malaria. Rivera died from the disease at a young age; *La Vorágine* was his first and only novel. Conrad and Casement were weakened by it and suffered its effects for the rest of their lives. We also know that the atrocities they saw haunted them for many years. Doubtless, these experiences drove them to write their most important works and to devote part of their lives and energies to changing the state of things in the tormented regions they had visited. Casement saw both Infernos and the suffering he witnessed surely played a decisive role in his personal transformation from an employee of Empire into an anti-imperialist revolutionary.

This article has traced significant intertextual relations between historical and literary works from the period of the rubber boom. These relations often are reciprocal: shared metaphors and images that writers draw on to express and transmit the situations of extreme violence and human suffering that they confront. Furthermore, in the isolated regions discussed here, writers often act as historians: their works are among the few if not only testimonies to such dark and forgotten episodes. In the case of Conrad and Rivera, their works still endure in the collective memory of nations and continents as recollections of two, often forgotten, genocides.

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