A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE

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Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in Heart of Darkness

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting — on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.

—JOSEPH CONRAD, Notes on Life and Letters

We can start, contrary to current critical practices, with some old-fashioned generalizations about the history of ideas. And, when we journey, as we must, to more specificity about Conrad’s story there is no guarantee that we will penetrate to the essential Truth — or non-Truth — lying at the heart of Heart of Darkness; certainly not in a story informing us that for Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (p. 20). But we may be able to come closer to a truth that we can glimpse only if we read historically the narrative that Conrad weaves in his role as a historian of human experience.

1

The century that preceded the 1899 publication of Heart of Darkness was the great century of historiography; that is to say, the one in which history sought to become a science. The eighteenth century’s emphasis on natural, universal laws that governed human society did not suddenly vanish, but it was superseded by an emphasis on the organic development of peoples and nations, developments that became the object of study for the new science of history. In medieval times events in history had been seen as exempla: as illustrations of moral laws or truths. Relying on the sense of time that allowed anticipations of Chris-
shapes and determines his representation of the past. This critical
commonplace of today is in turn indebted to the insights of people like
Conrad who, in the passage I quote at the start of this essay, reminds us
that the documents that Ranke called “primary” sources merely give
the historian a “second-hand impression” of an age. One of the con-
cerns of this essay is to understand historically how Conrad felt that
“the reality of forms and observation of social phenomena” in his fic-
tion produce more truthful histories than those of most historians.

At least part of the reason is the crisis in historicism that occurred
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If historicism rested
on the belief that the historian could objectively reconstruct the past,
the ultimate truth it delivered seemed to be the impossibility of discov-
ering the truth. Feeling that their task was to relive an era as sympa-
thetically as possible by blotting out everything they knew about the
latter course of history, historians came to see that all beliefs were his-
torically contingent, including the belief in scientific objectivity. If this
awareness came dangerously close to what Friedrich Meinecke called
“the bottomless pit of relativism,” it was tolerated because historicism
retained a faith in progress (Iggers 175). Nineteenth-century histories
might demonstrate that beliefs were historically contingent, but many
adopted a teleological narrative structure: in other words, one that
assumed that history had a design or purpose and that whatever was
becoming was right. Values changed, but they were always appropriate
to their age, and they progressed and developed over time. Even this
faith, however, was undermined by the way historicism linked its his-
tories to the emergence of individual nations. As each nation’s history
emerged, it became clear that not all narratives of progress could be right.
If academic dispute did not bring this point home, World War I did.

But even before the destruction of the war, many Europeans had
lost faith in the values that gave coherence to the historicist project.
Increasingly, the attempt to give an objective description of the past
gave way to modern subjectivist philosophies. As J. Hillis Miller sum-
marizes, “Historicism does not mean merely an awareness of the con-
tradictory diversity of cultures and attitudes. The ancient world had
that. The modern historical sense means rather the loss of faith in the
possibility of ever discovering the right and true culture, the right and
true philosophy or religion” (Disappearance 10).

Miller’s passage is an excellent one to place Conrad’s fiction in the
context of the history of ideas. By having Kurtz, who embodies Europe’s
most noble ideals, recognize the horror at the heart of darkness, Con-
rad brings us face to face with the disillusions that many twentieth-
century thinkers continue to confront, although much of the culture
operates by trying to forget it. Marlow embodies this double perspec-
tive. On the one hand, back in Europe Marlow tries to forget Kurtz,
“to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that obliv-
ion which is the last word of our common fate” (p. 89). On the other,
Marlow cannot will Kurtz’s memory away. For him and the reader
it serves as what the French historian Michel Foucault has called a
“counter-memory,” a memory that disrupts the narrative of enlight-
ened progress that official European culture tried to tell about its his-
tory. Unable completely to repress this counter-memory when he visits
Kurtz’s Intended, whose forehead, as the room grows darker, “remained
illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (p. 91),
Marlow refuses to destroy her illusions and tells her that the last word
Kurtz had uttered was her name, thus linking this woman and all she
stands for with “the horror.” Official memory of light and counter-
memory of darkness are in Conrad’s narrative inextricably connected,
even though the official memory’s ascendancy depends upon the lies
that repress the counter-memory.

In a world in which the truth that Marlow tells about civilized
Europe is expressed through a lie, it is no wonder that Conrad claimed
that fiction is nearer to truth than history. The way Conrad’s art
approaches the truth is not by stating it but by reminding us of the lie
that accompanies every effort to name the truth. Art is closer to truth
only in so far as it carries within it the counter-memory that its efforts
to express the truth repress, just as the ivory keys of the grand piano
that Marlow sees as he waits to greet the Intended become an emblem
for the exploitation that Europe’s high culture tried to cover up. Em-
bodying the structural relationship between what is said and what is left
unsaid, Conrad’s story proves to be truer than history, not in its explicit
statements but in its forms.

For instance, Conrad does not offer an omniscient narrative per-
spective that knows and states how it really was. Instead, he constructs
a story in which his perspective gives way to a narrator’s, that gives
way to Marlow’s, that gives way to Kurtz’s. If this perspective does not
tell us the truth, there is a certain truth in the formal techniques that
illustrate the impossibility of directly stating the truth. Similarly, the linear narrative of nineteenth-century historicism, in which we move progressively toward a fuller understanding, is replaced by a narrative that concludes with a lie. Even so, there is a certain truth in the way the story unfolds, moving forward and backward in time, its narrative flow interrupted by Marlow’s addresses to his audience and his own psychological avoidance of the actual encounter with Kurtz, who is mentioned early in the story but is not met until pages later.

To enter the world of *Heart of Darkness* is, in other words, to enter the world of modern fiction, a world in which authors’ technical innovations responded to the loss of faith described by Miller as the “modern historical sense.” But if the crisis in historicism helps place *Heart of Darkness* in context, the story also places the context in context. For Conrad’s narrative about a European’s journey to the heart of Africa helps us see the extent to which the crisis in late-nineteenth-century European thought was related to Europe’s contact with what some recent critics, following Jacques Lacan’s revision of Hegel, have come to call “the Other.” It is probably no accident that the most important British modernist novelists are situated in positions on the borders of mainstream British culture that force them to encounter “the Other.” Perhaps no writer in the twentieth century achieved a mastery over the English language to match James Joyce. But Joyce was in an important sense a colonial writer, an Irish Catholic who spent his life in self-imposed exile on the Continent and who considered English an acquired tongue. An exiled Pole, Conrad quite literally wrote in an acquired language. D. H. Lawrence meanwhile came from a working-class family in the Midlands, carrying an accent that marked his difference from those producing “proper” English arts and letters. Only Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster could be considered insiders. And Woolf, as a woman, occupied her own border country, while Forster’s greatest work, *A Passage to India*, is about the encounter between East and West. Indeed, Europe’s encounter with the non-European, so poignantly portrayed by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, played a part in one of the most important aspects of modern thought: Europe’s discovery of “the Other” within itself.

As early as the late eighteenth century, Europeans had been forced to alter their view of a universal history centered in Europe. Paradoxically, this alteration resulted from the very imperialistic, overseas expansion that drew its ideological justification from the belief that reason, progress, and enlightenment emanated from the West. Brought into contact with such various cultures, Europeans found it impossible to retain belief in one universal culture. Instead, there were many cultures, each with its own history. Recognition of non-European cultures did not mean the abandonment of a Eurocentric perspective. Quite the contrary. Nineteenth-century historicism was adept at absorbing all cultures into a Eurocentric history. Nonetheless, the very presence of “the Other” within those histories heightened the possibility that their narratives would be “decentered.” The crisis in historicism can be linked to this decentering, a decentering made possible, ironically, by the success of the West’s imperialism.

One of the most important expressions of the decentering of Western narratives of progress and rationality is found in the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who died the year after Conrad’s story appeared. Nietzsche has had a strong influence on recent poststructuralist thought. It is, I think, no accident that two essays cited as starting points for poststructuralism contain explicit critiques of Eurocentrism. One is Paul de Man’s “Crisis in Criticism” (1967), which emphasizes the blindness of the philosopher Edmund Husserl to non-Western cultures. The other is Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), which points out that even the noble efforts to understand non-European cultures by the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss inevitably adopt a Western perspective. Offering a theory that assures us that the desire for the presence of the truth is inevitably an unfulfilled desire, poststructuralism can productively analyze the world Conrad presents in *Heart of Darkness*. It can also serve as a sort of new faith, albeit a negative one, for critics like Miller trying to cope with the loss of confidence in the Eurocentric view that is dramatized by Conrad’s narrative. In turn, Conrad’s narrative helps locate the historical situation that created the conditions for the formation of poststructuralist thought.

This reciprocal relation between *Heart of Darkness* and poststructuralism also holds for another approach that proves so fruitful in reading Conrad’s story: psychoanalysis. Albert J. Guérard’s use of Sigmund Freud to describe *Heart of Darkness* as “A Journey Within” remains one of the most important pieces of Conrad criticism. Certainly, a powerful aspect of Conrad’s story is the economy by which his tale about a physical journey into the darkness of Africa becomes a story about a psychological journey into the darkness of the human unconscious. But it is not only the case that psychoanalysis can be used to illuminate Conrad’s narrative. Freud’s narrative about the human psyche is also illuminated by narratives like Conrad’s about what happens when a rational Westerner journeys into Africa. While it is commonplace to consider
psychoanalysis a new scientific theory, one that provides a universal account of the structure of the human mind, an examination of Freud's metaphors suggests that we might consider psychoanalysis a historical event as well, one partly enabled by Western narratives about encounters with "the Other."

There are numerous similarities between Freud's narrative about the unconscious and Conrad's narrative about the European encounter with the non-European. Trying to describe the "wild and gorgeous apparition" (p. 76) of the African woman trying to protect Kurtz, Marlow tells his audience, "She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an incrustable purpose" (p. 77). Freud, in a famous passage, compares female sexuality to the dark continent of Africa. For both of these Western males the otherness of female sexuality is described in terms of the otherness of the African continent. Just as in Freud's theory the unconscious eludes representation and rational understanding, so in Conrad's narrative Africa eludes all attempts of the Western mind — especially a male mind — to understand it. In this context we can better appreciate Marlow's description of himself as a young boy staring, as did Conrad, at the "many blank spaces" on the map of the world. Vowing some day to visit those unexplored regions, he finds, by the time he sets out on his journey, that what had once been "a blank space of delightful mystery — a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" — had become "a place of darkness" (p. 22). Finally recognized by the West, those unexplored, blank spots on the globe known as Africa were represented as darkness, the same metaphor psychoanalysis uses to represent the unexplored areas of the mind.

The way *Heart of Darkness* helps us analyze some of the critical approaches we use to analyze it proves very satisfying for our classical sense of balance. Having arrived at this symmetrical formulation, however, we should not rest too comfortably, because it raises a problem. To merge critical approaches and text is to risk the disappearance of the encounter with "the Other," which seemed of such historical significance. Just as in Conrad's story what seems to be an encounter with another turns out to be an encounter with the self — so that Marlow's encounter with Kurtz really becomes an encounter with himself and readers' encounters with Marlow transform into encounters with themselves — so in some critical schools today even the otherness of the story we are reading is denied. Although we can hold a material object in our hand with *Heart of Darkness* written on the title page and the words Conrad wrote printed on the pages to follow, we are told that what we call the text is in fact the product of our interpretations.

Ironically, then, a project that seeks intent on decentering a Eurocentric point of view turns out to be the most Eurocentric of all. For just as Conrad's story can be read, not as a story about Africa, but actually as a story about Europe, so the decentering set in motion by Europe's encounter with "the Other" can be read as a statement about European thought, not about that which is foreign to it. Thinking we are encountering something outside of ourselves or Western culture, we end up merely discovering "the Other" within ourselves, a discovery that could be described as the most imperialistic of all, since what was once thought to be truly different is now absorbed into a system that accounts for its own decentering. In the meantime, "the Other" seems to be of interest only in so far as it can help the West in its task of self-definition.

3

If Conrad's narrative is one of the most effective expressions of the encounter between self and "Other," between the European and non-European, our task is not to affirm the truth of his narrative but to interrogate it. And what needs interrogation is Conrad's representation of the non-European. Why, we need to ask, in this narrative about Europe's encounter with Africa are Africans reduced to the mere function of providing us a spectral illumination about Europe? To answer that question we can turn to a passage in which Marlow describes the Africans:

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. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you — you so remote from the night of first ages — could comprehend. And why not? The mind of
man is capable of anything — because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage — who can tell? — but truth — truth stripped of its cloak of time. (p. 51)

Starting the paragraph with the paradox that the earth seemed unearthly, Marlow sets up the expectation that the human beings inhabiting that unearthly earth will be inhuman, an expectation easy to arouse because it would confirm his listeners' racial prejudices. But Conrad’s narrative disrupts such commonplace prejudices. The horror of the story is not that the Africans are a deviant form of humanity, but that the monster is also within the Europeans who consider themselves superior. Thus, the passage suggests a number of ironic reversals. On the one hand, the African continent is a shackled and conquered monster. On the other, it is the European conquerors who are conquered, as their ruthless and violent imperialism unleashes their latent savagery, making them more monstrous than those they profess to civilize. Whereas the West has a tradition of believing that to make the unknown known it has to be brought under control, Marlow suggests that what allows Westerners to understand Africans is loss of control. Released from the constraints of civilization, Europeans can feel a kinship with those people who on the surface seem so different. Understanding of the non-Western can occur, therefore, only when the West is conquered by the very people it feels it is conquering. True courage, a courage in Marlow’s world reserved for men (“...but if you were man enough...”), comes in admitting the possibility of being conquered by “the Other,” an “Other” that exists all along within the European.

One of the most obvious reasons why Westerners do not immediately recognize “the African” within themselves is the physical difference between races. But for Marlow physical differences, such as skin color, are a surface deception. The real otherness is not physical but temporal. When Westerners travel to Africa, they make a temporal journey as well as a physical one. As Marlow tells his listeners, “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings” (p. 48). The incompressibility of the landscape and the people inhabiting it is caused because to travel to Africa is to travel to prehistoric times.

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, 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. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us — who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glistened past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign — and no memories. (pp. 50–51)

But Marlow eventually does comprehend these people. He can because, as different as they seem from civilized human beings, they constitute the prehistory of the West. If the veneer of civilization has made Westerners forget the truth of their prehistory, the function of Conrad’s art is to make them remember what they have forgotten. As he writes in the preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” his task is, “by the power of the written word,” to present “that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.” The way he stimulates his readers’ memories, however, is at odds with the way nineteenth-century historians tried to do so. As we saw, for the historians time constituted reality. The truth of an event had to do with the time in which it took place. To discover a truth we had forgotten was to reconstruct it historically. But Conrad has a different notion of temporality. For him truth has to be discovered by stripping it of “its cloak of time.” The passage of history does not lead to continually new truths. Instead, it places a barrier between us and the memory of our prehistory. Truth is not to be found by remembering history but by forgetting it.

The belief that truth is located in a realm of a prehistory that is still present but disguised by modern life is typical of modernist writers. T. S. Eliot, for instance, praised the work of Wyndham Lewis for “sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end” (Matthiessen 466). Whereas for nineteenth-century historians the past and present existed on different temporal planes, for many modernists past and present occupied the same plane. Flattening history in The Waste Land, Eliot continually juxtaposes past and present, just as in Heart of Darkness Marlow links the past of England with the present of Africa by
The political message of Conrad’s encounter with the non-European is that he finds himself in an encounter with Africans who exist in a state prior to history, so the meaning of Conrad’s tale seems to exist in reality prior to history, so the meaning of Conrad’s tale seems to exist in reality. Nonetheless, just as we have to travel through history to encounter our own history, so we have to travel through the fiction of The Heart of Darkness to encounter a meaning that is deeper than the fable’s narrative surface.

For Conrad, the novel has a function similar to that of history. Inevitably, the place of time, the novel, like history, disposes of a truth that the facts have prior to time. Just as the nature of history, which is to be discovered in an encounter with Africans who exist in a state prior to history, so the meaning of Conrad’s tale seems to exist in reality prior to history, so the meaning of Conrad’s tale seems to exist in reality. Nonetheless, just as we have to travel through history to encounter our own history, so we have to travel through the fiction of The Heart of Darkness to encounter a meaning that is deeper than the fable’s narrative surface.

To recognize the possibility of bringing an atemporal truth into narrative representation is to start to understand the importance of one of the most noticeable formal characteristics of Conrad’s narrative; its breaks and gaps. Disrupting the narrative flow, they suggest something that resists narrativization, that is, the glimpse of the truth we have.
forgotten to ask. For instance, the first interruption of Marlow's story occurs when Marlow cries out about his inability adequately to represent Kurtz in words.

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream — making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams. . . . (p. 42)

Marlow's outcry is an obvious reminder to the reader of Conrad's own task as a novelist, for he must make his audience see not only Kurtz but also Marlow. And Conrad's task is even more difficult than Marlow's. Marlow's listeners have access to the voice of someone who has seen Kurtz. Conrad's audience confronts nothing but silent, black words on a white page. But Marlow's outcry does more than comment on the difficulty of representation in words.

To remain within narrative is to remain within the realm of consciousness that veils truth. By interrupting the flow of Marlow's narrative Conrad establishes contact with his readers, momentarily freeing them from the shackles of a linear narrative and throwing them back on their own imaginations. In their imaginations, which contain "all the past as well as the future," not in conscious attention to the story's surface, readers will be able to evoke the memory of their prehistory necessary to comprehend the story's meaning. It was, for instance, in a dreamlike state that Marlow was able to remember his kinship with prehistoric humanity. "There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence" (p. 49). To relate a dream is to distort the dream-sensation. In Heart of Darkness Conrad's disruption of narrative forms works to recreate a dream-sensation in the reader.

But it is not quite so simple. If words seem to block us from a deeper truth accessible only through the imagination, it is words that provoke the imagination. It is, for instance, the mention of Kurtz's name that provokes Marlow's outcry over his inability to use words to make us see Kurtz. Since the very narrative that must be disrupted in order for us to have a glimpse of a forgotten truth is our only means to approach that truth, the gaps in Marlow's narrative can be said to serve a different function from the one we have examined. If, on the one hand, they suggest a truth that resists narrativization, on the other, they reveal Marlow's reluctance to continue his narrative journey toward the glimpse of truth he experienced at the heart of darkness. For Marlow to mention Kurtz is to recall all that Kurtz came to embody for him. Not yet capable of facing that horror, Marlow interrupts the story that inevitably leads to Kurtz. The very breaks and gaps that seem to be the only way to suggest the truth also indicate an avoidance of it.

If these two functions seem at odds, they ultimately converge, because for Conrad "the horror" is associated with the inability fully to represent the truth and what that inability implies about the human condition. So long as truth cannot fully be represented, lies become part of the truth of the world. Indeed, immediately preceding the first interruption of the story Marlow announces his hatred of lies. This hatred does not, however, stem from Marlow's love of truth over falsehood, for what he hates about lies is that they remind him of the inevitable truth of mortality. "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies — which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world — what I want to forget" (p. 42). Marlow wants to forget the truth of human finitude that lies remind him of: the truth of our existence in a fallen state in which we cannot have full access to truth, a state making lies inevitable. The lie Marlow tells Kurtz's Intended at the end of the story signals Marlow's ability to overcome his hatred of lies and his acceptance of a world of finitude. At odds with the Enlightenment's faith in humankind's ability through time to liberate itself by expanding its sphere of influence in the world in order to gain a fuller access to truth, Marlow's vision has affinities with a medieval view that a fallen humankind will never have full knowledge of God's truth. For Conrad, as for many contemporary theorists, humanity's finitude is intricately related to humanity's existence within language. Language, our only access to truth, by its very nature offers only a trace of what it seeks to represent. To be within language is to be in a perpetual state of lost presence.

Politically for Conrad this necessitates the acceptance of a world in which lies and repression are inevitable, a political vision that is intricately linked to the seemingly contradictory functions of a narrative that, on the one hand, helps reveal the horror at the heart of darkness and, on the other, serves to cover it up and hold it at bay. Humanity, or the male part of it at least, must confront the horror Kurtz had the courage to face. Survival of the species, however, demands that unlike
Kurtz it must not succumb to it, but instead, like Marlow, learn to cover it up. The work of civilization is a lie, but since the alternative is so terrifying it must go on.

In a world in which all other values seem to be relativized, restraint, therefore, becomes an important value for Conrad. In *Heart of Darkness* restraint is by no means the sole property of Westerners. For Marlow the Africans who accompany him on the journey up the river display more restraint than any European when they resist “the devilry of lingering starvation” (p. 57) by not killing and eating the whites. Marlow, however, cannot explain this restraint, which he finds a mystery greater than the inexplicable sounds of savagery emanating from the primeval forest. He cannot explain it, because for Marlow restraint is associated with work, the work of civilization that separates the West from the savage forest. How much Marlow values work is made clear in another break in his narrative.

Interrupted by a skeptical grunt from one of his listeners, Marlow responds.

You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no — I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes — I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook.

There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (pp. 51–52)

The necessity to work, just to keep the ship moving, not some idealistic values, keeps Marlow from participating in “unspeakable rites” (p. 65). And, as the reference to “surface-truth” reminds us, Conrad self-consciously compares Marlow’s journey up the river to the act of narrating that journey. As a comment directly before another break in Marlow’s tale makes even clearer, Conrad’s narrative also offers a surface truth that hides a profounder truth. “When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality — the reality, I tell you — fades. The inner truth is hidden — luckily, luckily” (p. 49).

Within the logic set up by the implied analogy between Marlow’s journey and his narrative, the leaky steam-pipes that threaten to sink the ship invite comparison with the gaps and breaks in Marlow’s narrative. Just as covering the holes in the steam-pipes allows the ship to continue its journey on the surface of the river, so filling the gaps in Marlow’s narrative allows the surface narrative to continue, thus protecting us from the groundless horror they suggest. Told by an agent at the station about “the necessity for every man to get on,” Marlow responds, “Did I see it? I saw it. What more did I want? What I really wanted was rivets, by Heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work — to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted” (p. 43). But rivets, although in abundance at a station closer to shore, are not available. Thus, Marlow, like Conrad, must improvise techniques that will allow him to stop the holes so dangerously exposed and difficult to repair in this outpost of progress.

In the final two paragraphs of his preface to *The Nigger of the *Narcissus*, Conrad explicitly compares his work as an artist to the work of civilization by referring to “the workman of art.” But there is an important difference. Workers’ hands are kept so busy that they never take a moment to glimpse “the truth.” Thus, the hand of a writer must produce a work that arrests,

for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile — such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished — behold! — all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile — and the return to an eternal rest.

What interests me most about this passage is the effect that the work of art has, according to Conrad, on the workers of the earth. The initial image is one of labor — hands busy at toil. The final image is one of tranquility — an eternal rest. That final image is clearly an image of death, but, as J. Hillis Miller points out, it also suggests a return “to the forgetful sleep of everyday life” (*Poets* 39). The implication is, therefore, that after people have had a glimpse of the truth of life provided by the workman of art their lives of everyday labor can be considered ones of rest. Arrested for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth are set in motion again, returning to the world of time that, because it protects them from the truth at the heart of
darkness, is actually one of repose. Serving to protect humanity from the horror it discovers when truth is stripped from the cloak of time, work not only takes place within history but also produces history. It is work, then, that constructs the lie of civilization that hides humanity, necessarily, from the prehistoric truth about itself.

But what if Conrad’s location of truth in an atemporal realm is itself a lie? What if the horror of human existence is not to be found in a realm of savagery that we discover by escaping history, but instead lies within history itself—not a Eurocentric construction of a universal History, but one that refuses to indulge in Conrad’s mystification that turns Africa into the mere site of Europe’s prehistory? If this is the case, work might serve a very different function from the one Conrad attributes to it.

Just as the narrative Conrad uses to hold the horror at bay produces gaps and breaks that bring us face to face with it, so the very work that is supposed to cover up the horror might also produce it. Rather than protecting humanity from an unnameable horror, work might be part of the unnamed horror of Conrad’s story. Whereas Conrad sees work providing Europeans with the restraint and discipline necessary to control the horror of “the Other” within themselves, European history records the horror of the enforced labor of others—European and non-European—to maintain structures of domination. Work does indeed restrain. Perhaps, however, the reason why people with hands busy about the work of the earth are restrained from seeing a glimpse of the truth is not because they repress an unconscious world of the imagination that contains an ahistorical truth about the reality of forms, but because they are given no time to become conscious of the history of how the time of their lives has been wasted. Or to put this another way, the unconsciousness of narratives about the unconscious might turn out to be the history of human labor.

As we have seen, Conrad’s tale easily lends itself to psychoanalytical and poststructuralist analyses at the same time that it helps us place in a historical context both psychoanalysis’s narrative about the journey to the unconscious and poststructuralism’s narrative about the decentering of the West’s logoscentrism. Conrad’s representation of work indicates the need to introduce another form of narrative explanation in our attempt to analyze Heart of Darkness. Karl Marx’s insistence that historians tell the history of work. Whereas the affinities of Conrad’s narrative with Freudian and Nietzschean narratives help explain how it serves as a counter-memory to prevailing Eurocentric narratives, its differences from the Marxist narrative help expose the counter-memory of such counter-narratives. To say this is not to argue that the Marxist narrative is the master narrative that explains all others. But so long as there are those who offer narratives of human history that neglect the role human labor has played in shaping history—or even more, who, like Conrad, offer a narrative in which human labor hides us from the “truth” of human experience—so long as such narratives influence our sense of history, Marx’s narrative will serve as a reminder of acts of repression.

Like Conrad, Marx constructs a narrative in which human beings quite literally make history through their labor. But, unlike Conrad, Marx would consider any escape from that history to be an escape from the truth of human experience. People are prone to escape from the truth within human history because it is not a pleasant one. Human beings might make history, but they do not, Marx reminds us, make it under conditions of their own choosing. Humanity’s lack of control over the conditions under which it labors makes history, as it is for Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, a nightmare from which we are trying to awake. The role the historian plays in helping us awaken from the nightmare of history is quite different for Conrad and Marx. In expounding human experience Conrad’s novelist as historian becomes its “preserver” and “keeper.” He does so by revealing a prehistorical, unchanging truth about humanity. In expounding human experience, Marx’s philosopher as historian tries to help change it. He does so by providing explanations of the historical forces that keep humanity from laboring under conditions of its own choosing with the hope that consciousness of those conditions can help liberate humanity from them. Any new historical criticism worthy of its name will share in this goal of using historical analysis as a way to help those in the present work toward the construction of a new future, a future in which work is not only used as a means to control “the Other” within, but also directed toward liberating ourselves to help improve the lives of others truly different from us. In terms of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness this means recognizing that, whereas Conrad’s attempt to separate truth and history serves the important function of demystifying nineteenth-century notions of progress and European superiority, it generates a mystification of its own by absorbing the encounter with “the Other” into a narrative about European identity. Precisely because Conrad’s narrative tells us more about Europe than the Africa it supposedly represents, it compels us, not to strip truth from the cloak of time, but to imagine a radically different form of temporal narrative that allows “the Other” to be represented.