


A POSTcolonial CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?

In a 1975 lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe attacked Heart of Darkness as "racist." Conrad "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" (Achebe 783). Supposedly the great demystifier, Conrad is instead a "purveyor of comforting myths" (Achebe 784) and even "a bloody racist" (788). Achebe adds: "That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected" (788). Achebe would therefore like to strike Conrad's novella from the curriculum, where it has been one of the most frequently taught works of modern fiction in English classes from Chicago to Bombay to Johannesburg.

Achebe's diatribe has provoked a number of vigorous defenses of Heart of Darkness, which predictably stress Conrad's critical stance toward imperialism and also the wide acceptance of racist language and categories in the late Victorian period. Cedric Watts, for example, argues that "really Conrad and Achebe are on the same side" (204). Achebe simply gets carried away by his understandable aversion to racial stereotyping. "Far from being a 'purveyor of comforting myths,'" Watts declares, "Conrad most deliberately and incisively debunks such myths" (197). Acknowledging that Conrad employed the stereotypic language common in his day, Watts contends that he nevertheless rose above racism:
Achebe notes with indignation that Conrad (in the “Author’s Note” to *Victory*) speaks of an encounter with a “buck nigger” in Haiti which gave him an impression of mindless violence. Achebe might as well have noted the reference in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* . . . to a “tormented and flattened face — a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger’s soul.” He might have noted, also, that Conrad’s letters are sprinkled with casual anti-Semitic references. It is the same in the letters of his friend [R. B. Cunninghame] Graham. Both Conrad and Graham were influenced by the climate of prejudice of their times. . . . What is interesting is that the best work of both men seems to transcend such prejudice. (208)

Their work “transcends prejudice,” Watts believes, partly because they both attack imperialism. Watts is one of the many critics who interpret *Heart of Darkness* as an expose of imperialist rapacity and violence. Kurtz’s career in deviltry obviously undermines imperialist ideology, and the greed of the “faithless pilgrims” — the white subKurtzes, so to speak — is perhaps worse. “The conquest of the earth,” Marlow declares, “which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (p. 21). There is nothing equivocal about that remark; Conrad entertained no illusions about imperialist violence. But Marlow distinguishes between British imperialism and that of the other European powers: the red parts of the map are good to see, he says, “because one knows that some real work is done in there” (p. 24). *Heart of Darkness* is specifically about what Conrad saw in King Léopold II’s African empire in 1890; the extent to which his critique can be generalized to imperialism beyond the Congo is unclear.

The politics of Conrad’s story are complicated by its ambiguous style. I will use “impressionism” as a highly inadequate term to refer to its language and narrative structure, in part because Fredric Jameson uses it in his diagnosis of the “schizophrenic” nature of *Lord Jim* (219). Conrad’s “impressionism” is for some critics his most praiseworthy quality, while for others it appears instead to be a means of obfuscation, allowing him to mask his “nihilism,” or to maintain contradictory values, or both. Interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* that read it as only racist (and therefore imperialist), or conversely as only anti-imperialist (and therefore antiracist), inevitably founder on its “impressionism.” To point only to the most obvious difficulty, the narrative frame filters everything that is said not just through Marlow, but also through the anonymous primary narrator. At what point is it safe to assume that Conrad/Marlow express a single point of view? And even supposing that Marlow speaks directly for Conrad, does Conrad/Marlow agree with the values expressed by the primary narrator? Whatever the answers, *Heart of Darkness*, I believe, offers a powerful critique of at least certain manifestations of imperialism and racism, at the same time that it presents that critique in ways that can only be characterized as both imperialist and racist. “Impressionism” is the fragile skin of discourse that expresses — or disguises — this “schizophrenic” contradiction as an apparently harmonious whole.

I

In *Conrad and Imperialism* (1983), Benita Parry argues that “by revealing the disjunctions between high-sounding rhetoric and sordid ambitions and indicating the purposes and goals of a civilisation dedicated to global . . . hegemony, Conrad’s writings [are] more destructive of imperialist’s ideological premises than [are] the polemics of his contemporary opponents of empire” (10). Perhaps. It is at least certain that Conrad was appalled by the “high-sounding rhetoric” that had been used to mask the “sordid ambitions” of King Léopold II of Belgium, Conrad’s ultimate employer during his six months in the Congo in 1890. *Heart of Darkness* expresses not only what Conrad saw and partially recorded in his “Congo Diary,” but also the revelations of atrocities that began appearing in the British press as early as 1888 and that reached a climax twenty years later, when in 1908 the mounting scandal forced the Belgian government to take control of Léopold’s private domain. During that period the population of the Congo was reduced by perhaps one half; as many as 6,000,000 persons may have been uprooted, tortured, and murdered through the forced labor system used to extract ivory and what reformers called “red rubber.”

Conrad was sympathetic to the Congo Reform Association, established in 1903 partly by his friend Roger Casement whom he had met in Africa, and Casement got him to write a propaganda letter in which Conrad says: “It is an extraordinary thing that the conscience of Europe which seventy years ago . . . put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo state today” (Morel, *Rule 351–52*). There

follows some patronizing language contrasting the brutalities visited upon the Congolese with the legal protections given to horses in Europe, but Conrad’s intention is clear enough.

There is little to add to Hunt Hawkins’s account of Conrad’s relations with the Congo Reform Association. Its leader, Edmund Morel, who quoted Conrad’s letter to Casement in King Leopold’s Rule in Africa (1904), called Heart of Darkness the “most powerful thing ever written on the subject” (Hawkins 293). But as Hawkins notes, apart from writing the letter to Casement, Conrad backed away from involvement with the Association. Other prominent novelists who’d never been to the Congo contributed as much or more to its work. Mark Twain volunteered “King Léopold’s Soliloquy,” and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a book for the Association called The Crime of the Congo. Hawkins notes that Conrad “had little faith in agitation for political reform because words were meaningless, human nature unimprovable, and the universe dying” — hardly views that would encourage engagement in a cause like that of the Association (292–93).

All the same, in at least one other work of fiction Conrad registered his abhorrence of King Léopold’s rape of the Congo. This is the minor but highly revealing fantasy that Conrad coauthored with Ford Madox Hueffer, The Inheritors: An Extravagant Story (1901). Conrad’s role in its writing may have been slight, but was still substantial enough to make plain that he shared the views expressed in it. Briefly, the protagonist meets a beautiful young woman who claims to come from the “fourth dimension” and to be one of those who “shall inherit the earth.”

The Dimensionists were to come in swarms, to materialise, to devour like locusts. . . . They were to come like snow in the night: in the morning one would look out and find the world white. . . . As to methods, we should be treated as we ourselves treat the inferior races. (Conrad and Hueffer 16)

Far from being meek, the “inheritors” are obviously modern-day imperialists, satirically depicted as invaders from a “spiritualist” alternative world. But apart from the young woman and one other character, the invasion does not occur during the course of the novel, although the satire upon imperialism is maintained through the portrayal of the Duc de Mersch and his “System for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions” (46). Like King Léopold, “the foreign financier — they called him the Duc de Mersch — was by way of being a philanthropist on megalomaniac lines.” He proves ultimately to be no philanthropist at all, but just the sort of “gigantic and atrocious fraud” that Conrad believed Léopold to be. All one needs to do to read The Inheritors as an attack on Léopold’s African regime is to substitute “Congo” for “Greenland.” The hero, journalist Arthur Granger, helps to expose “the real horrors of the système Groënlandais — flogged, butchered, miserable natives, the famines, the vices, diseases, and the crimes” (280). The authors are not even particular about the color of the Eskimo victims: one character says that the Duc “has the blacks murdered” (246–74).

Hueffer and Conrad write some scorching things in The Inheritors about “cruelty to the miserable, helpless, and defenceless” (282). But the facts of exploitation in the Congo are perhaps less distressing to them than the lying idealism which disguises it:

More revolting to see without a mask was that falsehood which had been hiding under the words which for ages had spurred men to noble deeds, to self-sacrifice, to heroism. What was appalling was . . . that all the traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience, had been committed to the upholding of a gigantic and atrocious fraud. The falsehood had spread stealthily, had eaten into the very heart of creeds and convictions that we learn upon our passage between the past and the future. The old order of things had to live or perish with a lie. (282)

I will come back to the possibility that the worst feature of imperialism for Conrad may not have been its violence toward the “miserable” and “helpless,” but the lying propaganda used to cover its bloody tracks.

As Hawkins and others have pointed out, Conrad did not base his critique of imperialist exploitation in Heart of Darkness solely on what he had seen in the Congo. What he witnessed was miserable enough, and he was also made personally miserable and resentful by disease and the conviction that his Belgian employers were exploiting him. But, as he assured Casement, while in the Congo he had not even heard of “the alleged custom of cutting off hands among the natives” (Morel, Rule 117). The conclusion that Casement drew from this and other evidence was that most of the cruelties practiced in the Congo were not traditional, but were the recent effects of exploitation. The cutting off of hands was a punishment for noncooperation in Léopold’s forced labor system, and probably became frequent only after 1890. And just as Conrad had seen little or no evidence of torture, so, Molly Mahood conjectures, he probably saw little or no evidence of cannibalism, despite the stress upon it in his story (Mahood 12).

It thus seems likely that much of the “horror” either depicted or suggested in Heart of Darkness does not represent what Conrad saw,
but rather his reading of the literature that exposed Léopold’s bloody system between the time of his return to England and the composition of the novella in 1898–99. While Conrad’s “Congo Diary” and every facet of his journey to Stanley Falls and back has been scrutinized by Norman Sherry and others, much less attention has been paid to what Conrad learned about the Congo after his sojourn there. The exposed literature undoubtedly confirmed suspicions which Conrad formed in 1890; the bloodiest period in the history of Léopold’s regime began about a year later. According to Edmund Morel: “From 1890 onwards the records of the Congo State have been literally blood-soaked. Even at that early date, the real complexion of Congo State philanthropy was beginning to appear, but public opinion in Europe was then in its hoodwinked stage” (Rule 103).

The two events that did most to bring Léopold’s Congo under public scrutiny after Conrad’s time there were the 1891–94 war between Léopold’s forces and the Arab slave-traders and the murder of Charles Stokes, English citizen and renegade missionary, by Belgian officials in 1895. The conflict with the Arabs — a “war of extermination,” according to Morel — was incredibly cruel and bloody. “The first serious collision with the Arabs occurred in October 27, 1891; the second on May 6, 1892. Battle then succeeded battle; Nyangwe, the Arab stronghold, was captured in January, 1893, and with the surrender of Rumaliza in January, 1894, the campaign came to an end” (Rule 23). Conrad undoubtedly read about these events in the press and perhaps also in later accounts, notably Captain Sidney Hinde’s The Fall of the Congo Arabs (1897). Arthur Hodister, whom Sherry claims as the original of Kurtz, was an early victim of the fighting, having led an expedition to Katanga that was crushed by the Arabs. According to Ian Watt, “The Times reported of Hodister and his comrades that ‘their heads were stuck on poles and their bodies eaten’” (23). This and many similar episodes during the war are probable sources of Conrad’s emphasis upon cannibalism in Heart of Darkness.

Cannibalism was practiced by both sides in the war, not just by the Arabs and their Congolese soldiers. According to Hinde, who must also be counted among the possible models for Kurtz, “The fact that both sides were cannibals, or rather that both sides had cannibals in their train, proved a great element in our success” (124–25). Muslims, Hinde points out, believe that they will go to heaven only if their bodies are intact, as opposed to mutilated, chopped up, eaten. So cannibalism was in part a weapon of fear and reprisal on both sides, and in part also a traditional accompaniment of war among some Congolese societies. Hinde speaks of combatants on both sides as “human wolves” and describes numerous “disgusting banquets” (69). A typical passage in his account reads: “What struck me most in these expeditions was the number of partially cut-up bodies I found in every direction for miles around. Some were minus the hands and feet, and some with steaks cut from the thighs or elsewhere; others had the entrails or the head removed, according to the taste of the individual savage . . .” (131). Hinde’s descriptions of such atrocities seem to be those of an impartial, external observer, but in fact he was one of six white officers in charge of some four hundred “regulars” and “about 25,000” “cannibal” troops. His expressions of horror seem only what are expected of an Englishman, but they are also those of a participant and contradict more honest expressions of sadistic fascination with every bloodthirsty detail.

While it seems likely that Conrad read Hinde’s lurid account, he must have known about the war from earlier accounts such as those in The Times. To cite one other example, in a series of journal extracts published in The Century Magazine in 1896–97, E. J. Glave documented “cruelty in the Congo Free State.” According to Glave, “The state has not suppressed slavery, but established a monopoly by driving out the Arab and Wangana competitors.” Instead of a noble war to end the slave trade, which is how Léopold and his agents justified their actions against the Arabs, a new system of slavery was installed in place of the old. Glave continues: “sometimes the natives are so persecuted that they [take revenge] by killing and eating their tormentors. Recently the state post on the Lomami lost two men killed and eaten by the natives. Arabs were sent to punish the natives; many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to [Stanley Falls], and have been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house” (706). Captain Rom, no doubt, must also be counted among the possible models for Kurtz. In any event, the practice of seizing Congolese for laborers and chopping off the hands and heads of resisters continued and probably increased after the defeat of the Arabs, as numerous eyewitnesses testify in the grisly quotations that form the bulk of Edmund Morel’s exposés. According to a quite typical account by a Swiss observer: “If the chief does not bring the stipulated number of baskets [of raw rubber], soldiers are sent out, and the people are killed without mercy. As proof, parts of the body are brought to the factory. How often have I watched heads and hands being carried into the factory” (Morel, Rubber 77).
When Marlow declares that “the conquest of the earth... is not a pretty thing,” he goes on to suggest that imperialism may be “redeemed” by the “idea” that lies behind it. But in the real world idealism is fragile, and in Heart of Darkness, except for the illusions maintained by a few womenfolk back in Brussels, it has almost died out. In “going native,” Kurtz betrays the “civilizing” ideals with which he supposedly set out from Europe. Among the “faithless pilgrims,” there are only false ideals and the false religion of self-seeking. “To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire,” says Marlow, “with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe” (p. 45). The true nature of European philanthropy in the Congo is revealed to Marlow by the chain gang and the “black shadows of disease and starvation,” left to die in the “greenish gloom,” whom he sees at the Outer Station (p. 31). These miserable “phantoms” are probably accurate depictions of what Conrad saw in 1890; they may also be taken to represent what he later learned about Léopold’s forced labor system. In any case, from the moment he sets foot in the Congo, Marlow is clear about the meaning of “the merry dance of death and trade” (p. 29). It thus makes perfect sense to interpret Heart of Darkness as an attack on imperialism, at least as it was operative in the Congo.

But in the course of this attack, all “ideals” threaten to turn into “idols” — “something,” in Marlow’s words, that “you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to” (p. 21). Conrad universalizes “darkness” partly by universalizing fetishism. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and other Marxist critics of empire described the era of “the scramble for Africa” — roughly 1880 to 1914 — as one when the “commodity fetishism” of “late capitalism” was most intense, a notion that Edward Said touches upon in analyzing The Nigger of the Narcissus” (142–43). If the “natives” in their darkness set Kurtz up as an idol, the Europeans worship ivory, money, power, reputation. Kurtz joins the “natives” in their “unspeakable rites,” worshipping his own unrestrained power and lust. Marlow himself assumes the pose of an idol, sitting on shipdeck with folded legs and outward palms like a Buddha. And Kurtz’s Intended is perhaps the greatest fetishist of all, idolizing her image of her fiancé. Marlow’s lie leaves Kurtz’s Intended shrouded in the protective darkness of her illusions, her idol-worship.

But the difficulty with this ingenious inversion, through which “ideals” become “idols,” is that Conrad portrays the moral bankruptcy of imperialism by showing European motives and actions to be no better than African fetishism and savagery. He paints Kurtz and Africa with the same tarbrush. His version of evil — the form taken by Kurtz’s Satanic behavior — is “going native.” In short, evil is African in Conrad’s story; if it is also European, that’s because some number of white men in the heart of darkness behave like Africans. Conrad’s stress on cannibalism, his identification of African customs with violence, lust, and madness, his metaphors of bestiality, death, and darkness, his suggestion that traveling in Africa is like traveling backward in time to primeval, infantile, but also hellish stages of existence — these features of the story are drawn from the repertoire of Victorian imperialism and racism that painted an entire continent dark.

Achebe is therefore right to call Conrad’s portrayal of Africa and Africans “racist.” It is possible to argue, as does Parry, that Conrad works with the white-and-black, light-and-darkness dichotomies of racist fantasy in order to subvert them, but she acknowledges that the subversion is incomplete: “Although the resonances of white are rendered discordant... black and dark do serve in the text as equivalences for the savage and unredeemed, the corrupt and degraded... the cruel and atrocious. Imperialism itself is perceived as the dark within Europe... Yet despite... momentous departures from traditional European usage... the fiction gravitates back to established practice, registering the view of two incompatible orders within a manichean universe” (23). The “imperialist imagination” itself, Parry suggests, works with the “manichean,” irreconcilable polarities common to all racist ideology. Achebe states the issue more succinctly: “Conrad had a problem with niggers... Sometimes, his fixation on blackness is... overwhelming” (789).

Identifying specific sources for Conrad’s later knowledge of the horrors of Léopold’s regime is less important than recognizing that there were numerous sources, swelling in number through the 1890s. Conrad reshaped his firsthand experience of the Congo in the light of these sources in several ways. As I have already suggested, the emphasis on cannibalism in Heart of Darkness probably derives in part from Conrad’s reading about the war between Léopold’s agents and the Arabs. At the same time, the war is not mentioned in the novella — indeed, the Arab rivals of the Belgians for control of the Congo are conspicuous only by their absence. The omission has the important effect of sharpening the light-and-dark dichotomies, the staple of European racism; “evil” and “darkness” are parceled out between only two antithetical sides, European and African, “white” and “black.” But while Conrad/Marlow treats the attribution of “evil” to the European invaders as a
paradox, its attribution to Africans he treats as a given. Further, the omission of the Arabs means that Conrad does not treat cannibalism as a result of war, but as an everyday custom of the Congoese, even though he probably saw no evidence of it when he was there. Exaggerating the extent and nature of cannibalism is also standard in racist accounts of Africa.

In simplifying his memories and sources, Conrad arrived at the dichotomous or “manichean” pattern of the imperialist adventure romance, a pattern radically at odds with any realist, exposed intention. Perhaps Heart of Darkness expresses two irreconcilable intentions. As Parry says, “to proffer an interpretation of Heart of Darkness as a militant denunciation and a reluctant affirmation of imperialist civilisation, as a fiction that [both] exposes and colludes in imperialism’s mystifications, is to recognise its immanent contradictions” (39). Moreover, the argument that Conrad was consciously anti-imperialist, but that he unconsciously or carelessly employed the racist terminology current in his day will not stand up, because he was acutely aware of what he was doing. Every white-black and light-dark contrast in the story, whether it corroborates racist assumptions or subverts them, is precisely calculated for its effects both as a unit in a scheme of imagery and as a focal point in a complex web of contradictory political and moral values.

Conrad knew that his story was ambiguous: he stresses that ambiguity at every opportunity, so that labeling it “anti-imperialist” is as unsatisfactory as condemning it for being “racist.” The fault-line for all of the contradictions and ambiguities in the text lies between Marlow and Kurtz. Of course it also lies between Conrad and both of his ambivalent characters, not to mention the anonymous primary narrator. Is Marlow Kurtz’s antagonist, critic, and potential redeemer? Or is he Kurtz’s pale shadow and admirer, his double, and finally one more idolator in a story full of examples of fetishism and devil worship? Conrad poses these questions with great care, but he just as carefully refuses to answer them.

III

In the world of Heart of Darkness, there are no clear answers. Ambiguity, perhaps the main form of “darkness” in the story, prevails. Conrad overlays the political and moral content of his novella with symbolic and mythic patterns that divert attention from Kurtz and the Congo to “mystic halos” and “moonshine.” The anonymous narrator uses these metaphors to describe the difference between Marlow’s stories and those of ordinary sailors:

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical ... and to him 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. (pp. 19–20)

The passage announces that locating the “meaning” of the story won’t be easy, and in fact may be impossible. It seems almost to be a confession of defeat, or at least of contradiction. Conrad here establishes as one of his themes the problem of rendering any judgment whatsoever — moral, political, metaphysical — about Marlow’s narrative. It is precisely this complexity — a theme that might be labeled the dislocation of meaning or the disorientation of values in the story — that many critics have treated as its finest feature.

In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that Conrad’s stories — Lord Jim is his main example — betray a symptomatic split between a modernist “will to style,” leading to an elaborate but essentially hollow “impressionism,” and the reified, mass culture tendencies of romance conventions. In a fairly obvious way, Heart of Darkness betrays the same split, moving in one direction toward the “mystic halos” and “moonshine” of a style that seeks to be its own meaning, apart from any “kernel” or center or embarrassingly clear content, but also grounding itself in another direction in the conventions of Gothic romance with their devalued mass culture status — conventions that were readily adapted to the heroic adventure themes of imperialist propaganda. This split almost corresponds to the contradiction of an anti-imperialist novel which is also racist. In the direction of high style, the story acquires several serious purposes, apparently including its critique of empire. In the direction of reified mass culture, it falls into the stereotypic patterns of race-thinking common to the entire tradition of the imperialist adventure story or quest romance. This double, contradictory purpose, characteristic perhaps of all of Conrad’s fiction, Jameson calls “schizophrenic” (219).

By “the manicheaism of the imperialist imagination,” Parry means dividing the world between “warring moral forces” — good versus evil, civilization versus savagery, West versus East, light versus darkness, white versus black. Such polarizations are the common property
of the racism and authoritarianism that constitute imperialist political theory and also of the Gothic romance conventions that were appropriated by numerous writers of imperialist adventure tales — G. A. Henty, Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Conan Doyle, John Buchan, Rudyard Kipling, and Conrad among them. As Martin Green points out, “Conrad of course offers us an ironic view of that genre. But he affirms its value” (219). Conrad is simultaneously a critic of the imperialist adventure and its romantic fictions, and one of the greatest writers of such fictions, his greatness deriving partly from his critical irony and partly from the complexity of his style — his “impressionism.” But the chief difficulty with Jameson’s argument, I think, is that the “will to style” in Conrad’s text is also a will to appropriate and remake Gothic romance conventions into high art. On some level, the “impressionism” of Conrad’s novels and their romance features are identical — Conrad constructs a sophisticated version of the imperialist romance — and in any case both threaten to submerge or “derealize” the critique of empire within their own more strictly esthetic project. As part of that project, providing much of the substance of “impressionism,” the romance conventions that Conrad reshapes carry with them the polarizations of racist thought.

In analyzing Conrad’s “schizophrenic writing,” Jameson notes the proliferation of often contradictory critical opinions that mark the history of his reception: “The discontinuities objectively present in Conrad’s narratives have, as with few other modern writers, projected a bewildering variety of competing and incommensurable interpretive options . . . .” Jameson proceeds to list nine different critical approaches, from “the ‘romance’ or mass-cultural reading of Conrad as a writer of adventure tales [and] the stylistic analysis of Conrad as a practitioner of . . . an ‘impressionistic’ will to style,” to the “myth-critical,” the Freudian, the ethical, the “ego-psychological,” the existential, the Nietzschean, and the structuralist readings. Jameson leaves off of the list his own Marxist-political reading; what he wishes to suggest is how often criticism ignores or downplays the contradictory politics of Conrad’s fiction (208–09). Raymond Williams voices a similar complaint:

It is . . . astonishing that a whole school of criticism has succeeded in emptying Heart of Darkness of its social and historical content . . . . The Congo of Léopold follows the sea that Dombey and Son traded across, follows it into an endless substitution in which no object is itself, no social experience direct, but everything is translated into what can be called a metaphysical language — the river is Evil; the sea is Love or Death. Yet only called metaphysical,

because there is not even that much guts in it. No profound and ordinary belief, only a perpetual and sophisticated evasion. . . . (145)

There are wonderfully elaborate readings of Marlow’s journey as a descent into hell, playing upon Conrad’s frequent allusions to Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Goethe, and devil worship. And there are just as many elaborate readings of the story as an “inward voyage” of “self-discovery,” in which its geopolitical language is treated as symbolizing psychological states and parts of the mind. Conrad, Albert Guerard reminds us, was Freud’s contemporary, and in Heart of Darkness he produced the quintessential “night journey into the unconscious” (39). Guerard adds that “it little matters what, in terms of psychological symbolism, we . . . say [Kurtz] represents: whether the Freudian id or the Jungian shadow or more vaguely the outlaw” (39). Perhaps it matters just as little whether we say the story takes place in Léopold’s Congo or in some purely imaginary landscape.

The point, however, is not to take issue with Guerard and other critics who concentrate on the “impressionism” of Conrad’s story, but rather to restore what their readings neglect. In a great deal of contemporary criticism, words themselves have ceased to have external referents. Williams does not take Jameson’s line in accusing Conrad’s “will to style” of emptying Heart of Darkness of its “social and historical content”; instead, he accuses criticism of so emptying it. The “will to style” — or rather the will to a refreshed critical intelligence — devours us, too, leaving structuralists and deconstructionists, Althusserians and Foucauldians, and so forth. And yet Conrad has anticipated his critics by constructing a story in which the “meaning” does not lie at the center, not even at “the heart of darkness,” but elsewhere, in “mystic halos” and “moonshine” — forever beyond some vertiginous horizon which recedes as the would-be critic-adventurer sails toward it.

IV

The crowds [in one village] were fired into promiscuously, and fifteen were killed, including four women and a babe on its mother’s breast. The heads were cut off and brought to the officer in charge, who then sent men to cut off the hands also, and these were pierced, strung, and dried over the camp fire. The heads, with many others, I saw myself. The town, prosperous once, was burnt, and what they could not carry off was destroyed. Crowds of people were caught, mostly . . . women, and three fresh rope
gangs were added. These poor ‘prisoner’ gangs were mere skeletons of skin and bone. . . . Chiyombo’s very large town was next attacked. A lot of people were killed, and heads and hands cut off and taken back to the officers. . . . Shortly after the Street caravans, with flags flying and bugles blowing, entered the mission station at Luanza . . . and I shall not soon forget the sickening sight of deep baskets of human heads. (Morel, Rubber 49)

While the primary narrator and many critics seem to believe that the meaning of Heart of Darkness lies in “the spectral illumination of moonshine,” Marlow knows better. “Illumination” proves as false as most white men — as false as white “civilization”; the “truth,” or at least the meaning of Conrad’s story, lies in “darkness.” That is why, once Marlow learns about the shadowy Kurtz, he is so impatient to get to the Central Station. And yet Kurtz seems inadequate as a central character or the goal of Marlow’s quest — vacuous, a mere “shade,” a “hollow man.” That, however, may be part of Conrad’s point. Ian Watt has identified at least nine possible models for Kurtz, including Henry Morton Stanley, Arthur Hodister, and Charles Stokes, who left the Church Missionary Society for an African wife and life as a gun-runner and slave-trader (Watt 141–45). In 1895 Stokes was executed in the Congo for selling guns to the Arabs, an event which, close on the heels of the war, provided a focus for British public indignation. To Watt’s list of models for Kurtz I have already added Captain Hinde, author of The Fall of the Congo Arabs, and Captain Rom, who decorated the borders of his flower garden with skulls. The Belgian officer responsible for Stokes’s illegal execution, Captain Lothaire, must also be counted.

But just as Conrad probably drew upon many sources in depicting the horrors of the Congo, so he probably had many models for Kurtz in mind. All of the white officers in charge of Léopold’s empire were in essence Kurtzes, as the eyewitness testimony published by the Congo Reform Association demonstrates. And what about the eyewitnesses? Were they always so objective or so morally appalled as they claimed to be? What about Conrad himself? Although his role in the building of Léopold’s “Congo Free State” was minor and also prior to the worst horrors, Conrad must have recognized his own complicity and seen himself as at least potentially a Kurtz-like figure. In the novella, the African wilderness serves as a mirror, in whose “darkness” Conrad/Marlow sees a death-pale self-image.

The massive evidence of wholesale torture and slaughter under the direction of Léopold’s white agents suggests not only that there were numerous Kurtzes in the “heart of darkness,” but also that, as Hannah

Arendt contends in The Origins of Totalitarianism, nineteenth-century imperialism prepared the ground in which fascism and Nazism took root after World War I. Arendt has Kurtz and other Conrad characters in mind when she describes the appeal of “the phantom world of colonial adventure” to certain types of Europeans:

Outside all social restraint and hypocrisy, against the backdrop of native life, the gentleman and the criminal felt not only the closeness of men who share the same color of skin, but the impact of a world of infinite possibilities for crimes committed in the spirit of play, for the combination of horror and laughter, that is for the full realization of their own phantom-like existence. Native life lent these ghostlike events a seeming guarantee against all consequences because anyhow it looked to these men like a mere play of shadows. A play of shadows, the dominant race could walk through unaffected and disregarded in the pursuit of its incomprehensible aims and needs.” The world of native savages was a perfect setting for men who had escaped the reality of civilization. (70)

A great many Kurtz-like Europeans “went native” in Africa, often to the extent of practicing genocide as a hobby; some were even rumored to practice cannibalism. According to Sir Harry H. Johnston, first governor of British Central Africa, “I have been increasingly struck with the rapidity with which such members of the white race as are not of the best class, can throw over the restraints of civilization and develop into savages of unbridled lust and abominable cruelty” (68). Kurtz is not a member of the worst “class” of the white race, however; Conrad is talking about a quite common pattern of behavior.

One of the most remarkable perversions of the criticism of Heart of Darkness has been to see Kurtz not as an abomination — a “hollow man” with a lust for blood and domination — but as a hero of the spirit.” That phrase is Lionel Trilling’s. In his well-known essay describing the establishment of the first course in modern literature at Columbia University, Trilling explains why he put Conrad’s novella on the reading list:

Whether or not . . . Conrad read either Blake or Nietzsche I do not know, but his Heart of Darkness follows in their line. This very great work has never lacked for the admiration it deserves, and it has been given a . . . canonical place in the legend of modern literature by Eliot’s having it so clearly in mind when he wrote The Waste Land and his having taken from it the epigraph to “The Hollow Men.” (“Modern” 17–18)
Despite the “hollow man” association between Eliot’s poem and Conrad’s novella, Trilling claims that “no one, to my knowledge, has ever confronted in an explicit way [the latter’s] strange and terrible message of ambivalence toward the life of civilization” (17). In Sincerity and Authenticity (1981), Trilling adds that Conrad’s story is “the paradigmatic literary expression of the modern concern with authenticity,” and continues: “This troubling work has no manifest polemical content but it contains in sum the whole of the radical critique of European civilization that has been made by [modern] literature” (106).

Although Trilling mentions the Congolese background of the story, it is less important to him than the larger question of the nature of “European civilization.” Marlow’s quest for Kurtz becomes a quest for the truth about that civilization. Trilling arrives at his view of Kurtz partly the way Marlow does, because Kurtz at the end of his satanic career seems to confront “the horror, the horror.” “For Marlow,” says Trilling, “Kurtz is a hero of the spirit whom he cherishes as Theseus at Colonus cherished Oedipus: he sinned for all mankind. By his regression to savagery Kurtz had reached as far down beneath the constructs of civilization as it was possible to do, to the irreducible truth of man, the innermost core of his nature, his heart of darkness. From that Stygian authenticity comes illumination . . .” (108).

Marlow does paradoxically come to admire Kurtz because he has “summed up” or “judged” in his final moments: “He was a remarkable man” (p. 86). Marlow’s admiration for Kurtz, however, carries a terrific burden of irony that Trilling seems not to recognize. Kurtz has not merely lost faith in civilization and therefore experimented with “Stygian authenticity” — he is also a murderer, perhaps even a cannibal. He has allowed his idolators to make human sacrifices in his honor and, like Captain Rom, has decorated his corner of hell with the skulls of his victims. I suspect that Trilling arrives at his own evaluation of Kurtz as a “hero of the spirit” in part because he himself does not find “the horror” all that horrid, even though the deaths of 6,000,000 Congolese is a high price to pay for the “illumination” of “Stygian authenticity.” But Trilling’s interpretation of Kurtz’s dying words — “the horror, the horror” — does not take account of what transpired in Léopold’s Congo. “For me it is still ambiguous whether Kurtz’s famous deathbed cry refers to the approach of death or to his experience of savage life” (Trilling, “Modern” 18).

According to Trilling’s view, either Kurtz thinks death “the horror,” or Kurtz thinks African “savagery” “the horror.” There is another possibility, of course, which is that Kurtz’s dying words are an outcry against himself — against his betrayal of civilization and his Intended, against the smash-up of his early hopes, and also against his bloody domination of the people he has been lording it over. No one would ever mistake Conrad’s other traitors to civilization as “heroes of the spirit.” I am thinking, for example, of Willems who goes wrong and then “goes native” in An Outcast of the Islands, or of the ironically sympathetic murderer Leggatt in “The Secret Sharer.” Even Lord Jim is no “hero of the spirit,” but a mortal cripple who manages to regain a semblance of self-respect only after fleeing to Patusan. But how was it possible for Trilling to look past Kurtz’s criminal record and identify “the horror” either with the fear of death or with African “savagery”? Achebe gives part of the answer: “white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected” — so normal that acts that are condemned as the vilest of crimes when committed in the supposedly civilized West can be linked to a “heroism of the spirit” and to “Stygian authenticity” when committed in Africa against Africans.

But the other part of the answer, it seems to me, is that Trilling is right. Conrad himself identifies with and ironically admires Kurtz. He, too, sees him as a “hero of the spirit,” although “the spirit” for Conrad is perhaps not what Trilling thinks it is. For Conrad, Kurtz’s heroism consists in staring into an abyss of nihilism so total that the issues of imperialism and racism pale into insignificance. It hardly matters if the abyss is of Kurtz’s making. No more than Trilling or perhaps most Western critics, I think, did Conrad concern himself deeply about “unspeakable rites” and skulls on posts. These appear in Marlow’s account like so many melodrama props — the evidence of Kurtz’s decline and fall, yes — but it is still Kurtz who has center stage, with whom Marlow speaks, who is the goal and farthest point of the journey. Kurtz’s black victims and idolators skulking in the bushes are also so many melodrama props.

Kurtz is not only the hero of the melodrama, he is an artist, a “universal genius,” and a quite powerful, eloquent “voice” as well. As Achebe points out, the African characters are, in contrast, rendered almost without intelligible language. The headman of Marlow’s cannibal crew gets in a few phrases of Pidgin-minstrellese, something about eating some fellow Africans. These are the black Kurtz worshippers, shrieking and groaning incoherently in the foggy shrubbery along the river. Kurtz’s “superb and savage” mistress, though described in glowing detail, is given no voice, but in spite of this I like to imagine that she, at least, entertained no illusions about Kurtz or about imperialism.
Unlike the prim, palefaced knitters of black wool back in Brussels. "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are" (p. 27) says Marlow, but of course he means white women. Kurtz's black mistress knows all; it's just unfortunate that Marlow did not ask her for an interview.

The voices that come from the "heart of darkness" are almost exclusively white and male. As a nearly disembodied, pure voice emanating from the very center of the story, Kurtz is a figure for the novelist, as is his double Marlow. True, the "voice" that speaks out of the "heart of darkness" is a hollow one, the voice of the abyss; but Marlow still talks of Kurtz's "unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression." The "voice" of Kurtz has electrified large meetings, and through it Kurtz "could get himself to believe anything — anything" (p. 88). Is Conrad questioning or mocking his own "voice," his own talent for fiction-making, for lying? Is he aware that the "will to style," his own tendency to "impressionism," points toward the production of novels that are hollow at the core — that can justify any injustice — that contain, perhaps, only an abyss, a Kurtz, "the horror, the horror"? Yes, I think so. It is just this hollow "voice," so devious and egotistical, so capable of self-deception and lying propaganda, that speaks from the center of "the heart of darkness" to "sum up" and to "judge."

Besides a painter, musician, orator, and "universal genius," Kurtz is also, like Conrad, a writer. What he writes can be seen as an analogue for the story and also its dead center, the kernel of meaning or non-meaning within its cracked shell. True, Kurtz has not written much, only seventeen pages, but "it was a beautiful piece of writing." This is his pamphlet for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs," which Marlow describes as "eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think."

The opening paragraph . . . in the light of later information, strikes me now as ominous. He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings — we approach them with the might as of a deity," and so on, and so on. "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence. [And here I will add, "This was the unbounded will to style." . . . There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (pp. 65–66)

Viewed one way, Conrad's anti-imperialist story condemns the murderous racism of Kurtz's imperative. Viewed another way, Conrad's racist story voices that very imperative, and Conrad knows it. At the hollow center of Heart of Darkness, far from the "misty halos" and "moonshine" where the meaning supposedly resides, Conrad inscribes a text that, like the novel itself, cancels out its own best intentions.

But now Kurtz's dying words can be seen as something more than an outcry of guilt, and certainly more than a mere expression of the fear of death or of loathing for African "sagacity." They can be seen as referring to the sort of lying idealism that can rationalize any behavior, to a complete separation between words and meaning, theory and practice — perhaps to the "impressionistic" deviousness of art and language themselves. On this metaphysical level, I think, Conrad ceases to worry about the atrocities committed in the Congo and identifies with Kurtz as a fellow-artist, a "hero of the spirit" of that nihilism that Conrad himself found so attractive.

On several occasions, Conrad compared the artist with the empire builder in a way that obviously runs counter to his critique of imperialism in Heart of Darkness. In A Personal Record, Conrad writes of "that interior world where the novelist's thought and . . . emotions go seeking for . . . imagined adventures," and where "there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread opinion to keep him within bounds." And in the first manuscript of "The Rescuer," which as John McClure points out contains "by far" Conrad's "most sympathetic" treatment of imperialism, empire-builders are among "those unknown guides of civilization, who on the advancing edge of progress are administrators, warriors, creators . . . They are like great artists a mystery to the masses, appreciated only by the uninfluential few" (McClure 89–90). Kurtz is empire-builder, artist, universal genius, and voice crying from the wilderness all in one. But he has lost the faith — vision or illusion — that can alone sustain an empire and produce great art. Nihilism is no basis upon which to found or administer a colony, and it is also no basis on which to write a novel, and again Conrad
knows it. In suggesting his affinity to Kurtz, he suggests the moral bankruptcy of his own literary project. But once there were empire-builders and great artists who kept the faith. Conrad frequently expresses his admiration for the great explorers and adventurers, from Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake through James Brooke, the white rajah of Sarawak, and David Livingstone, the greatest of the many great explorers of the "Dark Continent."

Conrad's critique of empire is never strictly anti-imperialist. Instead, in terms that can be construed as conservative rather than nihilistic, he mourns the loss of the truth faith in modern times, the dosing down of frontiers, the narrowing of the possibilities for adventure, the commercialization of the world and of art, the death of chivalry and honor. Here the meaning of his emphasis on the lying propaganda of modern imperialism becomes evident. What was once a true, grand, noble, albeit violent enterprise is now "a gigantic and atrocious fraud" — except maybe, Marlow thinks, in the red parts of the map, where "some real work is done." Staring into the abyss of his life, or at least of Kurtz's life, Conrad sees in his disillusionment, his nihilism, the type of the whole — the path of disintegration that is modern history. It is not just Africa or even just Kurtz who possesses a "heart of darkness"; Conrad's story bears that title as well.

But I am not going to end by announcing in "a tone of scathing contempt" the death of Conrad's story as a classic, like the insolent manager's boy announcing: "Mistah Kurtz — he dead." I agree with Trilling that "authenticity," truth-telling, so far from being a negligible literary effect, is the essence of great literature. The fact that there are almost no other works of British fiction written before World War I that are critical of imperialism, and hundreds of imperialist ones that are racist through and through, is a measure of Conrad's achievement. I do not believe, moreover, that the real strength of Heart of Darkness lies in what it says about atrocities in King Leopold's Congo, though its documentary impulse is an important counter to its "will to style." As social criticism, its anti-imperialist message is undercut both by its racism and by its impressionism. But I know few novels that so insistently invoke an idealism that they don't seem to contain, and in which the modernist "will to style" is subjected to such powerful self-scrutiny — in which it is suggested that the "voice" at the heart of the novel, the voice of literature, the voice of civilization itself may in its purest, freest form yield only "the horror, the horror."