"Toying Architecturally with the Bones:" On Sitting Down to Read *Heart of Darkness* Once Again

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Professor Mary Ann Gillies' English 438 course *Topics in Modernism*. The assignment asked students to write a reflective essay based upon a previously submitted reading journal assignment. The paper uses MLA citation style.

This paper attempts to combine reflection on the stakes of literary studies today with a close reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In particular, I focus on what it means to read about historical atrocities such as Conrad depicts, and on how the main narrator, Marlow, makes visible a certain kind of failure to see those atrocities for what they are. I conclude by suggesting that this character's failure to understand is comparable to the failure of so many readers and critics to see racism, imperialism, and colonialism as both operative within the novel and, potentially, criticized by it.

Why bother reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* today? In all honesty, I am willing to assume that *Heart of Darkness* is worth reading. But now after rereading it I want to pose that question in order to think about what we turn and return to literature for. How can one interpret *Heart of Darkness*, or any work of literature which represents the atrocities of recent history, and not end up "toying architecturally with the bones" like the accountant to whom Marlow tells his tale? As he listens to Marlow's account of the 'horrors' of colonialism in the Congo, the accountant plays with a set of ivory dominoes—the product of European imperialism and its conquest of Africa (Conrad 74). The literary critic is at risk of doing the same when criticism becomes a game of interpretation-production. Too often the canonization of works like *Heart of Darkness* has the effect of making

them harmless or impotent by flattening the profound challenges they pose into simply narrative or stylistic difficulty. The reader's task should instead be to recognize moral, ethical, hermeneutic, or epistemological problems—that is, actual problems—as texts make them available. We too often forget how serious our 'serious' literature is. If it is the case that, as Edgar says in *King Lear*, "the worst is not / So long as we can say 'this is the worst'," (4.1.29-30) then one persistent challenge in reading works like *Heart of Darkness* is to at least recognize the claim that 'the worst' makes upon us. Reading Conrad's novel can be an occasion for reflection on the purposes of reading and writing, especially with regard to "the worst:" those experiences, stories, and histories that make the most urgent claims for our attention, interpretation, understanding, and even intervention.

I adopt Shakespeare's phrase in order to avoid reflexively using all-too-familiar words like "atrocity," "catastrophe," and "horror." The issue for me is how we can understand "the worst," especially in particular instances. I am not concerned here with some theory of "the worst" in general, but instead with the staggering array of specific histories of violence that call for attention, none more worthy of attention than another. We are, if fortunate, distanced from those histories by time, geography, and degrees of power and privilege. And the effect of these distancing factors is twofold. They grant the time, space, peace, state of mind, and resources necessary to read, listen, study, write, reflect, and theorize—to work toward understanding. But those same factors also insulate us from "the worst," making it ever more comfortable and easy to ignore ethical obligations that proximity could make obvious and urgent. Still, the choice is not really between proximity and distance. It is between saying "this is the worst," as a beginning, and saying nothing at all. Of course, choosing to speak of "the worst," or of "the horror," immediately gives rise to a new problem: how one should understand and represent it, if at all.

In *Heart of Darkness* the peculiar way Conrad frames Marlow's voice makes the discourses surrounding "the worst" conspicuous and problematic, which opens a space for the reader to begin reflecting critically on their own assumptions. Specifically, the anonymous frame-narrator who opens and closes the text of *Heart of Darkness* serves to present Marlow as a voice with an audience. Curiously, this external narrator does not appear as a voice the way Marlow does; he makes no explicit address to an audience. More strangely, he seems not to report his own speech as such, in the context of the *Nellie* on the Thames. This narrator muses on the "great knights-errant of the sea," explorers at the vanguard

of conquest and 'progress,' but this is not presented as speech audible to the other characters sitting on the *Nellie* (Conrad 75). However, Marlow later indicates that he has heard the framing narration, or what we might have assumed were the thoughts of the frame-narrator: "Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but […]" (77). We are forced to wonder who said anything about knights; then we may recall that we have read about them a few pages ago. This raises a subtle doubt about the stability of any distinction between thought, voice, and text in the whole novel. Because the novel's narrative voices are so confusing, one can already infer from the opening pages that the act of narrating atrocities is never easy or reliable.

That framing scene of the novel is essential to the ultimate meaning of Marlow's narration, even as it destabilizes our sense of that meaning. Marlow mostly tells his tale while literally in the dark, as the narrator helpfully notes: "It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice" (103). This darkness objectively parallels the hermeneutic difficulty that Marlow's story poses. Significantly, that darkness is reported only after Marlow has voiced his doubts about the possibility of truly communicating the subjective significance of his experience:

> He [Kurtz] 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 […] No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone…. (103)

Marlow slips out of the relatively smooth narrative voice he has been using and becomes temporarily interrogative, repetitious, and frustrated, as his sense of phenomenological or existential isolation makes the narration of experience seem futile. But immediately before the external narrator remarks on the darkness surrounding them, Marlow adds a cryptic coda to his interjection: "Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know…." (103). The fictional audience know Marlow and might trust him, but their chronological and geographical distance from his story of Africa may also make it easier for them to understand its meaning beyond Marlow's subjectivity—which is

not to say its 'objective' meaning. Earlier the narrator claims that with Marlow the meaning of a story "[is] not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (77). In other words, the meaning of Marlow's stories is in its whole, not any one detail or conclusive point. But these claims about storytelling and understanding speak to the limitations of narrator and audience alike. Moreover, they can serve as alibis for Marlow's incomplete understanding.

Marlow is not slow to describe the cruelty he witnessed along the Congo River, but he cannot synthesize his immediate experiences with the potential for understanding that distance permits. Marlow's position in relation to the horrors he saw makes him at once too close and too far to recognize a specific and communicable meaning. Instead he mythologizes his experience by narrating it as though it were a kind of 'quest for Kurtz,' and it is not surprising that exactly that narrative structure, the 'journey into a heart of darkness,' has proved easiest to adapt among all the elements of Conrad's novel. It is a potent myth, but it obscures Marlow's obtuseness. He claims that his initial apprehension of Africa was frustrated: "The idleness of a passenger, my isolation, […] seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (87). But he never escapes that delusion, and Kurtz offers no true revelation. Marlow is apparently too honest to deny or outrageously misrepresent the "horror" he witnessed, but he gives an exquisite performance of confusion and frustration instead of arriving at the conclusions immanent in his experiences; a performance that amounts to a self-undermining apology for imperialism. He says of "the conquest of the earth:"

> 'What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to….'
> He broke off. (79)

Strangely, Marlow cannot or will not say what that idea is. It is even more disturbing that his description of the function of such an idea begins to resemble the cult Kurtz gathered around himself, of which Marlow was so reluctant to learn: "'I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz,' [Marlow] shouted" (140). By 'breaking off' before he implicates himself further Marlow retreats to a euphemistic conception of 'civilization'—one

he used earlier to apologize for British imperialism in particular: "What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency" (78). Yet even here Marlow is affirming his hollow faith in Kurtz. Efficiency was also Kurtz's redeeming quality, having acquired more ivory than any other agent for 'the Company.' Beyond that Kurtz was nothing more than the vague 'idea' that Marlow saw in him, or around him. The conclusion Marlow should draw from his experience—which seems obvious today—would have to do with the falsity and injustice of all imperial-colonial projects which purport to 'civilize,' and not only those through whose 'delusions' one has personally seen.

Borrowing a phrase from T. S. Eliot, we could say that Marlow "had the experience but missed the meaning" ("The Dry Salvages" line 95). He recognizes that the Belgian regime in the Congo is in his words "merely a squeeze, and nothing more […] just robbery and violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind" (Conrad 78-9). All true enough (save the apologetic ascription of blindness to the perpetrators), but these comments immediately precede Marlow's attempt to describe some idea that would redeem such violence. Marlow cannot or will not recognize the conclusion, the 'meaning' of his experience that is both "kernel" and "haze." That meaning—the injustice and abject cruelty of imperialism and colonialism altogether—is a kernel in the individual suffering of every African victim, and also a haze in the cumulative, bewildering darkness of the situation. "The worst" of Marlow's experience is its whole and its parts. If *Heart of Darkness* is worth reading, that may be because of how it represents Marlow's failure to fully understand the implications of atrocity. He can describe the criminality of the Belgian Congo, even if he never names Belgium as the culprit, but he is unable or unwilling to analyze his experiences and make them part of an anti-imperialist conviction that would, of course, target the British Empire as well. Today, it is easier for us than it was for Conrad to say that the meaning of *Heart of Darkness*, with regard to the history of colonial violence, is no great mystery at all.

Now, this account I have given of *Heart of Darkness* is one that has tended toward a tone of de-mystification, as though I were proving that Conrad's novel is really quite simple to understand. At this point I want to stress the opposite. The history of the novel's reception—popularly, artistically, and among critics—demonstrates that Marlow's confusion is compelling and contagious. For decades it was long possible to study *Heart of Darkness* without racism ever entering the discussion. Hence Chinua Achebe's famous rejection of the novel's aesthetic value, and the subsequent critical evaluations that have placed its reputation

somewhere between the designations 'classic' and 'relic.' At the same time the novel has become popularly known as being 'universally' adaptable. This is not surprising; Marlow's failure to recognize the full significance of his experience is a model that I would expect to recognize, *mutatis mutandis*, in many other situations, such as the war in Vietnam—hence the Coppola film. In writing *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad wrote at a distance from his own experience that allowed him to reflect upon and fictionalize the confusion he may have felt. We today who may find it easy to recognize "the horror" of racism, of the Belgian Congo, and by extension that of *Heart of Darkness*, are not immune to 'mournful and senseless delusions.' They surround us more than we tend to feel comfortable admitting. To read *Heart of Darkness* is to be reminded of how difficult true recognition and understanding can be. Granted, that reminder is possible because of the distance the reader may have from the text, from Conrad's time, and even from Africa, as the case may be. But the distance readers may enjoy also has the potential to initiate the work of moving closer—of seeing, understanding, and perhaps acting to prevent "the worst" from endlessly recurring.

Works Cited

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