

MAILER AND CONRAD:
PART TWO—MYTH AND SKEPTICISM

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IN THIS SECOND PART OF MY EXAMINATION OF THE WRITINGS of Norman Mailer (1923–2007) and Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), we shall discuss the two themes of *Myth* and *Skepticism* as found in the life and work of Conrad—seeing if there may be comparable themes in Mailer.¹ Here we shall focus on two of Conrad’s more significant novels, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *The Secret Agent* (1907), attempting to interpret them in their historical contexts and in the current moment.

However, we are not unaware of the distinctive *sitz in leben* of this present American moment. There has been, I suggest, a distinctive shift in *consciousness*. That shift, connected to the current politics of the United States, suggests a deeper hermeneutic that we should bring to the works of both Conrad and Mailer.² Looking again at Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent*, I believe that we may see some comparisons with three of Mailer’s important novels—*The Executioner’s Song* (1979) and *The Castle in the Forest* (2007) with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Mailer’s CIA novel, *Harlot’s Ghost* (1991), with Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.

First, however, it will be helpful to look back and summarize the significance of Conrad’s *Lord Jim* (1900) in the overall achievement of Conrad. In particular, I want to focus on a haunting phrase—appearing eight times in the novel—the enigmatic claim by Charlie Marlow that Jim was “one of us.”

1. LORD JIM (1900)—THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “ONE OF US.”

Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim* is a narrative of some considerable complexity, with multiple voices representing various cultures. Charlie Marlow serves not only as narrator but also as Jim’s confidant and friend. Early on, we hear

Marlow's testimony that Jim was "one of us" (Conrad, *Lord Jim* 32). The phrase appears a total of eight times.³ The story of Jim's life is the account of a desertion, perhaps even a Fall on a biblical scale. It seems not unreasonable to see echoes of Genesis 3 in Marlow's repeated refrain.⁴ The phrase "one of us" artfully brings together human loneliness (one) with a quest for human solidarity (us)—two *motifs* in tension in Conrad's life and his writing. Jim, whose surname is never given, is convicted by a Naval Court of Inquiry for his act of desertion. Stripped of his identity as a British Officer, Jim becomes a wanderer, the *persona non grata*, one traveling ever further to the East, unable to return to his home.

In his wandering, Jim may remind us of Cain in Genesis 4, guilty of the crime of fratricide in killing his brother Abel. When questioned by the LORD—perhaps the ultimate Court of Inquiry—Cain asks belligerently, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9 NEB). In effect, he seems to deny a basic human solidarity, the belief represented by Marlow's phrase "one of us." Nevertheless, despite his question, Cain could not but recognize God's judgment and his subsequent fate as he cries, "I shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth . . ." (Genesis 4:14 NRSV). From God, he received the Mark of Cain, presumably so that others in the tribe would not kill him in retribution. He settled, the writer of Genesis tells us, "to the east of Eden," a poignant and telling phrase.⁵

Humanity is no longer in the Garden; Eden has been lost. Whatever our theological or religious point of view, both religion and literature seem to chronicle that sobering reality. In some way, this mark of Cain—whatever it was, physical or symbolic—enabled his tribe to recognize both Cain's human guilt and the divine judgement. In this archetypal Hebrew story, this ancient parable of identity and fate, do we not hear of human loneliness and the haunting presence of guilt? In many and various ways, are we all not wanderers?

Jim's exile, his sense of guilt, and his exile far from home, are reminiscent of Cain the Wanderer—who had killed his brother and had been cast out of the Garden. As a result, he was dwelling "to the east of Eden" (Gen 4:16 NRSV). However, this linking of Lord Jim with the biblical Cain is not merely my God-talk hypothesis. In his later short story, "The Secret Sharer" (1910), Conrad explicitly links the fugitive Leggatt—who had killed a brother-sailor—with the biblical figure of Cain. To the unnamed Captain and narrator, Leggatt acknowledged that the "brand of Cain" had been ap-

plied to him, and that he was being “driven off the face of the earth” (“The Secret Sharer” 52).⁶ Jeffrey Meyers goes farther than this story, suggesting that “the revelation of hidden guilt” is at the heart of Conrad’s greatest works.⁷

Lord Jim can also be seen as a modernist retelling of the *Odyssey*, which along with Homer’s *Iliad* and the Book of Genesis are foundation stories for Western culture. The *Odyssey* is the tale of “a complicated man” (*Odyssey*, 1:1, tr. Emily Wilson) trying to find his way home after the Trojan Wars. Robert Fagles, in his translation, calls him a man “of twists and turns” (*Odyssey* 1:1). However, unlike Odysseus, neither Cain nor Lord Jim will return home—ever. That is their tragedy and their doom.

Whether these parallels were clearly in Conrad’s mind as he was writing *Lord Jim*, we do not know. But both the Genesis stories and Homer’s epics are in the Western collective mind, and a degree of intertextuality would seem legitimate.

Why should we care about this young man Jim? Why would Conrad focus on this particular title character?⁸ Perhaps we care precisely because we realize that Jim is “one of us,” as Marlow frequently reminds us. Marlow is a reluctant witness to a conflict in Jim’s soul. Many might dismiss Jim as simply “a lost youngster, one in a million” (*Lord Jim* 67), but Marlow cannot do that. Having heard the story, it becomes a moral imperative that he pass it on.

I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood. He appealed to all sides at once—to the side turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness . . . He swayed me. I own to it, I own up. The occasion was obscure, insignificant—what you will: a lost youngster, one in a million—but then he was one of us (*Lord Jim* 68)

The story of *Lord Jim* is complex; the story-telling even more so. Therein lies the narrative complexity of this novel—and its significance for modernity. Conrad’s Jim appears as an ambiguous and mysterious figure—he is partly *incognito*—so our understanding of him is neither clear nor precise. Like both “Youth” and *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad uses a narrator within a

narrator, employing a “doubly oblique narration” (Cedric Watts, xix).⁹

To some extent, Jim could be seen as a forerunner of Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*, as both men are fleeing from their past.¹⁰ For all the residual mystery, Jim’s story for Marlow is a disturbing revelation, not simply of one man’s fault but of “the true essence of life” (*Lord Jim* 67). For Marlow, a curtain has been drawn aside; there is an epiphany. We too might be persuaded by Conrad’s story. Like it or not, we may acknowledge that Jim is “one of us.” Before turning to *Heart of Darkness*, let us first consider the two themes of myth and skepticism, as they may appear to us in this present moment of time.

2. THIS AMERICAN MOMENT—MYTH AND SKEPTICISM

What is *myth* and what part does it play in human society? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines myth as a “traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something . . .” (*myth*, 1.a. *OED*). It may be significant that the word is first recorded in English in 1830, well after the Enlightenment, so for us myth is often contrasted with history and truth. However, the Greek word $\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$, *mythos*, found from Homer onwards, is more nuanced than our English word *myth*. At times, it can be used of any story or tale—regardless of its truth or falsity.¹¹

Today, in what we might legitimately call the post-Trump era, we recognize that one person’s myth may be another man’s absolute faith. The myths of white superiority, the nobility of the colonial enterprise in Africa, were almost axiomatic in Conrad’s day. Increasingly, today’s protesters challenge these national myths of race, white supremacy, and colonialism. Yet, the existence of domestic terrorist threats, violence against people of color and Jews, and the January 6th Insurrection at the US Capitol, show that such myths of racial superiority and anti-Semitism still have great power today. The FBI has described current threats facing America in these terms,

“January 6 was not an isolated event,” [FBI Director] Wray told the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 2. “The problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and it’s not going away anytime soon.” (Robert O’Harrow, et. al. *Washington Post*, 12 Apr 2021).

Conrad would recognize those challenges, for he had examined the dark myths of racial superiority and the colonial enterprise in his own time—a time in which such myths were rarely questioned. There seems, therefore, a close connection between Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and this present moment.¹²

There is also a motif of *skepticism* in Conrad’s life and work. Today, we live in a globally connected world—in touch virtually but in actuality alienated. Human consciousness now seems hard-wired into the Web. By July 2020, four high-tech corporations had entered the Trillion Dollar Club: Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, and Alphabet, and they now dominate the world economy—and our daily lives.¹³ In this era of globalization, all human knowledge seems accessible, yet paradoxically we remain haunted by skepticism and conspiracy theories, by a kind of darkness.

It can be argued that this process of globalization began in Conrad’s world, that his fiction may “embody” that process—as Maya Jasanoff has suggested in her book *The Dawn Watch* (2017)?¹⁴ So we ask, is there a connection between globalism and skepticism, what Ernst Gellner has called the emergence of “ironic cultures” (193)? A global perspective is evident in *Lord Jim* and other works, but the novel that illustrates this best, I believe, is Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907).

Terror and globalism mark the post-Cold War era, and *The Secret Agent* had a peculiar resonance after the 9/11 attacks.¹⁵ Ironically, as Frank, Shulevitz, and others have pointed out, the ostensible “message” of Conrad’s novel was often *misread* in the period immediately after 9/11.¹⁶ In reality, Conrad’s novel is less about terrorism and far more about the excesses of counter-terrorism, the corruption of power, including the power of the government—what in Mailer might be called “the Ahab within.”¹⁷ But for many people, then and now, *The Secret Agent* is about terror and terrorists.

We realize that both terrorism and a global perspective arose well before 9/11, of course. Both were born in Conrad’s world—with Russian anarchists, Irish Fenians, steamships, the telegraph, and standardized time that began at the Prime Meridian at Greenwich, London. So, we must examine the setting and plot of *The Secret Agent* to try to avoid some common misreading. In this tale of Conrad’s, there is a profound *skepticism*, partly political and partly epistemological.

That skepticism seems to extend, indeed, to the basic categories of human existence. Yet, Conrad is no nihilist, though sometimes charged as such. So,

in this present moment—this American moment—we need to examine *The Secret Agent* and the skepticism that pervades the novel. But first, we turn to his *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

3. HEART OF DARKNESS (1899)—SETTING AND MYTH

It seems strangely appropriate that *Heart of Darkness* appeared at the junction between the 19th and 20th centuries. The novel has a Janus-like character, looking back to a fading classical and Victorian world but also forward to a world of terrifying modernity. So, we must ask, what kind of work is *Heart of Darkness*?

There are many ways to describe the theme or themes that we find in *Heart of Darkness*—as a journey both physical and symbolic, an awakening, a biting critique of colonial myths, an odyssey into the underworld, a profound questioning of epistemology and “the limitations of the English language” (Bonney 127), and many others.¹⁸ Without doubt, the novel is a paradoxical work that defies easy categorization. As Cedric Watts points out, it is “immensely rich in texture and implication” (xviii).¹⁹

If *Lord Jim* is Marlow’s somewhat wistful story of a young Romantic called Jim, then *Heart of Darkness* is a fearful odyssey into a kind of Hell—a journey that will leave Marlow and the reader bewildered and disoriented. The crisis that is engendered may be reminiscent of the “dark woods” at the beginning of Dante’s *Inferno*.²⁰ In the words of Ian Watt,

Heart of Darkness is Conrad’s most direct expression of his doubts about the foundations of human thought and action, and its mode of narration reflects this. . . . *Heart of Darkness* is not, like “Youth” or *Lord Jim*, the act of a raconteur; it is the act, rather, of a man who stumbled into the underworld many years ago, and lived to tell its secrets, although not until much later. (252–253)

So, how do we now read *Heart of Darkness*? The novel has entered the canon of twentieth-century modernism, yet Conrad has been criticized by post-colonial writers like Achebe and Said as undeniably “racist” in this work. Such critiques may have a degree of justification, and must be examined, but they can certainly be countered. The purpose of great literature is dif-

ferent from that of political speech, as a Professor from Sri Lanka has pointed out:²¹

Within the mainstream of literature, on the other hand, extraordinary texts are able to transcend the limitations of ideological principles of their times by revealing ironies, showing contradictions, and by depicting in memorable fashion the tragic consequences of the applications of those principles. In such a way does Shakespeare subvert Christian prejudice, Chopin subvert patriarchal values—and Conrad subvert the racist and imperialist impulse. (Goonetilleke 32)

So, Conrad's book may seem quaintly Victorian in its orientation, yet it proves to be deeply subversive in its effects. *Heart of Darkness* is a paradox that continues to disturb us—as all great art should.

What is the setting of *Heart of Darkness*? The question appears redundant, even naïve. The setting is a river in Africa, of course, we reply. The “darkness” of the title is there in Africa, inherent in phrases like “the Dark Continent.”²² It is to be contrasted, naturally, with the “light” of European civilization, yet Conrad upends our easy assumptions, for the novel begins on the Thames, the river at the center of London—the city at the heart of the vast British Empire. Sun has set, night is coming, and a group of friends wait for the turn of the tide,

And further west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars. “And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” (*Heart of Darkness* 105)

The unnamed narrator had just spoken of the “the great knights-errant of the sea” (104), those over the years who had sailed from the Thames to create—or to conquer—the land that would become the British Empire. Then Marlow takes up Conrad's narrative by going back to the Romans and their conquest of savage Britain, two millennia before. In describing these Romans, implicitly he seems to be criticizing the European colonialism of his own time. Here is his damning indictment of the ethos of Empire, worth quoting in full:

They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking of 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. (*Heart of Darkness*, 107)

The real setting of Conrad's novel is both Africa *and* Europe: darkness may be found in either place. Human prejudices about race, class, or ideology can be—and often are—linked to narrative *settings*, to place, to spaces both geographical and mythical. *We* live “here”—but *they* live “over there.” We recognize the rhetorical power of talk of borders and walls, beloved by those promoting clear tribal identities. Firm borders, they promise, will keep us safe. In a world of deep uncertainty and incredible complexity, human beings crave certainty: they want clear *demarcation criteria*—black and white distinctions, rigid boundaries.²³

We may recall that such demarcation criteria—which became, in effect, powerful historical myths—were the motive for the building of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, back in the Cold War era. In the more recent Trump era, we certainly remember the atavistic desire for a southern wall to keep “them” out. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad is beginning to *demythologize* the nature of setting in narrative. He wants to show that our binary divisions of the world into civilization and savagery, into light and darkness, into cultured Europe and barbaric Africa, are suspect.²⁴

However, the setting of *Heart of Darkness* is not only Africa and Europe: it is also a journey up a river. The river is both real and symbolic—as is the river in Francis Ford Coppola's film version of the novel, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), or in that classic American novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884–5) by Mark Twain. The journey in *Heart of Darkness* may also suggest various journeys in the classical texts of Homer, Virgil, and Dante—foundation narratives for Western culture, including European concepts of Empire. This intertextuality with the Classics was also relevant to our under-

standing of Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Terrence Bowers has argued particularly for the influence of these classical texts upon *Heart of Darkness*:

The hero with whom Conrad most identified, Odysseus is above all praised for his ability to survive. Unlike Aeneas and Kurtz, he has no grand historical mission or "immense plans"; he only wishes to return home (*Heart* 111). . . . He is also curious, but skeptical, and careful to test the motivations of others. Such attributes also belong to Marlow, who is inquisitive but wary, views the master narratives of imperialism with cynicism, and survives by his focus on the practical work of navigation . . . Rather than a cynical Aeneas, Marlow might be described as a modern Ulysses. (134)

Marlow's story is not only a journey up a river; it is also a quest to meet Kurtz. What are we to make of Kurtz? In *Lord Jim*, we saw that the phrase "one of us" was applied often to the figure of young Jim. In that novel, Conrad wants us to see and understand our common humanity with Jim—despite his shame and fall from grace. The phrase "one of us" reminded us of our loneliness as human beings but also our desire for connection. We remember Marlow's words, reflecting on his relationship to Jim, that it is "as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence" (*Lord Jim* 130).²⁵

However, Kurtz is not Jim—neither in his simplicity nor his significance in Conrad's work. We can go further. The Marlow we encounter in *Heart of Darkness* is not the genial raconteur of *Lord Jim*, as Ian Watts reminded us,

Heart of Darkness is not, like "Youth" or *Lord Jim*, the act of a raconteur; it is the act, rather, of a man who stumbled into the underworld many years ago, and lived to tell its secrets, although not until much later. (253)

What, we may ask, are those "secrets"? How do they impact Marlow, and behind him the author Joseph Conrad?

Here the various commentators differ somewhat. Daniel Schwarz sees Conrad's overall contribution in terms of the search for meaning in an alien universe, "In dramatizing the search for meaning in an amoral universe, he

addressed the central epistemological problem of the twentieth century” (*The Secret Sharer* 3). Cedric Watts sees *Heart of Darkness* as “fiercely pessimistic” but also offset by more positive elements,

... ‘Heart of Darkness’ can be seen as a fiercely pessimistic narrative. Its positive values lie partly in the quality of civilization represented by Marlow, who, though flawed, usually preserves a vigilant humanity; they lie largely in the authorial indignation at man’s inhumanity to man and, indeed, at the despoilation of the earth in the name of ‘progress,’ and they are richly implicit in the articulate intelligence, sensitivity, and exuberance of the text. (Watts, Introduction, xx)

What must not be forgotten is that Conrad was a participant in the colonialism that he critiques in *Heart of Darkness*. He was both an insider—an officer in the British Merchant Marine—and an outsider—a Pole born in Tsarist-dominated Ukraine, well-acquainted with the human costs of the Russian empire. Allan Simmons suggests, “An immigrant in an age of Empire, Conrad’s biography is bound up with the national struggles of England, whose changing face is reflected in these sea and land tales” (“One of Us”). In a perceptive article in *The New Yorker*, David Denby recognizes the status of Conrad as both insider and outsider,

In the end, his precarious situation both inside and outside imperialism should be seen not as a weakness but as a strength. Yes, Conrad the master seaman had done his time as a colonial employee, working for a Belgian company in 1890, making his own trip up the Congo. . . . But if he had not, could he have written a book like “Heart of Darkness”? Could he have captured with such devastating force the peculiar, hollow triviality of the colonists’ ambitions, the self-seeking, the greed, the pettiness, the lies and evasions? (Denby, 129).

I said earlier that *Heart of Darkness* has a Janus-like character, looking back to this Victorian world of “responsibility and order” but also forward to a world of frightening modernity—an era of “uncertainty and doubt of every kind” (Denby).²⁶

There are two incidents in the novel that we need to examine that may illustrate this character. The first is the death of Kurtz, which is “perhaps the most famous death scene written since Shakespeare” (Denby 121):

“Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—‘The horror! The horror!’” (*Heart of Darkness* 177–178)

We could argue whether the last words of Kurtz are a judgment on his own actions or on an “amoral universe” (Schwartz 3)—or indeed upon both. Along with other examples, these words have become a kind of *signifier* of modernism, pointing towards a reality than is hard to name more precisely.²⁷ In the text, Marlow gives various interpretations of the final words of Kurtz, as do the critics following him. Cedric Watts comments,

The words ‘The horror! The horror!’ thus serve as a thematic nexus, a climactic but highly ambiguous utterance which sums up, without resolving, several of the paradoxical themes of the tale. (Explanatory Notes 178).

But we come back, as we must, to that phrase from *Lord Jim*, “one of us.” To what extent is Kurtz “one of us”? Moving into theological categories, is Kurtz not simply a fallen man like Jim but actually an embodiment of evil? Has Marlow been to Hell and back—where Hell is more metaphysics than metaphor? Should we—can we—read the figure of Kurtz as a foreshadowing of the Nazis, of the horrors that American GIs would discover in 1945 as they liberated the Nazi Death Camps? Not a foreshadowing present in the mind of Conrad, of course, but as a strange cosmic synchronicity.

In his *New Yorker* article, David Denby reports how a group of students had argued over *Heart of Darkness* in a Columbia *Lit Hum* class. Many stu-

dents saw Conrad's book as a judgment against the West for creating "an Inferno on earth," in the Congo and elsewhere (Denby 122).²⁸ One student disagreed, seeing Kurtz as merely "an isolated figure" (Denby 123)—an unrepresentative criminal. As the class draws to a close, Professor James Shapiro attempted to sum up a somewhat acrimonious debate.

"I don't want to say that this is a work that teaches desperation, or that evil is something we can't deal with," Shapiro said. "In some ways, the world we live in is not as dark as Conrad's; in some ways, it is darker. This is not a one-way slide to the apocalypse that we are witnessing. We ourselves have the ability now to recognize, and even to fix and change our society, just as literature reflects, embodies, and serves as an agent of change." (Denby 122)

Hell, evil, Holocaust, heart, darkness? Deep concepts indeed. But then *Heart of Darkness* is a work that precipitates such profundity—that demands a kind of meta-language. Marlow stumbles often, trying to find the words to describe his journey. We could go further. Conrad the writer is skeptical that language itself—even in the hands of a *maestro* like Kurtz—can ever adequately plumb the depths of reality. This aspect of Conrad's writing style has been criticized, of course. The first to do so was probably F. R. Leavis, the Cambridge critic who more than anyone else established Conrad's reputation, as one of only four "great English novelists" (*The Great Tradition* 9). In discussing *Heart of Darkness*, Leavis writes,

The insistence betrays the absence, the willed 'intensity' the nullity. He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant. (207)

There is some justice, perhaps, to such criticism. If Hemingway had too few adjectives, Conrad may have used too many—especially those with the prefix *-un* or *-in*.²⁹ William Bonney argues plausibly that Conrad "probes the limitations of the English language," but he goes on to suggest that Marlow never escapes from his "state of epistemological confusion" (127).³⁰ Some of

us would respond that such “epistemological confusion” seems even more widespread today—in an age of conspiracies, fake news, the Big Lie, the Web and its mediated illusions, and myth. Mr. Kurtz may or may not be “one of us.” Charlie Marlow assuredly is.

Perhaps the final word on the character and *ontology* of Kurtz should be from Marlow himself. While the novel is set largely in the Belgian Congo, the British Empire and the rest of “enlightened” Europe is not thereby excused by the narrator from the horrors of King Leopold’s administration. Earlier in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow tells us something of the back story of Kurtz,

The original Kurtz had been educated partly in England, and—as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place. His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz . . . (154)

Does that imply that all Europe contributed to the “horror” also? Marlow’s last sentence seem to have a deeper reference than the education or parentage of one individual. All of us share the same common humanity as Kurtz; none of us are immune to the corruption of naked power—or the seduction of comforting myths—although we like to think that we are. Like the biblical figure of Cain, we realize we are no longer in the Garden; we too dwell “to the east of Eden” (Gen 4:16 NRSV). Therein lies the nightmare—the profound horror—that Marlow encountered in Kurtz. It is no wonder that *Heart of Darkness* remains a contested text—and at the center of Conrad’s work.

After the death of Kurtz, the second incident to consider is Marlow’s meeting with Kurtz’s “Intended.” This takes place back in Brussels, at the novel’s end. When she asked what his last words were, Marlow would not—could not—repeat them, “The horror! The horror!” Yet answer he must, and so he lies to her. “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (*Heart of Darkness*, 186). The heavens did not fall, as Marlow had anticipated. But why the lie—and what was its significance? The lie appears as the crux of their meeting, and the meeting itself is an integral part of the novel, not an afterthought.

In a real sense, Marlow makes two journeys in *Heart of Darkness*—the first, up-river to find Kurtz, the second, back to Brussels to meet with Kurtz’s Intended. Both journeys are set in a kind of underworld, a world of Shades.

Both are marked by a darkness that seems more than metaphorical. Marlow imagines the ghost of Kurtz in the room, a nightmare he says that will last his lifetime. But so will the vision of this tragic woman, stretching her arms towards her dead lover. It is a chilling moment.

I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live, and I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness. (*Heart of Darkness* 185)

Again, as expected, critics differ. On the passage quoted, Cedric Watts shows helpful parallels between Conrad's words, the Intended's gesture, and Virgil's *Aeneid*.³¹ Leavis sees the meeting as "another bad patch" in Conrad's writing (*The Great Tradition* 208), because "the thrilling mystery of the Intended's innocence is of the same order as the thrilling mystery of Kurtz's corruption" (209). No, not the same order, but they are connected because both Kurtz and his Intended shared in the myth of colonial innocence. As did most of civilized Europe.

Leo Gurko states—rather obviously—that the truth "would only have plunged her into needless disillusionment and pain" (*Giant in Exile* 171). Ian Watt may have the best evaluation, stressing the irony of the novel's ending, while recognizing Marlow's practical problem: how does one find truth and fidelity in an amoral and insouciant universe? That problem may well be Marlow's "epistemological confusion" (Bonney 127), but it is a confusion that we too may share, in the twenty-first century.

The lie to the Intended, then, is both an appropriately ironic ending for Marlow's unhappy quest for truth, and a humane recognition of the practical aspects of the problem: we must deal gently with human fictions, as we quietly curse their folly under our breath; since no faith can be had which will move mountains, the faith which ignores them had better be cherished" (Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* 248).

Much of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, of course is richly symbolic—and such symbolism would become significant in later writers like T. S. Eliot,

James Joyce, or D. H. Lawrence. One such symbol that wends its way through the narrative is ivory. It is, of course, a source of wealth for the Europeans, representing economic and political power wrested from the “savages.”

Ivory has a wider symbolic application too. It is white and shiny on the outside but it is really dead matter, and thereby points to a paradox at the heart of Western civilization . . . Conrad chooses to focus on ivory rather than rubber, though in the Congo rubber was no less important, because it suits his purpose better. Ivory is thematically and metaphorically richer. (Goonetilleke 41)

However, the primary symbols used in this novel are light and darkness. Darkness can be seen as a “primal reality to which all else in the world is posterior in origin and subordinate in power” (Watt 250). This is not a new idea in the Western religious tradition, as Watt points out. Darkness is there at the beginning of Creation, in the first words of Genesis.³² However, Conrad powerfully develops the contrast between light and darkness in *Heart of Darkness*, despite the linguistic and epistemological difficulties he encountered. He has subverted our usual expectations of light and dark, as he has also subverted our expectations of setting.³³

In summary, I have used the two categories of setting and myth as one way of understanding Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. I have suggested that he *demythologizes* setting, showing that our convenient binary divisions of the world into civilized and savage—usually based on setting as geography—are suspect and too simplistic. Whatever our cultural veneer, our apparent sophistication, we are still deep down—at our most primal level—tribal. Yet as a form of projection, we deny those atavistic urges in ourselves, while applying them to the Other. So, we disguise our desire for conquest, our instinct to defend the tribe’s purity, in myths—in powerful, reassuring, and convenient delusions—the “White Man’s burden,” or Western evolutionary superiority, or the nobility of bringing the light of Christianity to benighted heathen. Each of those comforting myths are subverted in Conrad’s work.

We must remember that *Heart of Darkness* was written by a man very aware of “his precarious situation both inside and outside imperialism” (Denby 129). In background, he was more European than British. Losing both parents at a young age, Conrad knew loss and loneliness intimately. As

a Pole growing up under the Russian Empire, he certainly experienced the traumas of imperialism. With his complex linguistic and cultural heritage, he became an essentially English novelist—and one of the first rank—who was skeptical about scope of language.

So, as the century turned, Conrad challenged the racist and imperialist myths of Europe as few had dared. In a work “immensely rich in texture and implication” (Watts xviii), Conrad had written a scathing critique of colonialism, a haunting odyssey into the underworld, and a profound questioning of epistemology and the limits of language. In each of these aspects, *Heart of Darkness* is undeniably a great work.

4. *THE SECRET AGENT* (1907)—IRONY AND SKEPTICISM

This novel by Conrad is an interesting example of dramatic irony and irony on many different levels.³⁴ The title might suggest that the novel will focus on one character—Verloc the secret Agent—as *Lord Jim* was apparently focused on the young man Jim. Such is not the case. Verloc is merely one of a large cast, a dysfunctional collection of individuals—each with their own visions and delusions—each with their own agendas. The novel is Conrad’s master class in misinformation and misdirection.

In *The Secret Agent*, even Verloc’s apparent title is misdirection. In the Cold War language of le Carré or the CIA, Verloc is not a spy or agent but a *triple agent*—ostensibly part of an Anarchist cell, in the pay of Scotland Yard as an informant, but also working as an *agent provocateur* for the Vladimir in the Russian Embassy.³⁵ Nobody is who they claim to be: all follow their own delusions. As Leo Gurko points out, this is a novel without a hero—the only work by Conrad in that category.³⁶

There are also major ironies in the way that *The Secret Agent* has been read and interpreted, particularly since 9/11. I have mentioned that both globalism and terror mark our post-Cold War era. Terrorism has been part of European experience since the late 19th century, but only after the 9/11 attacks did *terror* enter the American consciousness. Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*—ostensibly about terrorism—became famous, cited in newspapers around the world. In those first weeks after 9/11, the novel had a strange resonance—along with two poems by W. H. Auden. Here is a *Slate* article, written about two weeks after the 9/11 attacks,

Ah, the perils of relevance! In the aftermath of the attacks on Sept. 11, Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* became one of the three works of literature most frequently cited in the American media. (The other two were poems by Wystan Auden: "Sept. 1, 1939" . . . and "Musée des Beaux Arts.") (Shulevitz).

The irony is, as Shulevitz, Frank, and others have pointed out, that the "message" of Conrad's novel was often misinterpreted. *The Secret Agent* is less about terrorism, and more about counterterrorism and the corruption of power. More prosaically, perhaps, the work is "an interplay of contrasting moral perspectives" (Leavis 240).

The setting is not a journey up a river. This time, the setting is a great city. This, above all else, is an urban novel, a thriller in fact. Terrorism is merely the "scaffolding"—the vehicle driving the plot. At the *heart* of this novel is the great city of London, center of the British Empire. So argues Leo Gurko,

Plainly, then, the anarchist theme supplies the novel with its physical scaffolding. But no more. Underneath lies the heart of the book, the dominant idea that determines its movement and is responsible in the first place for the selection of anarchism as the sheath of the plot. That heart is London, and the idea stemming from it is the life of man in the great city. (*Giant in Exile* 190).

Above, I argued that in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad is really *demythologizing* the nature of setting, showing that our glib Western demarcation between civilization and savagery, between cultured Europe and barbaric Africa, is suspect and must be challenged. In that novel, when Marlow speaks for the first time, he says of London, ". . . this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (*Heart of Darkness* 105). We could plausibly regard *The Secret Agent* as Conrad's expanded footnote to those ominous words of Marlow.

As there are echoes in *Heart of Darkness* of Virgil's and Dante's underworld, so in *The Secret Agent* we encounter a "sordid netherworld" (Shulevitz)—more metropolis than primitive jungle this time—but equally dark, sinister, and chaotic. Although Marlow as narrator is absent, we may imag-

ine his disturbing words, “This also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (*Heart of Darkness* 105), haunting the dirty streets of London or the strange machinations of the different characters.

In the two previous novels of Conrad, we had become used to the intelligent skepticism of Marlow. In *The Secret Agent*, we have instead an omniscient third person narrator, with access apparently to the minds of Mr. Verloc, Chief Inspector Heat, the diplomat Vladmir, the various Anarchists, and the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard. At the end, we enter even Winnie Verloc’s mind as she kills her husband.

But why did this tale from 1907—by a strange coincidence “originally published the day after September 11, 1907, no less” (Mallios 262)—become relevant to so many after the events of 9/11 in the year 2001? Here is one thought, written within days of the attacks,

The Secret Agent, a 1907 novel that depicts a sordid netherworld of would-be terrorists of the anarchist persuasion and the twisted machinations behind a plot to bomb a national monument, London’s Greenwich Observatory, seems today like a promising piece of prophecy—a literary Nostrodamus, an early warning of the enduring evil of the nihilistic class. (Shulevitz).

Twenty years later after 9/11, the relevance and apparent “message” of *The Secret Agent* seems more strained. However, it is hard to underestimate how much life changed—particularly how much American *consciousness* changed—in and through the 9/11 attacks. Amid the fear and shock, misunderstanding abounded, as government officials, commentators, and ordinary people searched for answers. The 2014 article by Michael C. Frank gives one of the fullest and most useful accounts of the process:

One of the great narrative ironies of Conrad’s novel is that the Greenwich bombing is supposed to look like an act of terrorism, but that it really is a perverse act of counterterrorism instigated by state actors. The irony was lost on several American commentators in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. On September 12, 2001, a fiercely patriotic editorial by the conservative *National Review* explained that the 9/11 attacks were an act of war, motivated solely by the fact that the United States “are powerful, rich,

and good,” and that military retaliation was the only appropriate response (“At War”). For reasons known only to themselves, the authors were reminded of the invasion of the Roman Empire by Gothic tribes as well as the plot of Conrad’s novel. (152)

Frank is right, of course. This was an act of *counterterrorism*. Terrorists there are aplenty in the story, but the act of terror perpetrated in *The Secret Agent* is instigated by Mr. Vladimir, a czarist diplomat, who then pressures his *agent provocateur*, Adolf Verloc—yes, his first name really is Adolf—to act, aiming to provoke the British government to crack down on Russian anarchists (Kaplan xii). The act of terror was to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, the location of the Prime Meridian—the very definition of space and time in Conrad’s world—and ours. We recognize its symbolic significance, as we also recognize the symbolism of New York’s World Trade Center or the Pentagon.

Verloc recruits his retarded brother-in-law, Stevie, to plant the bomb. But it explodes too early, leaving Stevie a bloody heap whose remains have to be collected by police with a shovel. After finding out what happens, Verloc’s wife, Winnie, murders her husband, and then commits suicide. (Kaplan 12)

There was an actual bombing of the Greenwich Observatory in 1894, by a Frenchman Martial Bourdin, who like Stevie was fatally injured in the explosion. It remains something a mystery why that target was chosen, and what group was behind the bombing, but Frank has a full account of the incident and its aftermath (155–160). From that 1894 event, Conrad spins his tale—apparently about a specific anarchist cell, but more about the chaos and darkness of London. Here, Frank suggests why—in Conrad’s rationale—Vladimir would have chosen the Prime Meridian at Greenwich as the target:

In the current age of progress, the “sacrosanct fetish [. . .] is science” (31). For that reason, Vladimir’s choice falls on the Royal Observatory, a target that has the additional advantage of being familiar to the “whole civilized world” (35), as a result of the International Meridian Conference of 1884, which placed Green-

wich, the home of the Prime Meridian, at the centre of the world map. This, then, is how Conrad answers the question as to who could possibly have wanted to bomb this isolated building outside of London—and for what purpose. (Frank 160)³⁷

There is much more that can be said about *The Secret Agent*. As I said earlier, the novel is Conrad's master class in misdirection. Critics have examined "Conrad's representation of chance and determinism" (Attridge 125), and a host of other themes. In simple terms, however, we see the underworld of a great city, observing a dysfunctional collection of individuals—each with their own delusions and agendas. Did Conrad have a personal agenda? It seems that *The Secret Agent* was written by Conrad at an unhappy time in his family life. Furthermore, in his writing career, he sensed failure. That tone is certainly present in this novel,

When these feelings were most acute, Conrad wrote *The Secret Agent*, a novel dealing with people who fail and with the life of failure. He pressed them into the iron clamp of the great city, whose hugeness and multiplicity made vain the efforts of men to reach out and conquer. If Verloc is the political agent whose activities supply the plot with its motion, the megalopolis that he inhabits is the psychological agent that invests the characters with their sombre colouring and melancholy destiny. (Gurko, *Giant in Exile* 201)

In this tale, on a deeper level, Conrad reveals a profound *skepticism*, particularly of political solutions. He expects no salvation from the anarchists. Equally, he has no faith in the organs of government—Chief Inspector Heat, the Assistant Commissioner, the British Home Secretary, or First Secretary Vladimir of the Russian Embassy. When we realize his Polish roots, the tragic fate of his parents under the Russian Empire, his long search for a new identity as English writer and gentleman, we are not surprised that Conrad was skeptical of political solutions—whether revolutionary or statist.

But Conrad's skepticism is also epistemological and linguistic—as it was in *Heart of Darkness*. Yet Conrad is not a nihilist, although he may have come closest in *The Secret Agent*. There is the personal situation of the author, as there was—for example—in the life of Hemingway, while he was writing his

A Farewell to Arms (1929). We should avoid the biographical fallacy, but also realize that writers are human beings with their own peculiar complex of emotions.

The Secret Agent was not a success with the public. Despite its recent fame after the 9/11 attacks, the novel is more about the abuse of power, the excesses of government, counterterrorist strategies, than about secret agents and terrorist cells. Dealing with power as Conrad does in both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Agent*, we are reminded of the phrase applied to similar themes in Norman Mailer, namely the “Ahab within.”³⁸

Written at a dark time in his family life and in his writing career, *The Secret Agent* “records with harsh and singular power Conrad’s savage vision of life” (Gurko 201). His vision was of “a solitude that was not merely exile,” and he understood the need for “moral resistance” (Watt 359)³⁹. With irony and dark skepticism, the novel reveals a global world, focused on London—of mass media, government machinations, failed anarchists, sordid secrets, illusions and myths. With a pang of recognition, we realize it may be our world also.

5. SOME COMPARISONS WITH NORMAN MAILER

This section must be very brief, merely outlining some possible parallels between the two writers. With Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, there are some comparisons with Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979) about the life and death of Gary Gilmore. The figures of Kurtz and Gilmore are very different, of course, but the mystery of their personalities, the issues of human culpability, and their effect on others—such as the Intended or Nicole Baker—bears some examination.

We can also compare *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), about the early life of Adolf Hitler and Mailer’s final novel. The question that arises for me, for both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Castle in the Forest*, is to what extent are darkness and evil simply *metaphorical* tropes and to what extent are they *ontological*? In other words, do these tropes chart a metaphysical or even physical reality, on the level of Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity? We realize, naturally, that ontology can have metaphorical aspects, and *vice versa*. Contemporary physics surely teaches us that. I am reminded of Andrew Delbanco’s wise words on these matters:

A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it. Never before have images of horror been so widely disseminated and so appalling. . . . The repertoire of evil has never been richer. Yet never have our responses been so weak. We have no language for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before our eyes in the outer world. (3)

That seems valid, although I would argue that both Conrad and Mailer attempt to develop such languages—trying to describe the “horrors that pass before our eyes.” They were and still are criticized for not knowing what they were doing. F. R. Leavis, in discussing Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* writes, “He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means” (207). But, aware of the horrors of the modern world, both writers at least made the attempt.

There are some parallels between Mailer’s CIA novel, *Harlot’s Ghost* (1991), and Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) in terms of subject matter and an ironic tone, but they are also very different narratives. I suggested that *The Secret Agent* was Conrad’s master class in misdirection, a misdirection that begins with the title. The title of *Harlot’s Ghost* has a similar ambiguous function, as David Rampton has suggested,

The title itself signals the importance of the ambiguity at the centre of the novel. “Harlot’s Ghost” is itself a sort of oxymoron, a phrase that invites readers to ponder all the different and unexpected ways that the flesh can trade in the spirit. (51)

The narrative complexity and innovation is greater in Mailer’s novel, as we would expect from a work written eight decades later. The skepticism—I would suggest—is a little less bleak than in Conrad’s novel. Neither writer is confident that the intelligence and law enforcement communities can defend us without abusing their powers. But, again, these are only some brief first thoughts.

As I concluded in Part One, both Mailer and Conrad begin as cultural outsiders. Even when part of the literary mainstream, both writers have an uneasy relationship to the dominant culture. From a skeptical and nuanced standpoint, both men felt compelled to criticize their national myths—

whether that be British colonialism or American military/intelligence “adventures.” In this present moment, I would argue, these powerful critiques of Mailer and Conrad still need to be heard and studied.

NOTES

1. “Mailer and Conrad: Part One—Tradition and Narrative” appeared in *The Mailer Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 100–122. It focused first on Conrad’s relationship to the tradition of the English novel—a relationship pioneered by the Cambridge critic, F. R. Leavis—and secondly on Conrad’s novel, *Lord Jim* (1900) and his narrative innovations.
2. In the first part of this study, I claimed that we had witnessed several dramatic events that have caused a major shift in consciousness. Three events seem significant, illuminating American politics, but also providing a deeper hermeneutic. The first events were political—the 2016–2020 presidency of Donald Trump, the election of President Joe Biden, and the Insurrection on 6th January 2021. In the aftermath, myths and conspiracies abound. In May 2021, for example, a majority of Republicans still believed that Trump had won the Election (*The Guardian*, 24 May 2021). The second event was the COVID-19 pandemic and the American response. As of December 2021, over 800,000 Americans had died, yet many still dismiss the pandemic as myth. The third event was the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, the subsequent wave of worldwide protests, and the conviction in April 2021 of ex-police officer Derek Chauvin for second-degree murder. These three events—along with others—shape this present American moment, showing the continuing power of myth in our culture.
3. The phrase “one of us” appears seven times in *Lord Jim*, on pp. 32, 56, 68, 78, 162, 236, and 303. The eighth instance is in the Author’s Note, which ends, “It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was ‘one of us’” (306).
4. *Lord Jim* is about a human fall: quite literally Jim jumps—or falls—from his ship, deserting the passengers in a crisis. The consequences of that fall haunt Jim, like an “original sin.” We might hear an echo of the Fall as told in Genesis 3, as the LORD God reflects, “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:22, NEB).
5. “So the LORD put a mark on Cain, in order than anyone meeting him should not kill him. Then Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and settled in the land of Nod to the East of Eden” (Genesis 4:15–16 NEB).
6. In “The Secret Sharer,” Leggatt acknowledges to the unnamed Captain that the “brand of Cain” had been applied to him (35). Later in the story, talking of his guilt, he alludes to Genesis 4:13–14 when he says, “What can they know whether I am guilty or not—or of *what* I am guilty, either? That’s my affair. What does the Bible say? ‘Driven off the face of the earth.’ Very well. I am off the face of the earth now” (52).
7. “Conrad’s greatest works concern the revelation of hidden guilt, the confession of a disgraceful deed. Kurtz has betrayed his colonial mission by committing the “horror” he can scarcely express; Jim admits to deserting an abandoned ship and betraying his trust as an officer . . . Ver-

- loc has sacrificed Stevie; Leggatt in "The Secret Sharer" has murdered a disobedient sailor" (Jeffrey Meyers, *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*, 253).
8. The title *Lord Jim* is partly ironic. Given to Jim by the natives of Patusan, "Lord" is their title of honor. But despite his fall, the novel seems to recognize a kind of nobility in Jim. In a similar way, the honorific "Great" in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is also in part ironic. Yet it does signal Nick Carraway's belief that in Gatsby—despite his tragic end—there was a kind of greatness.
 9. "As in 'Youth,' 'Heart of Darkness' employs doubly oblique narration: an anonymous character reports the story told by Marlow" (Cedric Watts, xix).
 10. "Both Jim and Gatsby conceal or alter their last names in order to flee from past endeavors of which they are not proud, and both characters' successes require that they remain incognito. . . . Unlike Gatsby, who is known almost exclusively by his last name (albeit an altered one), Jim's surname is never given" (Martell and Vernon 61).
 11. The Greek word, μῦθος (*mythos*) which appears from Homer onwards, can be translated *tale, story, legend, myth, fable* (μῦθος, Arndt & Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 530). In Homer, it "is used of any kind of speech . . . and sometimes of unspoken thought . . . More particularly it is used of a story, whether true or false . . ." (*Myth*, Colin Brown, *NIDNTTh*, Vol 2, p. 643).
 12. To claim this is not to deny that Conrad shares some of the attitudes of his age, or to ignore the criticisms of Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, and others. Achebe claimed that "Conrad was a bloody racist" (qtd. in Goodetilleke 16) and Said agreed. But Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* is always several steps ahead of us in our critiques.
 13. "Alphabet was the latest to re-enter the trillion-dollar club, reaching \$1.02 trillion in market value at the close of trading. Apple was valued at \$1.64 trillion, followed by Microsoft at \$1.61 trillion. Amazon, which has largely benefited from stay-at-home orders that battered most companies, was valued at \$1.52 trillion as of market close" (Bursztynsky, CNBC, 6 Jul 2020).
 14. "Conrad wouldn't have known the word 'globalization,' but with his journey from the provinces of imperial Russia across the high seas to the British home counties, he embodied it." (Jasanoff 7).
 15. "In the aftermath of the attacks on Sept. 11, Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent* became one of the three works of literature most frequently cited in the American media." (Shulevitz)
 16. "One of the great narrative ironies of Conrad's novel is that the Greenwich bombing is supposed to look like an act of terrorism, but that it really is a perverse act of counterterrorism instigated by state actors. The irony was lost on several American commentators in the immediate aftermath of 9/11" (Frank 152).
 17. "The most important of the direct influences is that the egoistical lust for power, the character trait that Mailer focuses on in all his novels, is so directly derived from *Moby-Dick* that it may be justly labeled, 'the Ahab within'" (Horn 381).
 18. "Much of Joseph Conrad's art probes the limitations of the English language. The phrase "heart of darkness" is a pertinent, if dangerously threadbare, example. Founded not upon anything which exists empirically either for Marlow or the reader, the phrase is grammatically ordered so

- as to suggest that the noun “heart” is the metaphoric vehicle, the noun “darkness” the tenor, thus concealing the fact that both the vehicle and the tenor are themselves tropes devised by Marlow while reminiscing in a state of epistemological confusion from which he never escapes” (Bonney 127).
19. *Heart of Darkness* “is exciting and profound, lucid and bewildering; highly compressed, immensely rich in texture and implication; and it has a recessive adroitness, for its paradoxes repeatedly ambush the conceptualizing reader or critic” (Cedric Watts, Introduction, *Heart of Darkness*, xviii).
 20. “1—Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell / About those woods is hard—so tangled and rough. // 2—And savage that thinking of it now, I feel / The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter. / And yet, to treat the good I found there as well.” (*The Inferno of Dante*, Tr. By Robert Pinsky. Canto 1:1–2).
 21. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, who edited the Broadview edition of *Heart of Darkness*, is a Professor of English in Sri Lanka, and a former Chair of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language. His perspective on Conrad’s work is, therefore, within a post-colonial perspective—and particularly valuable for that reason.
 22. In Tampa, Florida, my adopted hometown since 1991, Bush Gardens in 1976 opened a section of their theme park called Congo and started using the term “The Dark Continent.” Sometime around 2006, it seems, the term was dropped in favor simply of “Africa.”
 23. Such rigid criteria are applied by some to gender issues, for example, to justify homophobia, anti-trans attitudes, or to any discussion of gender fluidity.
 24. Boundaries and borders are always contested places, that is part of their very nature as *liminal* spaces. In mathematical terms, they are fractal in nature, illustrated beautifully by the images of the Mandelbrot Set. They represent, maybe, the awkward *topology* of reality. Yet the myths of rigid demarcation—and the desire for dogmatic certainty—can and still do motivate human beings, as hysterical arguments on the political Right over United States racial history, Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, and the like, illustrate in this current American moment.
 25. “It is when we try to grapple with another man’s intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence . . . there remains only the capricious, unconsolable, and elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp” (*Lord Jim* 130).
 26. It is my belief that this concept of uncertainty or doubt, while exemplified in the arts and literature of modernism, is foreshadowed in the Relativity Theories of Einstein (1905 & 1915), the Uncertainty Principle of Heisenberg (1927), and other mysteries of modern physics. In other words, if even the hard sciences have a major element of uncertainty and ambiguity, how much more uncertain will the arts be?
 27. In Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925), in the interchapter to Chapter II, we encounter the strange grammatical fragment “Scared stiff looking at it” (21) with no subject and an ambiguous pro-

- noun reference. In a previous article, I suggested that this too could be seen “as a signifier of modernism, much as the final words of Kurtz, “The horror, the horror” (Conrad 178) in *Heart of Darkness*.” (Vince, “Rumors of Grace: God-Language in Hemingway and Mailer,” 335).
28. “Western man had done this. We had created an Inferno on earth. “Heart of Darkness,” written at the end of the nineteenth century, resonates unhappily throughout the twentieth. Marlow’s shock, his amazement before the sheer strangeness of the ravaged human forms, anticipates what the Allied liberators of the concentration camps felt in 1945. The answer to the question “Does the book redeem the West?” was clear enough: No book can provide expiation for any culture. But if some crimes are irredeemable, a frank acknowledgment of the crime might lead to a partial remission of sin. Conrad had written such an acknowledgment” (Denby 122).
 29. “So we have an adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence of ‘unspeakable rites,’ ‘unspeakable secrets,’ ‘monstrous passions,’ ‘inconceivable mystery,’ and so on” (Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 206).
 30. “Much of Joseph Conrad’s *Art* probes the limitations of the English language. The phrase “heart of darkness” is a pertinent, if dangerously threadbare, example. Founded not upon anything which exists empirically either for Marlow or the reader, the phrase is grammatically ordered so as to suggest that the noun “heart” is the metaphoric vehicle, the noun “darkness” the tenor, thus concealing the fact that both the vehicle and the tenor are themselves tropes devised by Marlow while reminiscing in a state of epistemological confusion from which he never escapes” (Bonney, “Joseph Conrad and the Betrayal of Language.” 127).
 31. “Shade . . . arms . . . darkness: Virgil’s *Aeneid* (vi 314) says that the Shades in the underworld ‘stretched their arms out in longing’ to Charon as they stood on the shore of Styx, the river of darkness” (Cedric Watts, Explanatory Notes, p. 217).
 32. “In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, for example, the idea is embodied at the cosmic level on the book of Genesis, where ‘darkness was upon the face of the earth’ in the beginning of things. The Western religious tradition as a whole makes light not the rule but the exception; it is the result of a beneficent divine intervention which may be temporary and is certainly not bestowed unconditionally” (Ian Watt, 250–251).
 33. “We seem to have moved from a realization of the overwhelming power of darkness in the psychological, moral, and spiritual realm, to a larger and intangible change of a metaphysical kind, in which light seems to have a particular affinity with unnaturalness, hypocrisy, and delusion, and to be quite as contrary to the positive values of human life as the worst manifestations conventionally attributed to darkness.” (Ian Watt 251–252)
 34. “But visual techniques are not the central achievement of the novel, although everywhere present, and occasionally extremely explicit, as in the scene where Verloc’s agonized and vengeful wife, Winnie, stabs him to death, which reads exactly like a screenplay. The central aspect of the novel is that of dramatic irony” (Robert S. Ryf, 28).

35. In the real world of espionage, probably the most famous double agent of the Cold War era was Kim Philby (1912–1988). A senior office in British Intelligence, he was also working for the KGB, and part of the Cambridge Five. Whether genuine triple agents exist is controversial.
36. “. . . it a novel without a hero. It is the only such novel ever written by Conrad, and one of the few of its kind in the whole history of fiction.” Leo Gurko, *Giant in Exile*, 188).
37. In the 2014 *Conradiana* article by Frank, he quotes from pages 31 and 35 of a different edition of *The Secret Agent*. In the one I have used here, the Modern Library edition, the page references are 26 and 29.
38. “The most important of the direct influences is that the egoistical lust for power, the character trait that Mailer focuses on in all his novels, is so directly derived from *Moby-Dick* that it may be justly labeled, ‘the Ahab within’” (Horn 381).
39. “It had given him a vision of life which was to remain relatively uncommon for writers in the West until much later; in a solitude that was not merely exile Conrad had extracted from his inheritance of loss and alienation a deep understanding of the need for moral resistance and affirmation, a need whose subsequent topicality neither he nor his contemporaries could possibly have imagined” (Ian Watt 359).

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