Conrad in the New World Order

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Why Conrad? Whose Conrad?

Just over one hundred years ago, at the turning point of the twentieth century, when Conrad published *Heart of Darkness* and Freud *The Interpretation of Dreams*, there were certainly straws in the wind, of which these two books were among the most significant. We are now positioned to consider that moment in relation to the terrain that has since been traversed: events, certainly, and just as importantly discourses which influenced and were influenced by events. Some of these have fed into our collective consciousness and even the language of everyday life, affecting the way we read and think the world. They include: the production of psychoanalytic thought and practices; the ascendancy and decline of Marxism at both the political and discursive levels; the transition from literary realism to modernism and beyond; the long struggles which saw the eclipse of the old European empires and the rise of new nation-states (the ‘colonies’ becoming the ‘third world’); the invention of the volatile, hybrid University discipline known as ‘English’, along with the desire for a University-guaranteed canon of great writers (and the waning of that desire); the changing balance of power and focus of desire in the discourses loosely summarized as ‘orientalism’; the ‘linguistic turn’ or the ‘theoretical revolution’ in the study of the humanities; and, perhaps the most far-reaching of all, the revolutionary changes in the place of women in human societies.

Like other writers whose reputations extended significantly beyond their own times, Conrad’s novels have been read so radically differently at different times that it is illuminating to address the hermeneutic challenges they present both in themselves and in parallel with other histories-histories of reception and intervention. More than other novelists of his time, Conrad’s reputation and the meanings attributed to his fictions were affected by shifting academic, literary and wider political and cultural global changes across the twentieth century: above all, they represent the most significant literary encounter between Europe and Europe’s Other at the moment of ‘high imperialism’.

Starting from Slavoj Žizek’s proposition (following Gadamer), that ‘there is more truth in the later efficacy of a text, in the series of its subsequent readings, than in its supposedly original reading’, ¹ Conrad’s iterability makes him an ideal test case for the ongoing importance (or not) of retaining ‘canonical’ writers in the curriculum of the future. In arguing positively for such a position, I will make no appeal to the need to preserve and transmit the cultural tradition, do honour to great writers of the past and the like—it even seems arrogant at this point of time to think

that the power to do that rests with English departments. The aim is simply to raise questions about the possible terms of a political criticism and pedagogy in the present condition of world politics. That condition is largely determined by the trajectory from European imperialism to the postcolonial world, which is itself now subject to further transformations.

Conrad is chosen as an example of an older writer of the tradition whose distinction it was to be the first writer of fictions to posit a world imperial system (above all in *Nostromo*, 1904) and who later became one of the most controversial figures in debates that led to the establishment of postcolonial studies. Given the pan-European nature of Conrad’s work and life experience, as well as its global reach and imperial themes, it would seem that if any writer was ‘to last’, remain ‘relevant’ to changing cultural conditions and resist the vagaries of fashion, it might be Conrad. In the early stages of what came to be called postcolonialism, Conrad was invoked, both for praise and blame, as central to the enterprise: *Heart of Darkness* assumed the status of an Ur-text for the new disciplinary field. The dust has now settled on many of those debates; Conrad retains his canonical status, probably even enhanced by the controversies, although these days not cited quite so often in postcolonial studies proper; postcolonial studies experiences no diminution in the volume of publications it generates, but drifts a little unsteadily, anxious about its authenticity and the relevance of its assumed ‘politics’. If changing cultural assumptions can test out Conrad, the reverse of that process might equally be true.

**The Emptiness of the Heart of Darkness**

From the start, the interpretative tradition generated by *Heart of Darkness* became fixated on the novel’s alleged hollowness, what E. M. Forster had labelled Conrad’s ‘central obscurity’. And even though the novel’s very title invites such a preoccupation, this flaw or quality has proven most frustrating to the novel’s defenders, whether they read it as a critique of imperialism or a wider philosophical statement. As a corrective to the view that Conrad was deeply conservative, when *Heart of Darkness* appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1899, the writer was delighted that his close friend, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, a fervid socialist and devotee of Marx, active anti-imperialist and founding member of the Scottish Labour Party, read the first instalment as anti-imperialist:

> I am simply in seventh heaven to find you like the ‘H. of D.’ so far. You bless me indeed. Mind you don’t curse me by and by for the very same thing. There are two more instalments in which the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that you—even you!—may miss it. And also you must remember that I don’t start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced. So far the note struck chimes in with your convictions,—mais après? There is an après. But I think if you look a little into the episodes you will find in them the right intention, though I fear nothing that is practically effective.²

It is often hard to pin down Conrad’s politics, but this statement is best taken to mean precisely what it says. Conrad is clearly comfortable with the assumption

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that *Heart of Darkness* is anti-imperialist; but-and there is always a ‘but’-in the context of the long, careful letter of which this forms an opening move, that acceptance leads to his refusal to appear with Graham on a political platform opposing the British fighting in South Africa. The novel, he says, may be negative in its attitude towards imperialism but Conrad’s habitual scepticism towards all political conviction and idealism points him away from causes and certitude. This non-commital proviso encourages the view that Conrad either fails at the level of ‘concrete’ meaning or manifests an equivocal political commitment. Another interpretation, however, might be that the novel is concerned to situate this last stage of European imperialism in the dispersed and volatile conditions of tragedy, unresponsive to the demand for clear-cut ethical and political choices. *Heart of Darkness* (like *King Lear*) presents the vision of a world doomed to imminent ruin.

In such a state the litany of past horrors (whether these be imagined as the depredations of colonialism, the Atlantic slave-trade, or more loosely the nightmare of history) meets the prospect of a future nothingness in a zone whose governing condition is a state of radical indeterminacy: *Heart of Darkness* (1899) represents Conrad’s tragic moment, which opens the way to the sustained meditation on European imperialism of *Lord Jim* (1900), *Nostromo* (1904) and *Victory* (1915).

There is a degree of harmony between this apolitical side of Conrad and his most famous mid-century champion, F. R. Leavis. The ‘great tradition’ novelists, for example, in certain crucial life choices remained aloof from ‘real’ politics, and Conrad fits that general rule. It was Conrad’s foreignness that posed problems for Leavis, whose great tradition made ‘Englishness’ a necessary qualification for inclusion. He was a pan-European émigré, whose dominant subject-matter was the field of empire, whose characters included Englishmen rubbing shoulders with primitive peoples, and in whose work both residual elements of popular fiction and modernist departures from realistic representation threatened Leavis’ preferred aesthetic for the novel, so discriminations became necessary.

Leavis’ strategies for domesticating Conrad had the effect of further repressing the narrative of imperialism. His first move was to attack the widely admired *Heart of Darkness*. Following the lead of T. S. Eliot, the novel had been taken as providing rich mythic and metaphorical possibilities for the hollowness or evil of twentieth-century life in general and only incidentally to be concerned with imperialism. Leavis’ ‘necessary correction’ was not to draw attention to the novel as an intervention in the question of European imperialism, but simply to point to those same ‘metaphysical’ suggestions as vitiating. For Leavis ‘the best’ of Conrad resided in the ‘concreteness’ of the novel’s detail.

3 T. S. Eliot took the famous utterance announcing Kurtz’ end in *Heart of Darkness* (‘Mistah Kurtz -he dead’) as the epigraph for his 1925 poem, “The Hollow Men”. He had earlier intended to use Kurtz’s own unforgettable epitaph on his life (‘The horror! The horror!’) as an epigraph for *The Wasteland* (1922). Such appeals to Conradian authority would continue across the twentieth century, perhaps most famously in Francis Ford Coppola’s epic movie of the Vietnam War, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which evokes mythic resonances and narratives provided by both Conrad and Eliot to add literary density to his own apocalyptic vision.
Before addressing the controversial heart of Leavis’ case against the novel, it is well to remember just how responsive his own writing could be to what he admired as ‘concrete’ (or ‘fully realized’) in Conrad:

By means of this art of vivid essential record, in terms of things seen and incidents experienced by a main agent in the narrative, and particular contacts and exchanges with other human agents, the overwhelming sinister and fantastic ‘atmosphere’ is engendered. Ordinary greed, stupidity and moral squalor are made to look like the behaviour in a lunatic asylum against the vast and oppressive mystery of the surroundings, rendered potently in terms of sensation. This mean lunacy, which we are made to feel as at the same time normal and insane, is brought out by contrast with the fantastically secure innocence of the young harlequin-costumed Russian…

Whatever shortcomings there are in Leavis’ reading of the tale, they clearly don’t derive from a failure to appreciate Conrad’s text. This fine example of the old art of practical criticism demonstrates just how far a rigorous attention to textual subtlety can produce a compelling sense of ‘inwardness’ with the text’s ‘deep’ meaning. The moment of intense insight in this passage delivers the recognition that Conrad is after something other than ‘normal’ greed; further, that the juxtaposition of the tale’s conflicting elements creates a world that is paradoxical in the extreme, at once ‘normal and insane’. But having reached that point in his analysis, Leavis pulls back from exploring the nature of that ethically and psychically split world, veering off instead to his own polemical concerns: the novel’s failure to live up to its own best moments; its abandonment of the ‘concrete’ for something which he regards as vaguely metaphysical; and the crude pursuit of ‘atmosphere’ for its own sake, empty at bottom. In the era of postcolonial critique, the world that was at once ‘normal and insane’ would be named as the colonial world, and Heart of Darkness read first and foremost as an evocation of that world.

Debates about Conradian politics only fully emerged in the politicizing decades of the ‘60s and ‘70s, and were fought over the related questions of imperialism and racism. Among other things, the ‘Sixties’ were experienced by many as a time for clear-cut political choices over the pressing issues of the day and in terms of broader political affiliations. Stirred by major world conflicts such as various Cold War crises and the wars of National Liberation, ‘the young’ lived out a cultural moment that demanded ‘radical change’. That was no time for fine nuances, even-handed balancing or too much hesitation. Famously, the university campuses of the West became sites for protest, over grievances ranging from the American war in Vietnam to the English Literature syllabus. To be political was to belong to ‘the left’; to be anti-imperialist was de rigueur. Needless to say, Conrad would eventually be caught in the cross-fire.

Terry Eagleton was concerned to define Conrad’s political limitations. In Criticism and Ideology (1976), the book most influenced by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, he locates the oppositional critiques of the writers of the great tradition firmly within a dominant ideological field. He describes the England which welcomed Conrad as a time when

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Nineteenth-century imperialism demanded the production of a corporate, messianic, idealist ideology: but it demanded this at precisely the point where mid-Victorian faith in progress was being eroded into pessimism, subjectivism and irrationalism … it also bred an awareness of cultural relativism at precisely the point where the absolute cultural hegemony of the imperialist nations needed to be affirmed.\(^5\)

For Eagleton, ‘ideological struggle’ is both more and less than a battle between rival political philosophies, parties or slogans, though all three come into it. Mainly it is conducted at the level of ‘culture’ in the broadest sense. In the case of a literary text, the ideology may be critiqued and even refused, but such a refusal will not enable the text to go beyond the determinants of its historical moment. To those new, politically aware readers of Conrad who were beginning to read *Heart of Darkness* as a radical rejection of imperialism, Eagleton replies: ‘The message of *Heart of Darkness* is that Western civilization is at base as barbarous as African society—a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them’.\(^6\)

This contradictory ideological field marks the limits of Conrad’s critical reading of European imperialism: his critique involves a distancing operation that exposes imperialism’s contradictions but is helpless to go beyond them, thus failing to constitute a knowledge. More damningly, Eagleton contends that this limitation leaves Conrad enmeshed in the very ideological contradictions his text exposes, so that Chinua Achebe was right in saying that Conrad’s representation of African people repeats (albeit at a more sophisticated level) the racist disfigurements of imperialist propaganda.

Eagleton’s reading of the novel, like Cunningham Graham’s and Leavis’ before him, suffers from a certain partiality: all three address a cut-down version of the novel which only includes elements directly relevant to the political interests of the critic (thus Eagleton simply accepts Leavis’ dismissal of the writing characterized by ‘adjectival insistence’ and pejoratively labelled ‘metaphysical’). A fuller political reading of *Heart of Darkness* must go beyond simple questions about Conrad’s ‘position’ with regard to imperialism or his representation of non-European peoples (though both are central); such a reading might even address what Conrad calls ‘secondary notions’, that he regarded as important but Leavis and Eagleton saw as weaknesses.

**New Conrads**

This does not imply that all problems associated with the politics of Conradian textuality are resolved merely by greater inclusiveness: the mythopoetic and imagistic use of language of Conrad’s novel means that the horror of Kurtz’ final vision need no more correspond with the enslavement of black men than the specific and different European horror of miscegenation, or indeed the future ‘quagmire of Vietnam’. Conrad said that he liked to work with ‘definite images’—yet the images are often polysemic, symbolic. One unforgettable image, the skulls on poles turned towards Kurtz’ house, as the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o saw, announces the total collapse of every moral defence of colonialism. Ngugi

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\(^6\) Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 135.
added that no African writer ‘had created so ironic, apt, and powerful an image’ of that failure.\(^7\) Ngugi is aware of the political limits of Western self-recognition—but also how rare a thing it is to come upon. One of Conrad’s achievements was to infiltrate the idea of failure into an ideological frame that had allowed no space for it. But if the image of those skulls is one of the novel’s powerful symbols of colonialism, it works in complex, uncontainable ways: if it indicates a violent, sadistic underside to the civilizing mission, in its macabre suggestions of veneration it also reveals the spiritual sickness of the system itself.

Another such image whose power is symbolic is the emaciated Kurtz desperately crawling on all fours through the jungle towards the beckoning lights and tom-tom beats of whatever black ritual is going on beyond the colonial compound.\(^8\) The linear structure of Heart of Darkness takes Marlow and the reader ever closer to Kurtz, right to the point of tracking him along that jungle path; it takes us to a place that affords a glimpse of where Kurtz had been, where slavishly he wants to return—but we are not permitted to go there, to the beyond that calls Kurtz. To that extent, the narrative climax is an anti-climax, at least in terms of the desiderata of tragic catharsis or realist closure. It is only when we frame questions of this hollowness within a different discourse from that of traditional literary theory (which, privileging knowledge as its master signifier, properly belongs to the ‘discourse of the university’)\(^9\) that Conrad’s empty ‘adjectival insistence’ takes on a different significance. At the same time, such a relocation of the text provides the beginnings of an answer to a question that appeared more and more insistently during the 1990s, which could be restated in this way: What has a Lacanian reading of Heart of Darkness to do with the politics of imperialism?

Lacan’s Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis\(^10\) takes its lead from Freud’s later writings that introduce the concept of the ‘death drive’, as well as Civilization and its Discontents (1933), making it a good starting-place for re-reading Heart of Darkness with Lacan. Central to Lacan’s argument that the proper ethics for psychoanalysis is one that resists the ‘good’ as the goal and test for ethical behaviour is the perception that tragedy and psychoanalysis are deeply implicated in one another. Thus Sophocles’ Antigone comes to occupy a central position in Lacan’s attempt to define that radically different ethics.

Two elements of Lacan’s complex argument are immediately suggestive in terms of Heart of Darkness. The first is his use of the strange Greek concept of até, a state of radical disarray or confusion leading to destruction and ruin: roughly, the equivalent of some kind of ‘break-down’. In Lacan’s reading of Sophocles’ tragedy, Antigone becomes most beautiful, her éclat most potent for the audience, when they follow her in her desire to ‘go beyond’ até, to her death no less. From the moment Antigone embarks on her quest to defy the reasonable, unjust laws of

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\(^8\) Conrad, Heart of Darkness, pp. 140-145.


the city, she occupies a place which Lacan designates as situated ‘between two
deaths’. It is in some such state of radical otherness that Marlow finds Kurtz at the
end of his journey up the Congo, groping towards that further place beyond até.
Their encounter strangely binds Marlow to Kurtz, and finally, given ‘a choice of
nightmares’ even leads him to opt for Kurtz—although, like Antigone’s sister
Ismene, he is unable to follow him all the way down that path.

The second element from Lacan’s Seminar VII that bears on Heart of Darkness
is his discussion of an even more abstruse term, employed by Freud and echoing
Kant, which is the concept of das Ding (the Thing). For one very obvious reason
the term stubbornly resists definition and exemplification: it refers to a realm (in
the psyche or in existence) that lies outside the Symbolic order of language,
knowledge and the law and is thus beyond representation. Like the Unconscious
itself, upon whose evanescent existence the entire structure of psychoanalysis is
built, das Ding can only be deduced from its effects. It is the underlying beyond of
Desire, its absent cause or ‘lost object’, around which the mad pursuit of the
various candidates that insistently act in its place as objects of desire is carried on
at the level of everyday reality. If das Ding has no existence at that level, nor can
find representation in the Symbolic order, it must belong to Lacan’s order of the
Real, located ‘in the realm of being, not appearances’.

In his derangement, Kurtz babbles about these objects almost as an endless chain of inadequate claimants:
‘My Intended, my station, my career, my ideas…’. Those ‘goods’ to which he
has dedicated his life are now reduced to a set of empty signifiers which in turn
disappear into a final Emptiness: ‘The horror! The horror!’ These notoriously
‘empty’ phrases—‘impenetrable’, ‘unspeakable’, the ‘heart of darkness’ itself—can
now be read as gestures towards those very areas of being intimated through the
sometimes abstruse, technical and experimental, terminology of Freud or Lacan.

Lacan encourages critique to introduce the category of Desire into the political
discussion of imperialism and provides the discussion with one of its most
searching analyses. It exposes the possibility that the drive for colonial expansion
represents a project without rationale, answering to collective impulses that finally
are not only not subject to rational control but derive from a structure that is deeply
split. The education of colonial desire is essential to propagate and sustain the
system, yet built into the energies it generates and reproduces is a condition of
insatiability. Finally, the Lacanian recognition is that the Good which becomes the
justifying goal of conquest (call it civilization or modernity) is situated in a psychic

12 See Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis,
London and New York, Routledge, 1996, for an excellent discussion of this most
difficult of Lacanian concepts and its vicissitudes. This quotation is from p. 159.
13 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p. 147.
14 By now, of course, postcolonial studies abounds with work that includes desire
as a central category. For a useful overview of the place of desire in the
understanding of colonialism, see Robert J. C. Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity
survey is bracing in that his ‘desire’ starts with sexual desire and its offspring; on
the other hand, his perfunctory and dismissive references to the most important
psychoanalytical theorist of desire, Jacques Lacan, is a disabling lacuna, in my
view.
economy hell-bent on overcoming every obstacle to its satisfaction. Desire and the Law exist in a state of reciprocity and tension in Lacan: the Law not only prevents, it also generates, desire by opening up the possibility of a transgressive desire that cannot be appeased. Nor is the Law itself always a ‘nice’ law in Lacan: it can hit back in the form of the ‘obscene, ferocious figure of the superego’, a cataclysmic guilt, sexual at bottom, which finally destroys Kurtz.

**Future Conrads**

*Heart of Darkness* not only generated a seemingly endless hermeneutic chain, responsive to the shifting parameters and locations of reading; it also opened the way for Conrad to discover new angles of perception for the narrative of European imperialism. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981) Fredric Jameson took Conrad as his model for a new form of politicized ‘metacommentary’ whose ambition was little less than to redirect the course of North American literary/cultural analysis. In *Lord Jim* he unmasks a meaning undreamed by anybody (‘least of all Conrad himself’), that this slightly dated récit of failed honour in fact puts into question the very ‘cohesion of class values’ indicated by the code of the Merchant Marine Service but standing much more broadly for nothing less than the ‘ruling class of the British Empire’. With *Nostromo*, Jameson no longer appeals to a ‘political unconscious’ to expound the novel’s meaning: the notion of a ‘central absence’ becomes the key to understanding *Nostromo*’s greater access to history. Jameson’s comparison with the earlier novel shows how the ‘central absence’ of *Nostromo* is now employed to generate a new novelistic form and to record a quite different consciousness of history, inaccessible to a realism based on central characters and linear narrative: ‘this hole at the centre of the narrative is itself but an external emblem of the greater one around which the gigantic system of events of the novel pivots as on some invisible axis’. Jameson’s *Nostromo* is seen to answer the question of how, in the inherited forms of prose fiction, it is possible to represent that collective and decentred process which may be interpreted, but only retrospectively, as the coming of capitalism to Latin America.

The Marxist Jameson continues the system-building tendency of his Hegelian/Enlightenment heritage; he acknowledges Conrad’s counter-revolutionary tendencies, and does not respond to *Nostromo* in terms of its pessimism over capitalist expansion, nor even its prophetic insights into European and ultimately American expansionism. The American Christian millionaire Holroyd (a mild forerunner of Graham Greene’s ‘quiet American’) innocently, sinisterey, announces his vision of a future *Pax Americana*: ‘We shall run the world’s business whether the world likes it or not. The world can’t help it—and neither can we, I guess’. But the deeper significance of these thrown-away sentiments in the total plan of the novel is their prediction of a world system beyond the European colonial empires and seemingly beyond human agency. This

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is the Conrad who threatens even the solid structures of Enlightenment thought itself and looks beyond the imperial world system to global processes.

To test and accommodate such future visions, a glance beyond the Jameson of The Political Unconscious reveals new possibilities for reading Conrad’s old-fashioned novels. Even Conrad’s own later novel, Victory (1915) takes the analysis of imperialist capitalism beyond its arid and triumphalist arrival in Nostromo, locating the novel’s present among ‘bewildered travellers in a garish, unrestful hotel’, a veritable postcolonial world avant la lettre. Much later, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000) catches the final dispersal of the old European imperialist system at century’s end and posits a new world order which the authors designate ‘Empire’ as displacing those nationally-based colonial systems. The authors seek to ground a cultural politics for this reality in the scattered radical movements and postmodern culture that followed in the wake of the global defeat of the left over the last two decades of the century.

In the western academy, the cultural project of Slavoj Zizek has placed the development of the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan at the centre of a paradoxical attempt to ‘reactualize German idealism’ in order to ‘come to terms with the truly traumatic core of the modern subject’. In order to seek a more complete reading of Conrad, this paper has drawn on both Zizek and Lacan; to deal properly with Conrad’s last great imperialist novel, the unsteadily canonical Victory, the further necessary step would be to yoke those discourses to the project of the modern feminist movement—to grasp, that is, the degree to which Conrad’s final meditation on Europe’s faded empires became at the same time his late and unexpected encounter with the feminine, love and sexuality. If this portends a further loosening of received structures of knowledge and truth governing the mainstream discourse of the university, this need not mean that the enquiry is therefore entirely quixotic of eclectic. Rather, it takes its place in the realm of the provisional and the relatively persuasive, the familiar home of literature, theory and politics.

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