

Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress": History and the Epistemics of Fiction

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been praised for its critique of European colonialism in Africa and blamed for its racial stereotypes in depicting the victims of this enterprise. Its complex narrative strategies have likewise have provoked mixed reception. Conrad's short story, "An Outpost of Progress," written earlier than *Heart*, provides a clearer and more direct depiction of Europe's role in Africa by focusing on two feckless and idle colonial agents who mindlessly repeat the alibis for ivory extraction while all the real work is performed by the indigenous foreman. When made aware of the role of slavery in this business, their friendship deteriorates amidst mutual recriminations to a point where they are of fighting over scarce supplies. The earlier portrayal of comic doubles exhibits Conrad's debt to Flaubert, while the denouement consists in a struggle of violent doubles that ends up with one of them shooting the other and hanging himself thereafter, an outcome portrayed in a manner that accentuates the sacrificial dynamics working through their dealings with the native population. Oppression and self-destruction, murder and suicide, are Conrad's unambiguous emblem for the colonial scheme.

Keywords: Imperialism, Colonialism, Africa, Racism, Slavery, Violence, Mimesis, Satire, Conrad, Flaubert

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For permission to publish this essay in its original English, I wish to thank Alexei Zygmunt, who is publishing a volume of essays in Russian to commemorate the 100th anniversary of René Girard's birth.

Almost any mention of Conrad is likely to bring to mind his novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which has been widely applauded for its thoroughgoing critique of Europe's imperialist invasion of the African continent and of the murderous devastation wrought by what was being pitched as a "civilizing mission," a slogan employed by British, Belgian, and French colonialists. The work has also been pilloried in Chinua Achebe's scathing essay (1965) in which the Nigerian novelist denounces the flagrant racism put on display in the

form of its portrayal of Africa and its native inhabitants according to crude ethnic stereotypes routinely entertained by Europeans. Achebe's critique has resulted in closer scrutiny of the work; indeed, his challenge has renewed highly commendable attention to all the issues—political, historical, ethnic, ethical, anthropological, and rhetorical—that the novella raises.

This controversy has been most recently invigorated by Nidesh Lawtoo's mimetic reading of the novelist's entire oeuvre. Because of its racist, neo-colonial bias, Achebe denies the title of "masterpiece" to the novella. Lawtoo reads Conrad through mimetic lenses, demonstrating persuasively that they are Conrad's own. This is in keeping with René Girard's claims about the cultural authority enjoyed by literary masterpieces for their explanatory power of human self-understanding; he has argued persuasively for their own cognitive agency in our quest for real knowledge about human interaction, which he did not hesitate to label "Fundamental Anthropology" in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Part I). In this masterwork, Girard took a step further—a great leap for many—in arguing for biblical revelation as the unimpeachable impetus of our human scientific knowledge, indeed as the impetus of all our human sciences and ethical concerns, including our scrupulously circumspect historiography (Part II). Accordingly Eric Gans (1997) has identified our literary masterpieces as an ongoing "discovery procedure" of decisive anthropological import.

All this is of especial interest for Conrad's short story, "An Outpost of Progress," where the writer's mimetic lenses are less oblique than in his novella. Written two years before the latter, it exhibits a cogent analysis of mimetic behavior as it leads to violence, the dynamic that lies at the core of Girard's anthropology. The tale also engages religious, specifically Christian, imagery, ending up with a man hung from a cemetery cross by his own suicidal doing. This is a highly ambiguous dénouement in the light of the "Conrad's critical view of Christianity" that Lawtoo confines to a footnote: "It's strange how I always, from the age of fourteen, disliked the Christian religion, its doctrines, ceremonies and festivals.... [it] is the only religion which, with its impossible standards, has brought an infinity of anguish to innumerable souls—on this earth" (2016, 382, n. 54).

The word "religion" does not show up in the index of Lawtoo's magisterial reading of Conrad, nor in his earlier study of the author in a chapter of his earlier book, *The Phantom of the Ego*, nor is it indexed in his most recent *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation*, which is an encyclopedic curriculum on every aspect of mimesis. I do not mark this lacuna as a rebuke to Lawtoo: he reads Durkheim (for whom religion is a "social fact" central to social organization) very astutely as well as the religious anthropology developed in his wake; he devotes deft analyses to Durkheim's focus on the dynamics of the "effervescence," a unifying frenzy, induced by ritual practices as a simulacrum of transcendence. (For Girard, the frenzy is a stage in a scapegoat ritual.) This process figures importantly in both Conrad's novella and his short story, which is in many regards a run-up to the former. I shall argue

for "Outpost" as a free-standing masterpiece in its own right for its fine-grained analysis of mimetic desire that leads to its violent conclusion, which is marked some way or another as sacrificial. For Girard mimetic, internecine violence often is resolved by scapegoating, when the violence of all against all streamlines down to the violence of all against one, whose victim is sacralized as both the cause of violence and the seemingly divine agent of its cessation. The cultic replication of this crisis of difference takes the form of ritualized sacrifice, a process that informs Girard's critique, in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), of "religious thought" (*le religieux*), that he decodes as the misrecognition ("*méconnaissance*") of agency driving archaic religion.

"Outpost" is host to the core themes elaborated in Conrad's novella, but Conrad's recourse to a direct, third-person, omniscient narrator is in stark contrast to the complex layering of narrative strategies of indirection deployed in the latter and that have variously dazzled critical attention and frustrated readers in equal measure. The narrative in *Heart* is introduced by a seafaring Marlow on board of a ship on the Thames River, but the reader's expectation of a sailor's yarn, a stock genre of the publishing trade of the time, is thwarted by Marlow's brooding about the continuity rather than the difference between Europe's barbaric founding and the presumed exotic, aboriginal culture he visited in Africa. Marlow's commission by The Great Trading Company is a quest, a "progress towards Kurtz" (249) that reads like an ironic or anti-"pilgrimage among hints for madness" (223) embodied in the mysterious colonizer, whose Enlightenment idealism had morphed into genocidal despair: "Exterminate all the brutes" is inscribed in the margins of his official report to the company (262). The self-congratulatory claims of the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs that endorse Marlow's errand are in stark contrast to the evidence of colonial brutalities and despoliations, "a rapacious and pitiless folly" (225). The novella reads as a deconstruction of Enlightened Europe's beneficent delusions about itself.

All that has been amply deliberated in the copious archive of Conradiana that Lawtoo dutifully consults. Still, Achebe's indictment remains intact when we recall that Marlow's verbal contact with Africans is limited to two ungrammatical responses: "'Eat 'em,'" a native on board remarks of corpses floating the river, which ignorantly reduces cannibalism to appetite, whereas religious anthropology has everywhere traced it to a ritual function aiming to absorb the power of defeated enemies; "Mr. Kurtz, he dead," Marlow is told at the end of his quest. So much for the voice of Africa.

"Outpost" stands out by contrast not for giving much voice to Africans, but for its detailed exploration of the interactional dynamics of colonial officers that the novella overlooks almost entirely. *Heart* is a critique of European colonialism from the remote point of view of a scandalized witness to its depredations; "Outpost" zooms into the operations "on the ground" of a remote trading post occupied by just two officials. Their only contact with Africans are Gobila, the local tribal chief who provides them with victuals that their Company furnishes inadequately, and, more centrally, there is Makola, "who maintained

that his name was Henry Price” and who is effectively in charge of their business: “He spoke English and French with a warbling accent, wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping, and cherished in his innermost heart the worship of evil spirits.” That latter detail is perhaps blamably gratuitous, the main point being that Makola does all the work that the outpost requires, and more to the point, “despised the two white men,” for he is in fact their superior in all practical matters, whence his assuming a European cognomen. This is an example, as Lawtoo remarks, of “colonial mimesis,” the occasional identification of locals with the prestige of their occupying powers.

Conrad’s critical outlook here is reserved for the colonialists, as of the tale’s first sentence: “There were two white men in charge of the trading station. Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a pair of thin legs.” The Director of the company flatly derides them as “two imbeciles.” Their very names suggest their nonentity, as they replicate, echo each other phonemically; they are, in the derogatory sense, ciphers, as the lettering of their names overlap. With these two feckless, thoughtless “untidy men,” we are in a land of Dickensian satire, the realm of Messrs Boodle and Coodle and Doodle who make the pointless rounds of parliamentary debate in *Bleak House*. Nineteenth-century literature abounds in such comic doubles, such as we find in Dostoyevsky’s “The Double,” taking its cue from the nameless insignificance of eminently replaceable bureaucratic employees. This trend reaches its comic apogee with Flaubert’s posthumous *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, two retired copyists whose amateur research and experiments range over the entire span of available knowledge.

Lawtoo writes up Conrad’s two characters as doubles and leaves it at that. But it is worthwhile going into the text in more detail, into its style, into the “content of its form” (Gans 168-183), in order to assess the work’s own interpretive agency. This has ever been the goal of the very French practice of close reading, of *explication de texte*, which Girard regularly encouraged his students at Johns Hopkins to undertake. It is not the “what” of a text, which can be the topic of any sort of entertainments, high and low, but the “how,” how the work seeks to educate its readers, that matters for properly literary criticism.

The portrayal of Kayerts and Carlier is the occasion for the omniscient narrator to indulge in an editorial diatribe about the all but faceless population of crowds, whose distinguishing feature is a lack of agency, of initiative of any sort. Its depiction is worth quoting at length:

They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals,

in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations—to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike.

The urban masses of Europe seem to have irked the widely travelled Conrad. The ethnocentric notion of "pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man" is not to Conrad's credit, and Europe's difference from "savage customs" will disintegrate in his novella, where "trouble into the heart" is explored at length and in depth. Conrad's remarks here point to the experience of industrialized Europe's urban masses, notorious for their role in ongoing revolutionary upheaval. Their emergence on the scene of history with the triumph of industrial capitalism motivated the groundbreaking works of Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, whose importance for mimetic studies has been highlighted by Paul Dumouchel and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, and Lawtoo after them.

It is from this faceless crowd of nonentities that our colonial pair have been recruited. A sense of their vacuity, emphatically thematized by their names, is enhanced by indifferently attributed discourse on the part of "the one," "the other." The narrator waxes sarcastically on their unfitness to their surroundings:

No two beings could have been more unfit for such a struggle. Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on the sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom. They did not know what use to make of their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought.

Further on, the colonial enterprise comes in for a drubbing with the "perusal of a home paper," where the delusions of a "civilizing mission" are the pabulum of fools:

That print discussed what it was pleased to call "Our Colonial Expansion" in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving

his hand about, "In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and—and—billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue—and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!"

When they speak, it is the cultural commonplaces speaking through them. Conrad's notorious admiration for Flaubert is exercised here.

"Five months passed that way," we read in one simple sentence paragraph (another Flaubertian touch). We are deftly attuned thereby to a turning point in the narrative, which takes an ominous turn with the passage through the outpost of some remoter, sinister seeming tribesmen, armed with muskets. They make Makola nervous: "They are perhaps bad men"; and from our duo, we read, "I don't like those chaps—and, 'I say, Kayerts, they must be from the coast; they've got firearms,' observed the sagacious Carlier. Kayerts also did not like those chaps.... 'We must order Makola to tell them to go away before dark.'" What comes out of the darkness is "a lot of drumming in the villages" that would "roll" portentously and to which another drumbeat responds in a messaging function:

A deep, rapid roll near by would be followed by another far off—then all ceased. by a lot of drumming in the villages. A deep, rapid roll near by would be followed by another far off—then all ceased. Soon short appeals would rattle out here and there, then all mingle together, increase, become vigorous and sustained, would spread out over the forest, roll through the night, unbroken and ceaseless, near and far, as if the whole land had been one immense drum booming out steadily an appeal to heaven. And through the deep and tremendous noise sudden yells that resembled snatches of songs from a madhouse darted shrill and high in discordant jets of sound which seemed to rush far above the earth and drive all peace from under the stars.

This is a foretaste of the ritual frenzy thematized in *Heart*, which is alleged to have drawn Kurtz into its thrall.

The impression of madness in the air can be laid down to the colonialist's—and Conrad's—unself-critical, condescending view of indigenous practices, evoking a spooky atmosphere consonant with the ethnocentrism of the tale; pop film in later decades will exploit the cliché as "the native are restless tonight." In Lawtoo's analytic vocabulary, this is evidence of the *pathos*, the emotive ignorance of imperial discourse, which he finds alternating in Conrad with a more, rational, disciplined *logos* in the form of Conrad's acutely critical abhorrence of Europe's racist commerce in human flesh. The rational ego is enveloped and at times overwhelmed by its shadowy, mimetic impulses. What is of interest to mimeticians in this tale is the shape that madness takes in the panic frenzy marking the behavior of our witless protagonists and that composes the second half, Part II, of the story.

They learn—eventually—from Makola that the "ten station men"

conscripted—dragooned?—"from far away" for the manual labor of dock hands, like so much migrant labor, have been traded for an impressive stock of ivory. *Heart* will add more gruesome detail to such captive populations in a notorious passage: "Brought from all the recesses of the coast, in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar foods, the sickened, became inefficient, and were the allowed to crawl away and rest" (226). This segment of dialogue in "Outpost, whose brevity will have proven to be sinister for what it does *not* express, displays the stakes of this transaction in sharp juxtaposition, beginning with Makola:

"Those men who came yesterday are traders from Loanda who have got more ivory than they can carry home. Shall I buy? I know their camp."

"Certainly," said Kayerts. "What are those traders?"

"Bad fellows," said Makola, indifferently. "They fight with people, and catch women and children. They are bad men, and got guns. There is a great disturbance in the country. Do you want ivory?"

"Yes," said Kayerts. Makola said nothing for a while. Then: "Those workmen of ours are no good at all," he muttered, looking round. "Station in very bad order, sir. Director will growl. Better get a fine lot of ivory, then say nothing."

"I can't help it; the men won't work," said Kayerts. "When will you get that ivory?"

Makola responds "very soon, you have to leave it to me," and suggests giving palm wine to their station men "to make a dance this evening. Enjoy themselves," to which Kayerts responds "with a simple 'Yes.'" There follows an ironic understatement of what took place: "Some men from Gobila's village had joined the station hands, and the entertainment was a great success." The revelry nonetheless issues in shouting, "then a shot was fired." We don't know by whom or at whom, but Makola seeks to reassure his employers: "Then he whispered, 'All right. Bring ivory. Say nothing. I know my business.'" The sound of "footsteps, whispers, some groans," of "heavy things [dumped] on the ground" issues in the pair's joint satisfaction: "They lay on their beds and thought: 'This Makola is invaluable.'" Their passivity is emphatic, thematic, and this idea will recur further on: they are not *doing* anything.

Regretting what they view as the desertion of the station men, they ask about the six splendid tusks before them and learn that their employees were in fact traded for the ivory as carriers. To Kayert's indignation ("You fiend!"), Makola responds "imperturbably": "I did the best for you and the Company." In their repulsion for the transaction, they threaten to dismiss Makola, to "report him to the company," ordering him to throw the ivory into the river, refusing to look at it; however, a bit later, Carlier, "smoking his pipe," while assaying their part of the bargain for the tusks, "touched one or two with his foot, even tried to lift

the largest one by its small end." Complicity is gliding in; obliquity, slithering, is its usual trajectory. The only trace of the village festival is "one of Gobila's people lying dead before the huts—shot through the body. We heard that shot last night."

Attraction to the ivory is juxtaposed with repulsion for the transaction that secures it. Conrad stages the white men's reflections on the trade as bland echoes from the European "civilized" point of view; the terse phrasing highlights the poverty of expression between the colonialists, in the lock-step iterations. Thereafter Conrad editorializes about it:

"We can't touch it, of course," said Kayerts.

"Of course not," assented Carlier.

"Slavery is an awful thing," stammered out Kayerts in an unsteady voice.

"Frightful—the sufferings," grunted Carlier with conviction.

They believed their words. Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond the words. Nobody knows what suffering or sacrifice mean—except, perhaps the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions.

This is another of Conrad's Flaubertian moments, as it indicts the ritual exchange of "received ideas," the shibboleths of Western liberalism, whose victims are proof against our high-minded prattle; and there is a jab at a sacrificial economy at work. The passage is about victims and the platitudes uttered to screen them from view, to deny attention to them. Misrecognition is not an effect of sacrifice, but a rhetorical strategy to cover it up beneath a heap of value-laden verbiage. This denialism is key to both Anglo-European and Yankee imperialism.

Marlow observes of Kurtz that "all of Europe contributed to the making Kurtz " (1967, 261). The same can be said for the Polish-Franco-Anglophone expat Conrad, who undertakes an anguished, self-critical unmasking in the novella. Kurtz/Conrad identify not with Europe's benighted churches but with its Enlightenment, which we need to recognize as heir to the Judeo-Christian denunciation of sacrifice and of the verbose efforts to cover it up. The critique of empire is Israel's birth certificate, which is renewed by Israel's prophets inveighing against the "refuge of lies" (Isaiah 28.17) that their people are seeking for their compromises with idolatrous practices (Bandera). The very unbelieving Conrad is party to this indelible tradition, as is the vehemently anti-clerical Voltaire, whose *Candide* (Chapter 19) instructs all of Europe in the cruel venality of its colonial practices in one defining sentence: a mutilated slave lying by the road side, missing an arm and a leg, explains to

Candide's scandalized inquiry about his condition that "This is the price you pay for sugar in Europe."

It is to our best writers that befalls the properly prophetic role of disenchanting us from our depredations and efforts to cover them up. This legerdemain—abuse *cum* denial by blaming some others—is performed by our two colonial agents; Conrad archly stages their *involvement*, their collusion in weighing the ivory tusks while cursing its negotiator:

It was too heavy. [Malola] looked up helplessly without a word, and for a minute they stood round that balance as mute and still as three statues. Suddenly Carlier said: "Catch hold of the other end, Makola—you beast!" and together they swung the tusk up. Kayerts trembled in every limb. He muttered, "I say! O! I say!" and putting his hand in his pocket found there a dirty bit of paper and the stump of a pencil. He *turned his back on the others, as if about to do something tricky, and noted stealthily* the weights which Carlier shouted out to him with unnecessary loudness. When all was over Makola whispered to himself: "The sun's very strong here for the tusks." Carlier said to Kayerts in a careless tone: "I say, chief, I might just as well give him a lift with this lot into the store." (my italics)

The next paragraph stages their slipshod exculpation: "As they were going back to the house Kayerts observed with a sigh: 'It had to be done.' And Carlier said: 'It's deplorable, but, the men being Company's men, the ivory is Company's ivory. We must look after it.' 'I will report to the Director, of course,' said Kayerts. 'Of course; let him decide,' approved Carlier." Misdirection is the royal road of our devastations. "Of course," still with the same lock-step ventriloquism, as a matter of course according to their job description, where "stealthily" and "careless tone" aim at once at alienating and routinizing the haul and passing the buck to the Director.

The cross-purpose judgment (or bad faith—approval and disapproval) is farmed out to Makola, as the next paragraph begins: "At midday they made a hearty meal. Kayerts sighed from time to time. Whenever they mentioned Makola's name they always added to it an opprobrious epithet. It eased their conscience." Going along with the deal while blaming another for its execution is the daily bread of ideology, its "nescience" or "false consciousness" (in Marx's telling expression). On the African side, we read: "mild old Gobila" is fearful of "all the Evil Spirits that had taken possession of his white friends.... Who could foresee the woe those mysterious creatures, if irritated, might bring?" This is not a jibe at Africans' superstition; it is about us, not them, about how we moderns appear to them in our mimetic acquisitiveness unmoored from ritual controls to violence. Gobila's apprehension portends horrors to come; conveyed in free indirect discourse, it is the vehicle for Western readers of the Kurtz effect, of our strangeness to ourselves; bewilderment at "the witchcraft of white men" is a logical inference from Gobila's point of view. It is their label for what we name as commerce.

The famous Russian linguist Victor Shklovsky wrote of the role of "[defamiliarization](#)" (*ostranenie*, often translated as "estrangement") in literature, rendering unusual what we take as a matter of course, surveying matters portrayed otherwise than culturally shared views of reality. This performance crests at the experience of estrangement from ourselves, which is exactly what happens between these two non-entities, its turning point being the complicity in slavery:

It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as an inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts. The images of home; the memory of people like them, of men that thought and felt as they used to think and feel, receded into distances made indistinct by the glare of unclouded sunshine. And out of the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting.

The disgust is their own—with themselves; the "surrounding wilderness" with its hopelessness and savagery has leached into their consciousness, their self-image. Gobila's people repel them with a "shower of arrows." Their isolation increases with the lateness of the steamer, causing a shortage of supplies. Hunting and fishing for provisions fails. Their frustration ignites in Carlier "a fit of rage [over lost game] and [he] talked about the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable."

This vile utterance will find a place in Kurtz's marginal scrawl, but it does not originate with Conrad; it can be found in the archive of colonialism explored by Caroline Elkins in her *Legacy of Violence: A history of the British Empire*, which chronicles "its slide into the dehumanizing ether." Her book abounds in cringeworthy claims of white supremacy, with quotes from the pages of Churchill, John Stuart Mill, Carlyle, and still others. She concludes, "Violence is endemic to this structure." Its victims are the everyday cost of doing business: John Locke was a stockholder in the infamous East India Company, where, later on, John Stuart Mill was, like his father before him, an employee. "*Exterminate the Brutes*" is the title of Sven Lindqvist's book, subtitled *One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*. Lindqvist's title is a quote from more than one colonialist advocate before the expression got to Conrad, who perhaps learned it from Roger Casement, the first to blow the whistle on the Belgian Congo. Lindqvist consults Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which begins with coverage of King Leopold's African realm. Recourse to Arendt shows how colonial imperialism set the stage for totalitarianism, born of racism. "Genocide is a by-product of progress," notes Lindqvist. He reports on his deeply researched travelogue, an exercise in field anthropology, through Europe's former colonies, where he demonstrates that "Genocide existed before the form." As he pungently remarks, "The Heart of Darkness is Europe's truth." The term "horrorism," in a bow to

Conrad, has been coined in recognition of this ghastly chain of 19th- and 20th-century crimes against humanity (Lawtoo *et al.*).

It was to Casement that Conrad confided his own dissatisfaction with “the fogginess of *Heart of Darkness*,” an “awful fudge” in his reckoning (Grandin 19). The murkiness of its prose, its piling up of adjectives, its seeming metaphysics of evil, often proves to be an ordeal for undergraduate readers and the “common reader” at large. The point to establish here is not only the short story’s direct, unproblematic, omniscient narrator’s point of view, but especially the Kurtz effect on our two protagonists: “They had reckoned their percentages on the trade, including in them that last deal of ‘this infamous Makola.’” They also agreed not to inform the Director: “‘He has seen worse things done on the quiet,’ maintained Carlier, with a hoarse laugh. ‘Trust him! He won’t thank you if you blab. He is no better than you or me. Who will talk if we hold our tongues? There is nobody here.’” What-about-ism is the exit ramp from responsibility, which nonetheless haunts their exchanges.

Isolated around their offense to proclaimed values, each turns such remorse as he is capable of against others; they “cursed the Company, all Africa, and the day they were born.” These curses will inevitably find a less remote target—in each other: “When the two men spoke, they snarled; and their silences were bitter, as if tinged by the bitterness of their thoughts.” In their deprivation, they drank their coffee without sugar, reserving the “last fifteen lumps for a cheering treat ‘in case of sickness.’” That is all they need to unleash a mimetic frenzy:

One day after a lunch of boiled rice, Carlier put down his cup untasted, and said:
“Hang it all! Let’s have a decent cup of coffee for once. Bring out that sugar, Kayerts!”

“For the sick,” muttered Kayerts, without looking up.

“For the sick,” mocked Carlier. “Bosh! . . . Well! I am sick.”

“You are no more sick than I am, and I go without,” said Kayerts in a peaceful tone.

“Come! out with that sugar, you stingy old slave-dealer.”

This is the worst thing he can say in this dispute. Carlier’s “marked insolence” startles Kayerts to a point where he no longer recognizes his companion: “And suddenly it seemed to Kayerts that he had never seen that man before. Who was he? He knew nothing about him. What was he capable of? There was a surprising flash of violent emotion within him, as if in the presence of something undreamt-of, dangerous, and final.” Reality is coming unglued, its joints are dissolving; Conrad assiduously traces the path from chummy fraternity to fratricidal self-destruction—over a lump of sugar—that spirals up to mutual, reciprocal, mimetic recrimination:

“That joke is in very bad taste. Don’t repeat it.”

“Joke!” said Carlier, hitching himself forward on his seat. “I am hungry—I am sick—I don’t joke! I hate hypocrites. You are a hypocrite. You are a slave-dealer. I am a slave-dealer. There’s nothing but slave-dealers in this cursed country. I mean to have sugar in my coffee today, anyhow!”

The remnants of hierarchy, of order, have dissolved, issuing in a raging, hysterical scramble, “a blind rush” culminating in Kayerts’ snatching his revolver behind the door he has locked, and with Carlier “kicking at the door furiously, howling ‘If you don’t bring out that sugar, I will shoot you at sight, like a dog. Now then—one—two—three. You won’t? I will show you who’s the master.’” Sugar, slavery, mastery, whatever.... Amidst this violent reciprocity, Kayerts succumbs to an annihilating moment of panic-stricken trepidation:

What was it all about? He thought it must be a horrible illusion; he thought he was dreaming; he thought he was going mad! After a while he collected his senses. What did they quarrel about? That sugar! How absurd! He would give it to him—didn’t want it himself. And he began scrambling to his feet with a sudden feeling of security. But before he had fairly stood upright, a commonsense reflection occurred to him and drove him back into despair. He thought: “If I give way now to that brute of a soldier, he will begin this horror again to-morrow—and the day after—every day—raise other pretensions, trample on me, torture me, make me his slave—and I will be lost! Lost! The steamer may not come for days—may never come.” He shook so that he had to sit down on the floor again. He shivered forlornly. He felt he could not, would not move any more. He was completely distracted by the sudden perception that the position was without issue—that death and life had in a moment become equally difficult and terrible.

An absolute loss of difference, or meaning, invades his consciousness. Between life and death, pursuer and pursued, violence will only increase when contention becomes the content: “He darted to the left, grasping his revolver, and at the very same instant, as it seemed to him, they came into violent collision. Both shouted with surprise. A loud explosion took place between them; a roar of red fire, thick smoke; and Kayerts, deafened and blinded, rushed back thinking: ‘I am hit—it’s all over.’” In this collision of violent doubles, Conrad astutely deprives the deadly shot of any agency, of any punctual, particular origin to the lethal blast that ends the chase; this is further symbolized by the “thick smoke” that has enveloped them, from which the survivor eventually espies “a pair of turned-up feet. A pair of white naked feet in red slippers.” The impersonality of this discovery betokens the non-personhood issuing from violent indifferenciation.

Makola will cover up the killing: “He died of fever,” which was the case of their predecessor buried not far away. But Kayerts will not draw any benefit or solace from this sham,

succumbing instead “the depths of horror and despair,” of the kind that unmistakably will attend the last moments, the very last words of Kurtz in Marlow’s notorious depiction: “Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment complete knowledge?...he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: ‘The horror! The Horror!’” (283). Kayerts/Kurtz: the phonemic vicinity is not incidental. Kayerts experiences an all-consuming nihilism that is personal, deeply felt, and that foreshadows the “soul-madness” of Kurtz (280), whose delirium is prefigured in Conrad’s own, lengthier soul-searching depiction of Kayerts:

He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very actively, thinking very new thoughts. He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether. His old thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared in their true light at last! Appeared contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous. He reveled in his new wisdom while he sat by the man he had killed. He argued with himself about all things under heaven with that kind of wrong-headed lucidity which may be observed in some lunatics.

Thinking is emphatically a theme here for the reader to participate in. Kayerts is, for the first—and last—time in his life, thinking all the way down to his false identity and the inanity of the institution which he has served. He succumbs to the “wisdom” of nihilism, a sense of absolute contingency where nothing matters; commerce, culture, etc., are for Kayerts “a tale told by an idiot” if ever there was one. The nihilism is not a philosophical position here, it is not arrived at as matter of principle, as an idea. As Conrad shows, it is achieved downstream from the tipping point of murderous rage. Pondering “that men died every day in thousands,” “he became not at all sure who was dead and who was alive.” We are at the acute angle of identity crisis: living or dead, awake or asleep “or thought he had slept”; he is in a fog, of the kind that enshrouds the ship on which Marlow begins his tale and that attends his Congo trip downriver. “And somebody had whistled in the fog... He stood up, saw the body, and threw his arms above his head with a cry like that of a man who, waking from a trance, finds himself immured forever in a tomb. ‘Help! . . . My God!’”

At this point, we read of a horrific shriek that at once recalls jungle frenzies and a violent apocalypse, a last judgment:

A shriek inhuman, vibrating and sudden, pierced like a sharp dart the white shroud of that land of sorrow. Three short, impatient screeches followed, and then, for a time, the fog-wreaths rolled on, undisturbed, through a formidable silence. Then many more shrieks, rapid and piercing, like the yells of some exasperated and ruthless creature, rent the air. Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river. Progress and civilization and all the virtues. Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to return to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done.

This is an apocalypse of the kind that Girard speaks of in *Battling to the End*, which a long tradition has pegged as a terrifying reckoning with human sinfulness, the retribution of a vengeful god—and which Conrad, like Girard, sees as an all-too-human catastrophe. For this last judgment of colonial imperialism, the modernist writer need not have had the last book of the Christian bible in mind; amidst the symbolic inventory supplied by Scripture even into our secular modernity, he has in every sense *figured* it out on his own. King Leopold's rule has all the earmarks of the "anti-Kingdom which brings death," as Brian Robinette describes the apocalyptic destiny of violent reciprocity (159).

The "tumultuous peal," and "clamor" announce the arrival of the "Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company (since we know that civilization follows trade)." The Director finds Kayerts hanging from the beam of the cross over his predecessor's grave: "His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director." This derisive, swollen tongue is Kayerts' unspoken, unspeakable message to the Company and all that it represents in the fate of these two slavers, the two self-slayers.

How are we to interpret this tragico-grotesque conclusion, this self-crucifixion? It is ineluctably bound up with the symbolics and ethical implications of the cross that, according to Girard, has worked its way through Western culture in our historiography, our social sciences, our ethics and the political arrangements of liberal democracy (Dormoy *passim*). He views it as the wellspring of today's ubiquitous "concern for victims," which he maintains lies at the source of our demystifying fervor; it has suffused our Enlightenment, not least in its critique, with Voltaire and Diderot, for example, of colonialist violence. This differentiating concern underlies our quest for truth that he states is "not relative. It is our absolute," as Girard stipulates in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (177).

Conrad is heir to this epistemic and ethical tradition, along with the rest of us. We need to recall that the exalted status we award to literature that we stamp with approval for membership in our literary canon is modeled upon the Judeo-Christian canon as sources of cognitive and ethical authority. With astute attention to Girard's work, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that Israel was unique in its socio-political environment for having generated "a relentless literature of self-criticism," which our best writers perpetuate and renew with newer experiences. Christopher Haw complements this reading of Israel's "theoclasm" as the irruption of a "monotheism of truth." Whence Israel's fierce iconoclasm, its anti-idolatry. For Haw, following up on the research of Jan Assmann, this is Judaism's critical and emancipatory thrust, for it liberates humanity from "its embeddedness in the world and its political, natural, and cultural powers" (151-152). It is the foundation, the birth certificate of our critical-scientific outlook even today (Gans 1990). Israel's "theologized justice" is rooted in the absolute difference between those who rule over empires and those who suffer from them, a value-laden *distinguo* to which we pay at least

lip service even today. Girard's sacrificial interpretation of culture in *Violence and the Sacred* unveils archaic religion's *outsourcing* of its own violence to its divinized scapegoats. In *Battling to the End*, he conducts an exercise in "mimetic history" (25, 180) in the extended reflections he shares with Benoît Chantre on Clausewitz and the implications of the Prussian general's idea of modern warfare's "movement to extremes," the relentless escalation of violence as it conforms to the fundamental structure and dynamics of the duel, the reciprocal thrust and parry of doubles towards ever more lethal and widespread destructiveness. Conrad's oeuvre is an important chapter in reckoning with this history; his short story unveils this pathology *in nuce*.

As opposed to Michel Foucault's notion of "coupures épistémologiques" punctuating Western culture, Girard is a "continuist" (2010 13, 71), as is Conrad. In *The Secret Agent* (1907), a severely retarded boy is drafted by an *agent provocateur* to dynamite a national monument in London, a counterfeit of anarchist violence; predictably this massacre of an *infans*, of an un-speaking child, brings more violence in its train. "The Duel" (1908) reprises a decade of futile violent confrontation reset in the Napoleonic era.

This process of neo- or post-biblical revelation in narrative fiction is not altered because of Conrad's hostility to Christianity. We can trace his revulsion for empire as far back as his upbringing in Poland, a virtual colony of Czarist Russia and a playground for other European powers; his father was committed to modern, liberal ideas. In "Outpost," murder, madness, self-destruction are Conrad's liminal but unsparing message about his own experience in the Congo, from which he returned quite ill— not from malaria, I think, but from what he had seen and heard and shared with Roger Casement, as both Sven Lindqvist and Adam Hochschild (1998) report independently, while specifying that it was not ivory but rubber for inflatable tires that enriched the empire. And Girard's biblical anthropology does not comport with an imperial Christendom; it includes perforce a critical repudiation of "Christian denominations" for "their connivance with established political order in the present world that," he concludes is "always 'sacrificial'" (2001, 181). The scare quotes express Girard's concern about careless use of this accusatory label. Elsewhere the scare quotes come off: to the extent that political decisions aim to achieve "a lesser evil," there is "no non-sacrificial politics" (Dormoy 118).

As of my own research, the assessment seems a good fit for many institutional practices. In *The Scramble for Africa*, Thomas Pakenham describes the mimetic competition of European powers for African possessions, where each imperial incursion is a model for others, with no real knowledge of the stakes. We know that this was the prelude to World War I, when according to one diplomat "the lights of Europe went out." Conrad is the chronicler of this encroaching twilight. Howard K. French in *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World* traces the expansion of European empires from along the Atlantic coast of Africa into the Western hemisphere; he depicts the "interlocking suite" of colonial practices, composing an "integrated system" that is economic, military, and

political. He, among others, further demonstrates that the differential concept of “Whiteness” is born in this process; it is its “byproduct,” i.e., a residual, derivative identity preened to stand out from newly captive, “colored,” populations. Pakenham describes the scramble for territory; French’s companion volume details the scramble for Africans to harvest the “new world’s” plantations of sugar, coffee, and cotton for lucrative export to Europe. This process began with Portugal’s expansion of its overseas territories, which served as a model for Holland, Spain, France, and England to enter the competition. *Homo Mimeticus* looms large and balefully all over the geography of our modernity.

“Collateral damage” is another (military) term for the “sacrificial” practices of institutions, especially in Big Business. Hannah Arendt has averted us to the constrictions exerted by the instrumental, means/end rationality that came to dominate economic organization as of the 19th century. Its calculus of cost/benefit, investment/return, profit/loss, generates a zero-sum logic that has prevailed in market ideology as it shades into market idolatry. Often linked to Taylorism, time/motion computations as a measure for a mechanized system of labor productivity that was first essayed on slave plantations before it became the principle of assembly-line industry, this preeminent business model does not, by its very nature, factor in effects, physical and mental, on actual human beings, be they workers or consumers. The bosses and bankers enriched by this system have no reason to question the inner operations of its success. In conversation with Nadine Dormoy (70-71), Girard redefines the notion of “original sin” in terms of the nefarious effects of our mimesis, describing it as the “concatenation (*enchaînement*) of mimetic desire,” its endless, sinister “serpentine” coiling and recoiling, bearing the assurance in Genesis 3.5: “You will be like god, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3.5). In *Heart of Darkness*, the Congo River is evoked as serpentine in Marlow’s downstream quest for Kurtz, who is seen as a god by the population he commands.

Overall, these historical inquiries more than suggest that we abandon Michel Foucault’s comprehensive critique of power as the motor of history for attention to the more fundamental operations of mimetic desire; power, wealth, or land can be the *différend*, the *casus belli*, but in certain circumstances so can almost nothing, a lump of sugar. “Much Ado about Nothing” in its tragic mode: “One’s cause becomes utterly self-authorizing, and what it authorizes is extermination” (Robinette 106, 107). François Cusset, in *Le Déchaînement du monde: Nouvelle Logique de la violence*, discloses the “sacrificial dynamic” of Western institutions, juridical, social, economic, and political, with special attention to “la condition noire.” His analyses reveal how violence “circulates” around and through modern culture. Viewed from the perspective of Empire’s victims, sacrifice is a feature, not a bug of our socio-economic and political arrangements, which is also the argument of Frédéric Gros in his *Etats de violence*, which in its turn could be the ur-title of Conradian fiction. Such factual research demystifies the lie of punctual violence as opposed to its myriad, anonymous, impersonal, systemic circulation, the triple violence “among us, on us, in us” (Cusset). This is in fact the thrust of Hélène L’Heuillet in *Tu haïras ton prochain comme toi-même* (“Thou shalt hate thy neighbor as thyself”), standing the “golden rule” on its head as

we are wont to do in our fraught, foggy, mystified interactions. She adroitly probes the interwoven dynamics of “hatred of the other, of the self, of the other in the self, of the self in the other” whose elucidation is the payoff of our best fiction. My brief historical foray here is what Jean-Michel Oughourlian has analyzed as “psycho-politics” (2012), purblind mimetics passing as policy, as if echoing the prophet Jeremiah: “‘Peace, Peace’ they say, when there is no peace” (6.13-14; 8.10b-1).

All this research brings us back full circle to Conrad and the weirdly sacrificial image with which “Outpost” concludes, and in which we are beckoned to ponder our own likeness in the pattern of despoliation and self-destruction. The grotesque caricature of a veritable anti-Christ is Conrad’s enduring icon for the cross purposes of the West’s “civilizing mission.” Regarding this seeming formidable, demonic and alien figure, Girard counters, “To understand this title, we should de-dramatize it, for it expresses something banal and prosaic” (2001, 181). A constant theme throughout Conrad’s fiction is complicity in evil that is contagious; it is not radical, as Arendt, correcting Kant, famously declared about Adolph Eichmann a letter to Gershom Scholem; it works on the visible surface of human interaction: “Good can be radical; evil can never be radical, it can only be extreme, for it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension yet—and this is its horror—it can spread like a fungus over the surface of the earth and lay waste the entire world. Evil comes from a failure to think.” In the fate of our twinned, hapless colonial agents, Conrad confronts us with this appalling banality.

A complementary perspective on the issues discussed herein is afforded by Eric Gans’s *Generative Anthropology*, among whose core tenets are that (1) human interaction is a more fundamental category than being, (2) whence the primary interest of narrative fiction and drama, (3) whereby the best of it needs to be acknowledged as a “discovery procedure,” which must needs unveil the lies, the myths, ideologies, idolatries, and systemic denialism—in sum the cover-ups embedded in cultural practices. This procedure also bears on much historiography. The decolonial anthropology of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* is in this regard an exemplary contribution to what Paul Dumouchel has named the “realist epistemology” (17) afforded by Girard, whose earliest insights were gleaned from realist narrative, beginning with *Don Quixote*, whose ubiquitous theme, disenthralment, *disengaño*, extends to Conrad. The multilayered strategies of narration in *Heart* are self-consciously Conrad’s way to structure his fiction as a discovery procedure that Marlow relates to his hearers as his own sickening experience of colonial imperialism. The tragicomic satire of “An Outpost of Progress” is the forecourt of this fraught exploration.

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