

**“AN AIR OF PLOTTING”:
CONSPIRACY AND IMPERIALISM IN JOSEPH
CONRAD’S “HEART OF DARKNESS”**

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Abstract

This paper will argue that the manager’s conspiracy against Kurtz manifests the same strategy as that employed by real-life colonial explorers in the 1890s. It also argues that Marlow tries to grasp the significance of “imperialism” as a historical process when he tells the story of Kurtz.

This paper will contextualize the conspiracy theme by discussing two historical contexts: the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, and J. A. Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study*. It will show that the manager’s journey marks similar efforts in territorial annexation to those that characterized the Expedition. Secondly, this paper will tackle “imperialism” as a contingent historical process. It will discuss Marlow’s evaluation of Kurtz in the context of the late 1890s when “imperialism” meant different things to different European countries.

Key Words: Joseph Conrad, conspiracy, imperialism

Introduction: “the determining thread”

“Heart of Darkness”¹ is the most widely read and often interpreted work in Conrad’s *oeuvre* but, since Cedric Watts’s seminal “discovery” of the “murder plot,” only one major Conradian critic—Jeremy Hawthorn—has tackled the thematic significance of conspiracy in this novella.² Watts argued in his 1977 study: “if we may describe as a murder plot a scheme to delay a man’s relief, in conditions which virtually ensure that without prompt relief the man will succumb to disease and death, then *Heart of Darkness* is a murder story.”³ In this light, Marlow’s much delayed stay at the Central Station, as a result of the sinking of the steamer and the shortage of rivets, is part of the conspiracy led by the general manager to obstruct Kurtz’s relief. The manager is told by his uncle: “nobody here, you understand, *here*, can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate—you outlast them all” (91). Since Kurtz, “an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company” (75) who “endangers” the manager’s career, is very

¹ Following the Author’s Note in the Dent Collected Edition, I use the double-inverted comma for the title. See Joseph Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories* (1902; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1923). In my quotations where textual variants may affect interpretation, I follow Robert Hampson’s 1995 Penguin edition, which makes corrections according to the 1902 Blackwood edition and Conrad’s page-proofs for the 1921 Heinemann edition. See *Heart of Darkness with The Congo Diary*, ed. by Robert Hampson (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

² See Cedric Watts, *Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”: A Critical and Contextual Discussion* (Milan: Mursia International, 1977), pp. 83-92. Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (1990; London: Edward Arnold, 1992), pp. 171-202.

³ Watts, p. 83.

ill at the isolated Inner Station, the manager’s uncle assures his nephew that the “climate may do away with this difficulty” (89) for him. Watts further explores this “murder plot” by attending to the thematic significance of conspiracy in the context of Social Darwinism. According to Watts, “thematically the murder-plot is central to the evolutionary discussion” in “Heart of Darkness”: Conrad portrays “a predatory battle for survival, in testing environmental conditions, between a manager and Mr. Kurtz.”⁴ Moreover, as Watts demonstrates, an understanding of the manager’s conspiracy helps to illuminate some of the notorious evasions in Marlow’s account of the story. For example, as Marlow recapitulates his discovery of the sunken steamer at the Central Station, he observes: “I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now . . .” (72). The conspiracy theme thus effectively sheds light upon Marlow’s belated understanding of the “air of plotting” (78) at the Central Station. The “real significance” of the sabotaged steamer involves the conspiracy of the general manager and the brickmaker—the “manager’s spy” (77)—to delay the rescue of Kurtz. The delay in the supply of rivets for

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 87. For Watts’s discussion of the evolutionary theme, see Watts, pp. 85-92. Watts’s argument on the “murder plot” in relation to the evolutionary debate is reiterated by Allan Hunter in *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism: The Challenge of Science* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 15-17. Although Hunter briefly mentions the “murder story” in “Heart of Darkness,” the discussion is concerned with the act of killing in the context of the Darwinistic struggle for life, rather than with the significance of conspiracy as such. In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), Ian Watt argues that one of the ideological perspectives of “Heart of Darkness” is the critique of imperial expansion based upon Social Darwinism. See Watt, pp. 155-161.

fixing the steamer further delays Kurtz's relief.

Watts uses the conspiracy theme to engage with the cultural context of Social Darwinism; Jeremy Hawthorn explores the "murder plot" in relation to trade and imperialism. Elaborating Watts's argument, Hawthorn is the only major critic in the 1990s to discuss conspiracy in "Heart of Darkness" in relation to imperialism. Hawthorn draws attention to "the struggle for dominance between opposed groupings among the white men." He asks: "how can we characterize the 'parties' whose struggle for dominance forms a hidden but determining thread in the story unfolded in the novella?"⁵ As Hawthorn points out, the conspiracy against Kurtz at the Central Station represents more than just a struggle for commercial interests. It is also a conspiracy against Kurtz's *idea* of incorporating the imperialist "civilizing mission" into trade. Hawthorn argues that Kurtz is indeed "a prodigy" (79) who blends trade with idealized imperialism. The apprehension that he is part "of the new gang—the gang of virtue" (79)⁶ means that he is seen as a threat to the general manager's career. Hawthorn implicitly situates the conspiracy theme in the context of the new development in British imperialism when emergent ideals at home prompted Britain to exercise abroad a form of "enlightened and paternal despotism."⁷ In this light, it is

⁵ Hawthorn, pp. 174, 176.

⁶ Originally, the brickmaker regarded Marlow as "of the new gang." Yet, as the brickmaker points out, Marlow and Kurtz are both appointed by the "same people" (79). Therefore, Kurtz is also considered part "of the new gang" by the conspiring group at the Central Station.

⁷ Chris Bongie, "Exotic Nostalgia: Conrad and the New Imperialism," in *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, ed. by Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (1991; Durham: Duke

significant that Kurtz is tagged by the brickmaker as “of the new gang” that pursue not only trading profits, but also the “humanizing, improving, instructing” (91) enterprise in the “dark” continent.⁸ As Kurtz poignantly tells Marlow: “I had immense plans” (143).

Watts’s idea of the “murder plot” as elaborated by Hawthorn thus presents the conspiracy against Kurtz not simply in terms of group conflict in relation to commercial rivalry. It is a specific conflict of ideas as to what constitutes the proper “methods” (137) of trade and imperialism. A consideration of conspiracy is then essential to any analysis of the conflict between Kurtz’s “unsound methods” (137) and the manager’s no less “unsound” ways of conducting trade. Thus Marlow’s journey from the Central Station to Kurtz’s district, actively accompanied by the manager and his men, should be read as a highly purposeful, conspiring mission-journey against Kurtz. Marlow’s silent complicity in the manager’s intrigue shows that he is uncertain about the proper “methods” of imperialism until he meets the victimized Kurtz and thereby actually perceives the real result of the manager’s conspiracy. Indeed, Marlow’s journey from the Central Station to the Inner Station can be clearly mapped by this conspiracy that serves as, in Hawthorn’s words, “the determining thread” in his story. The journey begins some months after Marlow has overheard the “black display of confidence” (92) between the manager and his uncle; it ends with the completion of the manager’s conspiracy to “do

University Press, 1995), p. 271.

⁸ For the myth of the “dark continent” in relation to British imperialism, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 173-197.

the affair” (75), namely, to eliminate Kurtz by postponing his relief. Yet, ironically, the mission-journey to fulfil this conspiracy represents for Marlow a process of evaluating Kurtz’s ideas and “methods.” The mission-journey, accordingly, has four distinct developments—all related to conspiracy—superimposed upon it. First of all, for the manager and his gang, the journey is marked by the mission to bring about Kurtz’s death. Hence conspiratorial calculations are directed towards delaying the journey as much as possible. As the manager says, a delayed rescue “ought to do the affair” (75). Second, for Kurtz, the mission represents a slow materialization of the “air of plotting” at the Central Station: but for the manager, “this stupid scoundrel” (143), Kurtz believes that he would be “on the threshold of great things” (143). Third, for Marlow, the upstream journey relocates him from the position of merely overhearing conspiracy to the situation in which he can perceive the cruel outcome of the overheard conspiracy.⁹ Lastly, Marlow’s upriver journey represents for him an evaluative process in relation to the conspiracy to eradicate Kurtz’s influence in the Company. While he initially apprehends Kurtz as “very little more than a voice” (115), Marlow ostentatiously “affirm[s] that Kurtz was a remarkable man” (151) after Kurtz’s victimization. For Marlow, the mission-journey represents both a realization of

⁹ In *Coercion to Speak: Conrad’s Poetics of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), Aaron Fogel briefly mentions conspiracy in relation to Marlow’s “involuntary overhearing” of the conversation between the manager and his uncle. Although Fogel regards this episode as “conspiratorial colonial drama,” he primarily focuses on the act of overhearing rather than on conspiracy itself. See Fogel, pp. 56-61.

conspiracy and a process by which he is able to evaluate its victim.

I will argue that two historical contexts help in this reading of conspiracy as “the determining thread”: first, the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition of 1887-1889 and second, J. A. Hobson’s critique of imperial expansionism in *Imperialism: A Study*.¹⁰ In early November 1889, Conrad travelled to Brussels for an interview with Albert Thys, the deputy director of the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*, who later appointed Conrad to a command in the Congo in April 1890.¹¹ In late November, after Conrad’s interview in Brussels, news of the completion of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, led by Henry M. Stanley, reached King Leopold. On 23 November 1889, Leopold, the proponent of the Expedition for the Belgian interests in the Congo, cabled congratulations from Brussels to Stanley in Zanzibar.¹² During Conrad’s six-month stay in the Congo from June to December 1890, news of the Expedition spread widely, and Stanley arrived back in Europe in May to

¹⁰ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, 3rd ed. (1902; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), hereafter as *IM*.

¹¹ See Conrad’s letters to Albert Thys on November the 4th and 28th, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Vol. I, 1861-1897*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 25-28. Also see Zdzislaw Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 117-142.

¹² See Henry M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa or the Quest Rescue and Retreat of Emin, Governor of Equatoria, Vol. II* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1890), p. 433. Appendix A, “Congratulations by Cable Received at Zanzibar,” shows that between late November and early December 1889, news of Stanley’s success had reached both sides of the Atlantic, including journalists from the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Herald*. See Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, Vol. II, pp. 433-441.

find himself engulfed by much public attention. He was given an award by the Royal Geographical Society, and his lecture at the Albert Hall was attended by a huge audience. In June, the month when Conrad embarked for his own Congo journey, Stanley published *In Darkest Africa*, his account of the Expedition, that sold 150,000 copies in England alone.¹³ As Norman Sherry argues, the publicity surrounding Stanley's Expedition was too great for Conrad not to see "his own situation against the background of recent events."¹⁴ Critics have often drawn attention to Stanley's sensational "relief" of Emin Pasha, the governor of Equatoria who was besieged by the Mahdist forces, as a possible historical model for Marlow's journey to rescue Kurtz. Comparing Stanley's Expedition with Marlow's journey, Robert Hampson finds that *In Darkest Africa* shares with "Heart of Darkness" two significant motifs: "the urgent need to reach someone up-river and delays occasioned by the need to repair a steamer."¹⁵ Ian Watt argued that Emin Pasha and Major Edmund M. Barttelot, the commander of

¹³ Iain R. Smith, *The Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, 1886-1890* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 294-295. I rely upon Smith for the figures. On the title page of his autobiography, edited by his wife, the list of the dozen of honours and titles he received gives the reader an impressive picture of Stanley's international fame. His titles include: honorary doctorates at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Halle; Gold Medallist of the Paris, Italy, Sweden and Antwerp Geographical Societies; Grand Cordon of the Order of the Congo; Grand Commander of the Order of Leopold; Star of Zanzibar. See *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley*, ed. by Dorothy Stanley (1909; New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

¹⁴ Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 14.

¹⁵ See Hampson's Introduction to the Penguin edition, p. xxi.

Stanley’s rear column, may both be possible sources for Kurtz.¹⁶ As Watt notes, both Kurtz and Emin refuse to be “relieved” from their districts. The more controversial “rearguard theory” draws on the similarity between Barttelot’s alleged “madness” and Kurtz’s. Recently, L. J. Pearson has argued that Herbert Ward, another officer in the rear column, “records experiences and impressions the most suggestive of Marlow’s.”¹⁷

In reading “Heart of Darkness” in relation to the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, I seek to broaden the focus of the painstaking search for historical sources that largely aims to find models for a single fictional character. Although there are at least five possible models for Kurtz,¹⁸ the search for historical sources primarily concerns itself with those traits of historical personages that would suggest a single fictional character. Consequently, such efforts effectively marginalize the issue of conspiracy among the main characters in Marlow’s story. The straightforward coupling of Stanley/Marlow and Emin/Kurtz, for example, obscures the engagement between Kurtz’s “new

¹⁶ Watt, p. 143.

¹⁷ For the “rearguard theory,” see Jerry Allen, *The Sea Years of Joseph Conrad* (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 275-281. Roger Jones objects to Allen’s theory in a brief appendix to *The Rescue of Emin Pasha: The Story of Henry M. Stanley and the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, 1887-1889* (London: Allison and Busby, 1972), pp. 442-447. For a recent discussion, see L. J. Pearson, “Kurtz, Jim, Lakamba and the Rearguard of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition,” *The Conradian* 20:1-2 (1995): pp. 19-30.

¹⁸ Apart from Emin Pasha and Barttelot, Watt lists Charles Henry Stokes, a British missionary, and Georges Antoine Klein, an agent who dies on board the *Roi des Belges*. See Watt, pp. 141-144; also, Najder, p. 136. Citing much biographical material, Sherry proposes Arthur Eugene Constant Hodister as the most likely source for Kurtz. See Sherry, pp. 72-78; 92-118.

gang” and the conspiring band of the manager so essential to the events in “Heart of Darkness.” What is often at stake is “the determining thread” of conspiracy implicated in Marlow’s narrative. My purpose is not to refute any particular models convincingly proposed by previous critics. Rather, I would like to tackle “Heart of Darkness” from a different angle: instead of proposing another historical “source” for Kurtz or Marlow, I would wish to argue that the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition helps to contextualize the conspiracy theme of “Heart of Darkness” in a historical period in which conspiracy significantly characterized the strategy of imperialism.¹⁹ While previous suggestions of “sources” shed light upon biographical material in relation to Conrad’s writing of the novella, the conspiratorial interaction among main characters has not been sufficiently considered. In so far as the tension between Kurtz’s “new gang” and the manager’s “pilgrims” (94) is concerned, it is apparent that the search for historical sources inevitably fails to account for the role of the conspiring manager that is largely responsible for Marlow’s experience and greatly affects his subsequent evaluation of Kurtz.

Section One, focusing upon the tension between the manager and Kurtz, explores the conspiracy theme in relation to the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. The sending of the Expedition was itself the result of some conspiracies designed to annex Emin’s resourceful Equatorial provinces. Fore-grounding the manager’s conspiracy that underlies the relief journey, I will also argue that his journey to Kurtz’s Inner

¹⁹ The issue of the historical meanings of “imperialism,” “imperialist,” and “imperial expansionism” will be addressed in Section Two.

Station marks efforts of territorial survey and annexation similar to those that characterized the strategy of imperial expansionism exemplified by Stanley’s Expedition. I will therefore argue that Marlow’s up-river journey to relieve Kurtz is subject to the manager’s double-plot. Not only does the manager seek to delay the relief journey in order to bring about Kurtz’s death, but he also requires the journey itself to gain Kurtz’s “knowledge of unexplored regions” (153) in order to annex the inner district.²⁰

The second historical context in which I will tackle conspiracy and imperialism is J. A. Hobson’s critique of British high imperialism in *Imperialism: A Study*, published in 1902, the year when the Boer War ended with the British annexation of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Appearing in book form the same year, “Heart of Darkness” shows similar concerns about the moral issues of imperial expansionism as those treated by Hobson. What Hobson sarcastically called the “phrase-mongering imperialism” of the late 1890s is precisely the kind of imperialism witnessed by Marlow. Section Two, accordingly, tackles Marlow’s evaluation of “unsound methods” in the context of the late 1890s when the term “imperialism” acquired multiple meanings owing to intense European competition for territorial aggrandisement. I believe that it is crucial to acknowledge the contingency of the term “imperialism,” since, when Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness,” the “imperialism” he had in mind meant something different from the “imperialism” he experienced during his 1890 trip. During the Boer War, there were some British liberals and

²⁰ This second motive has not been sufficiently noted by earlier critics.

radicals that tried to counteract what Hobson called the “insane” imperialism. If Hobson distinguished a “sane” imperialism from an “insane” one, Marlow’s evaluation of Kurtz suggests a similar differentiation among different kinds of “methods” in order to imagine a “sound” conduct of the imperial enterprise. Finally, I will argue that the conspiracy theme of “Heart of Darkness” can best be understood if it is approached through Hobson’s idea of the conspiracy of white businessmen and capitalists. Like Hobson, Marlow also portrays the colonial business in the Company as being controlled by the conspiracy of a small group of traders following a private agenda.

I. “An Air of Plotting”

As Marlow learns from the manager during their first meeting: “The up-river stations had to be relieved. There had been so many delays already that he [the manager] did not know who was dead and who was alive. . . . There were rumours that a very important station was in jeopardy, and its chief, Mr. Kurtz, was ill” (74-75). Prior to this interview at the Central Station, Marlow had discovered that the steamer for “relieving” Kurtz had been sunk by the manager and “some volunteer skipper” (73), apparently in a hasty attempt to set out upon the relief journey. When Marlow meets the manager, he perceptively finds “something stealthy” in the manager “indefinable, faint expression” (73). Telling the story in hindsight on board the *Nellie*, Marlow eventually “see[s] the real significance” (72) of the sunken steamer: namely, the conspiracy at the Central Station against Kurtz. Yet Marlow’s

audience on board the *Nellie*, like the former Marlow, may find the manager’s behaviour “absolutely inscrutable” (73) in the early part of the story. If it was indeed, as the manager professed, so urgent to relieve Kurtz, why didn’t he overcome the “unfortunate accident[s]” (77) that impeded the relief journey? It required rivets to repair the steamer, but the supply of rivets inexplicably did not arrive for months. Marlow discovers later that the brickmaker in charge of supplies is “the manager’s spy” (77), and that he writes his requisition for supplies “from dictation” (84). Marlow’s demand for rivets is obviously denied priority. Apart from these impediments, the “air of plotting” materializes again in the mysterious fire in the supply hut. During the fire, Marlow notes that one of the Station’s staff members shows, oddly, no hurry to put out the fire: there is “a hole in the bottom of his pail” (76). Moreover, Marlow overhears the manager telling the brickmaker nearby to “take advantage of this unfortunate accident” (77), that is, to further delay the relief journey. It is significant that Marlow encounters the brickmaker during the incident. Although Marlow does not immediately present the fire as part of the brickmaker’s plot, he records enough circumstantial evidence to suggest the existence of such a plot. In the brickmaker’s room, Marlow is surprised to find that he has “a whole candle all to himself.” As Marlow notes, the manager should be the only person “to have any right to candles” (77). Suggesting the same stealthiness as the manager, the brickmaker strikes “a match” (77) before Marlow while the supply hut is being destroyed by fire not far away. The fact that Marlow closely associates the fire episode with his discovery of the brickmaker’s candle suggests that the brickmaker may be a suspect in the fire

plot.²¹

As a result of these suspicious “accidents,” Marlow gradually apprehends the manager’s conspiracy to aggravate Kurtz’s illness by exposing him to the unfavourable tropical climate.²² Marlow overhears the words of the manager’s uncle:

. . . I say, trust to this. I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river, seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. (92)

Later, during the relief journey, the manager continues to stick to this plot to take Kurtz’s life. One evening, after a slow journey and difficult navigation, the steamer reaches a point eight miles from Kurtz’s Inner Station. “[U]nreasonably” (101), the manager insists on staying for the night. Marlow is “annoyed beyond expression at the delay” (101). During the return journey, however, the manager’s plot is much clearer to Marlow. When the steamer breaks down again with the dying Kurtz aboard, Marlow feels no surprise, nor is he “annoyed” anymore—this delay happens as he “had expected” (148).

²¹ In this context, the beaten black worker is the scapegoat for the fire plot. The flogging of black labourers was a very common event during Stanley’s Expedition. See Smith, p. 114. What Marlow witnesses is actually the performance of the white officers’ authority, rather than any “justice.”

²² As Stanley notes, the African climate is notoriously “murderous.” In one of his books on African exploration, Stanley even devotes two whole chapters to how to cope with the climate. See Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration*, Vol. II (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1885), pp. 280-338.

Owing to series of delays, Kurtz eventually dies on board the steamer as the manager has plotted. Marlow finally sees the outcome of the “black display of confidence” (92) of the manager’s uncle, who had told his nephew to “trust” the deadly tropical climate to “kill” Kurtz.

Previous arguments about the manager’s conspiracy follow the above outline, as Watts and Hawthorn have shown. However, this outline still leaves one fundamental issue concerning the manager’s “murder plot” to be addressed. If the manager really seeks to jeopardize the relief journey, one might ask why he allows the steamer to be fixed at all. A more fundamental question, however, is: why does he join the journey himself with the “pilgrims” (94)? Why does the manager bother to travel all the way to visit Kurtz’s district rather than sending the brickmaker, his “papier-maché Mephistopheles” (81)? Obviously, the manager is subject to the supervision of the powerful “administration” (89) in Europe. As the uncle says: “the danger is in Europe” (91). Thus, although the manager does not “like to be dictated to” (89), he has to follow instructions from the “administration” and send Kurtz to the Inner Station as the chief. Marlow, as the brickmaker notes, is assigned his job by “the same people” (79) who back Kurtz. It seems, therefore, that the manager has no alternative but to facilitate the relief journey. Nevertheless, in the remote area of the Inner Station, the manager has much more space for manoeuvre if he really seeks to impede the relief mission completely. For example, he and his uncle have plans to hang Kurtz’s Russian agent. As his uncle says: “Anything—anything can be done in this country” (91).

In fact, the manager’s participation in the relief journey is

as conspiratorial as his plot to delay the journey has been. The relief journey embodies another conspiracy by the manager and his band to regain administrative power over the territories of the ivory trade. Moreover, the relief journey provides the manager with a perfect pretext not only personally to ensure Kurtz's death, but also to survey Kurtz's district so as to eliminate any legacy of his "immense plans." It is precisely in this context that the manager's participation in the relief journey suggests similar conspiracy motifs to those in Stanley's Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. Reading the relief journey as conspiracy helps to foreground the historical dimension of the manager's conspiracy. In "Heart of Darkness," the "murder plot" against Kurtz seeks more than his death. Like Stanley's project to "open up" the Congo route to reach Emin's Equatoria for political and commercial interests, the relief journey enables the manager to "open up" a personal channel to the inner posts in order to secure his career. The "real significance" of the relief journey as territorial surveillance, therefore, puts the manager firmly in line with the real-life imperial explorers of the 1890s.

* * *

Marlow first learns about Kurtz's situation through Kurtz's Russian devotee, and it was also a Russian who first brought Europe news about Emin Pasha. On 16 August 1886, Wilhelm Junker, the German-Russian explorer entrusted with Emin's correspondence for Britain and Germany, wrote to his friend in Cairo:

Escaped at last from the clutches of Mwanga at
Uganda. . . .

Must we believe that nothing will ever be done for

these unhappy Equatorial Provinces?

Write, write on, dear friend! Send forth words of thunder that will open the eyes of all the world! I am most urgent that all that is possible may be done. It is absolutely necessary that Emin Pasha should receive help without delay. . . . It is with this hope alone that I essay to return to Europe.²³

On 23 September, Frederick Holmwood, the Acting British Consul-General at Zanzibar, cabled the news brought by Junker to Lord Iddesleigh, the Foreign Secretary, in London: “Emin at Wadelai holds province, but urgently needs ammunition and stores.”²⁴ Meanwhile, on receiving Junker’s news, Schweinfurth sent his own appeal, together with Junker’s letter, to the *Könische Zeitung*, which published it on 17 November 1886.²⁵ A few days later, on 21 November, a French version was published in *Le Mouvement géographique* in Brussels.²⁶ As Iain Smith notes, Junker as Emin’s messenger provided “the first authentic news of the province since 1884.”²⁷ In England, Emin’s predicament greatly appealed to the general public who regarded him as “a second Gordon” besieged. In December 1886, news about Emin was given much publicity in leading newspapers throughout Britain.²⁸

²³ Quoted in Smith, p. 40. This English version of the letter to George Schweinfurth, a German explorer, was published, as Smith notes, in *The Times* on 27 November 1886.

²⁴ Quoted in Smith, p. 41.

²⁵ Georg Schweitzer, *Emin Pasha: His Life and Work* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co, 1898), Vol. I, pp. 258-260.

²⁶ Smith, p. 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See articles in *The Times* and *The Scotsman* as quoted in Smith, p. 45.

On 10 December 1886—exactly a month after the newly-naturalized Conrad had passed his master’s certificate, *The Times* published a letter from Emin Pasha, written on 7 June 1886, to his friend R. W. Felkin. Emin wrote: “From my last you will have gathered that I am determined to persevere here. . . . I have still a glimmer of hope that, as Egypt cannot help us, England, true to her traditions of humanity and civilization, will come to our assistance.” *The Times* added the following announcement:

Lord Iddesleigh has informed the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society that a private expedition, under the leadership of Mr. Stanley, the African explorer, is being organised to relieve Emin Bey, who meantime has been raised by the Khedive to the rank of Pasha. The Egyptian Government will bear a share of the expense of the expedition.²⁹

As Georg Schweitzer argues, it is important to note that the British project to “rescue” Emin Pasha—which was contrary to his own determination to use assistance from outside in order to stay—was actually intended to gain political and economic advantages from Emin’s predicament: “English people were full of the idea that Emin had necessarily to be rescued, or to speak more correctly, they desired to rescue him in order to acquire some right to the land he had governed until then.”³⁰ Among the natural resources of Equatoria, the abundant ivory attracted many desiring eyes. Emin himself was well aware of the value of his provinces in relation to the ivory trade. He writes:

²⁹ Quoted in Schweitzer, Vol. I, pp. 260-261.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

It is a well-known fact that ivory forms the principal factor in the Soudanese budget. Ivory from the mountainous and dry regions east of the Nile is known to be the hardest, and is, therefore, more in request, and fetches higher prices than other ivory. . . .

. . . here is no private elephant-hunting, and, as Arabian and European sportsmen were never courageous enough to venture into the Equatorial regions, the whole production of ivory was confined to whatever the negroes could procure in hunting with spears and guns.

On this account elephants are exceedingly numerous throughout the whole of the Equatorial Province proper, having in some places actually become a pest. . . .³¹

Emin estimated that the Equatorial provinces “put about 12,000 cwts. of ivory per annum on the market, at an average value of £30,000 sterling.”³² At Emin’s camp at Wadelai, A. J. Mounteney-Jephson, one of Stanley’s officers, witnessed Emin’s famous store of ivory. Jephson recalls his visit to the store room:

. . . here were vast quantities, all arranged in different heaps, according to the size of the tusks. There was one tusk shown me which weighed 140 lbs., and was the largest tusk I have ever seen in Africa. Emin told me there were large stores of ivory also in Dufilé, and he had somewhere about 1000 tusks in Monbuttu. . . . The value of the ivory in government store-houses, he said, was 75,000 *l.* . . . At the coast, it would make the real value of the ivory in the

³¹ Quoted in Schweitzer, Vol. I, p. 81. Emin gives a detailed account of Equatoria’s natural resources, see pp. 81-89.

³² Quoted in Schweitzer, Vol. I, p. 81.

Province 112,250 *l.*³³

Owing to Emin's much-talked-about ivory stock, William Mackinnon—who founded the Emin Pasha Relief Committee with Stanley and their circles of friends—proposed that “a just proportion” of Emin's ivory should alleviate the costs of the Expedition.³⁴

However, like Kurtz's ivory, Emin's ivory stock was only the means to a much bolder end. Similar to the manager's journey to the inner district, the primary aim of Stanley's Expedition was not, in the end, ivory. Rather, it was the implicated geographic, political, and economic knowledges associated with the territorial survey. As Smith points out, for Mackinnon, the primary figure in Britain promoting the Relief Expedition, if Stanley conducted the Expedition via the eastern route from the African coast, it would greatly promote British influence in East Africa against Germany.³⁵ Moreover, as Smith argues, the isolated Equatoria made it “the most annexable” province in the region, since “[t]hrough Emin in Equatoria the whole Lake region might be controlled and its resources exploited.”³⁶ At the time of organizing the Expedition, Stanley was still in the service of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II of the Belgians—another keen proponent of the Expedition. For Leopold, a common friend of Mackinnon and Stanley, if Stanley conducted the Expedition

³³ A. J. Mounteney-Jephson, *Emin Pasha and the Rebellion at the Equator* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1890), p. 76.

³⁴ See Smith, p. 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

through the untrodden Congo route from the western coast, Leopold could fulfil his own personal desire “to open up a route of communication between his Congo State and the Nile.”³⁷ As Thomas Pakenham notes, “[o]f course the project was for much more than the relief of Emin.”³⁸ In order to serve both Mackinnon’s project and Leopold’s Congo dream, Stanley chose to “relieve” Emin from the Congo route and to retreat through the eastern route to Zanzibar. For Stanley, moreover, such an arrangement not only created the prospect of geographical “discovery” to enhance his reputation, it also enabled him to complete his unfinished project (left over from 1879-1884) to “open up” the heart of Africa through the Congo.³⁹

* * *

In reading “Heart of Darkness” in relation to the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, I do not seek to evaluate Marlow’s journey *as if* it corresponds to Stanley’s Expedition at each stage of its development. Although Stanley finally managed to “rescue” Emin after prolonged delay—and after recourse to “unspeakable” measures such as forced labour and raiding local villages for food, the Relief Expedition, unlike the manager’s up-river journey, turned out to be a total fiasco for Stanley as a result of his misjudgements.⁴⁰ Stanley’s own predicament was

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Jones makes the same argument, see Jones, pp. 80-81.

³⁸ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 313. Like Smith and Jones, Pakenham also suggests that there were various “plots”—such as Mackinnon’s desire to expand British East Africa and Leopold’s greed for his Belgian Congo—that contributed to the sending of the Expedition. See Pakenham, pp. 310-335.

³⁹ See Smith, pp. 69-70. Also see Schweitzer, Vol. I, pp. 266-267.

⁴⁰ From Chapter VI, Smith gives a detailed account of the accumulating

such that when his party first met Emin, it was they who were in desperate need of “rescue” rather than the other way round. Unlike Kurtz, Emin showed no trace of “ill-health or anxiety”; rather, as Stanley saw it, Emin appeared to be in “good condition of body and peace of mind.”⁴¹ Moreover, costing twice as much as expected, the Expedition also took Stanley twice the estimated amount of time and produced extremely high casualties—only one-third of the people came back alive.⁴² Furthermore, not only did Stanley fail to retrieve any significant amount of ivory—only 42 tusks,⁴³ but neither Mackinnon’s colonial scheme nor Leopold’s Congo dream to annex Equatoria were achieved by Stanley’s Expedition. Instead, as Pakenham notes, what Stanley had achieved, ironically, was the handing over of Emin and Equatoria to Germany: in March 1890, Emin joined the German service and eagerly planned to return to Equatoria under the German flag.⁴⁴

Despite these differences between Stanley’s Expedition and the manager’s up-river journey, I would like to emphasize the fundamental motivation shared by both. That is, both journeys are motivated by similar intrigues that make the “relief” mission, as the title of Stanley’s book shows, a “*quest* rescue.” Like Stanley’s Expedition, the mission to relieve Kurtz is neither “enigmatic” nor “metaphysical” in its aims.⁴⁵ The manager’s

mishaps during the Expedition. For a much briefer account, see Pakenham, pp. 322-335.

⁴¹ Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, Vol. I, p. 374. Also see Jephson, pp. 16-17.

⁴² By Stanley’s estimate, out of 703 people, only 246 survived the expedition. See Smith, p. 293.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁴ Schweitzer, Vol II, pp. 1-25. Also see Pakenham, pp. 333-335.

⁴⁵ Numerous critics since Albert Guerard have privileged the “metaphysical”

journey from the Central Station to the Inner Station represents his conspiratorial arrangement with his “pilgrims” to reclaim his monopoly of the ivory trade. His up-river journey also embodies a secular “quest” in the form of a territorial survey designed to expand his power across the districts; that is, it is designed to “open up” the route to the inner region previously unexplored by any member of the Company except by Kurtz. Both Stanley’s and the manager’s journeys are motivated by the same desire for territorial advantages, and the tension of conspiracy in “Heart of Darkness” can best be understood if the novella is read not only in relation to Stanley’s Expedition, but also *against* what Stanley and his “interest group” had failed to achieve. The manager’s effective conspiracy, in turn, can serve as a model of conspiracy that illuminates the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition—had one of the original plots of Stanley, Mackinnon, or Leopold succeeded. The manager’s up-river journey to “relieve” Kurtz, therefore, represents a conspiracy at the Central Station to “annex” Kurtz’s district: it can be understood as an “ideal” demonstration of the way to annex “the most annexable” district in the inner area.

Thus, understood as a conspiracy, the manager’s participation in the relief journey is characterized by his careful control of two seemingly antithetical urges. For him and his band, as previous critics have noted, Kurtz’s illness creates a perfect opportunity: they are able to conspire to eliminate Kurtz indirectly by delaying the relief journey. But the manager’s

overtone of Marlow’s journey while remaining silent about the fact that the journey is secular and conspiracy-oriented. For a recent study of the metaphysical aspect, see Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 99-101.

conspiracy actually represents a double-plot: the relief journey also provides him with an opportunity to re-organize the inner trading posts and take them into his control. This ambition cannot be fully realized without, in an official's words, "Kurtz's knowledge of unexplored regions" (153). Therefore, the manager is eager to delay Kurtz's relief, but he is also eager to reach him in time before he dies with his secret knowledge. This aspect of the manager's double-plot is the most neglected part of the conspiracy in "Heart of Darkness." The manager seeks *more than* Kurtz's death: he also strives to acquire Kurtz's "knowledge" in order to enhance his own prospects in the Company.

The manager's double-plot can be illuminated by Marlow's observation during the relief journey. From the early stage, the up-river trip encounters many navigational difficulties that make the steamer travel sluggishly. As Marlow says, "we crawled" (100). The manager, oddly showing no anxiety, "display[s] a beautiful resignation" (100) in the face of the perturbing delays. In order to carry out his "murder plot," the manager even orders the steamer to stop short at a spot not far from Kurtz's station. Nevertheless, although Marlow views this delay as unreasonable, the manager's decision is far from "unreasonably" (101) made. As the manager says: "I would be desolated if anything should happen to Mr. Kurtz before we came up" (106). The manager, carefully balancing his opposing urges, keeps a close eye on the steamer's progress to ensure that the delays will be sufficient for Kurtz's death but will not jeopardize his opportunity meet Kurtz personally and thus acquire Kurtz's secret knowledge. At this point, the steamer is caught up in a dangerous fog, and no one aboard has any knowledge of the

inhabitants in ambush on shore. In contrast to his earlier “resignation,” the manager now resolutely urges Marlow to move on in the thick fog. He tells Marlow: “I authorize you to take all the risks” (106). Although Marlow, as the captain, does not follow the manager’s words, this episode shows clearly that the manager is actively supervising the progress of the steamer. Recalling the ambush, Marlow says: “I am not prepared to affirm the fellow [Kurtz] was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him” (119). However, for the manager, Kurtz’s secret knowledge of the ivory country is doubtless worth the life lost during the journey. Now, to ensure his own safety after the ambush, the manager hastens the progress of the steamer. Marlow observes: “The manager stood by the wheel murmuring confidentially about the necessity of getting well away down the river before dark at all events” (121).

Having accomplished the desired delays—sometimes unexpectedly owing to snags or ambush—the manager now turns his attention to “getting to” Kurtz in time to gather information. It is no surprise then that, as soon as the steamer lands at the Inner Station, “the manager, escorted by the pilgrims, all of them armed to the teeth” (122-123), loses no time in finding Kurtz—instead of getting provisions. While the ill Kurtz is being carried aboard the steamer, the manager is seen to bend over Kurtz “murmuring” (134). Then the manager, interrupting Marlow and Kurtz, shuts “the curtain” (135) of the cabin to talk to Kurtz. Like Marlow, the reader will never know exactly what the manager urgently tries to find out from Kurtz. Yet again, as in the episode of the fire plot, Marlow records circumstantial evidence to suggest that it is Kurtz’s deep “knowledge of unexplored regions” that the manager desires

from Kurtz's own lips. As Marlow overhears, at the heart of the desired "knowledge" is information about ivory:

At this moment I heard Kurtz's deep voice behind the curtain: "Save me!—save the ivory, you mean. Don't tell me. Save *me*. . . ."

The manager came out . . . he considered it necessary to sigh, but neglected to be consistently sorrowful. "We have done all we could for him—haven't we? . . . the district is closed to us for a time. Deplorable! Upon the whole, the trade will suffer. I don't deny there is a remarkable quantity of ivory—mostly fossil. We must save it, at all events. . . ." (137)

Marlow's observation suggests that the manager is not totally successful in his attempt to gather complete "knowledge of unexplored regions" from Kurtz. At most, the manager succeeds in locating all the ivory stock he can get hold of: "Heaps of it, stacks of it" (115). After the manager and his band have successfully retrieved the ivory, Kurtz's life becomes of less worth to them. As a consequence, they keep "guard over the ivory" (140) instead of nursing the dying Kurtz. The manager looks "very placid" (147) during the return trip. As Marlow observes: "he had no vital anxieties now, he took us both [Marlow and Kurtz] in with a comprehensive and satisfied glance: the 'affair' had come off as well as could be wished" (147). Although the manager fails to gather complete knowledge from Kurtz, he continues to inquire into Kurtz's numerous papers and correspondences. As Kurtz tells Marlow: "This noxious fool [meaning the manager] is capable of prying into my boxes when I am not looking" (148).

* * *

I have argued that Stanley’s Emin Pasha Relief Expedition helps to contextualize the manager’s double-plot by drawing attention to a historical period when conspiracy was a significant part of imperial expansion. This contextualization is also indispensable for tackling issues of imperialism in “Heart of Darkness,” since Marlow’s evaluation of Kurtz’s “methods” derives from a specific historical moment in the evolution of British imperialism in the late 1890s—an evolution that Conrad would have witnessed. The key argument in the next section is that the “imperialism” encountered by Conrad during his 1890 trip to the Congo was not the same “imperialism” as he experienced during the writing of “Heart of Darkness” in turn-of-the-century Britain. Likewise, when Marlow tells his story on board the *Nellie*, the kind of “imperial” exploitation he experienced previously is to be evaluated by the present Marlow’s new historical awareness of Britain’s role in “imperial” competition on an international scale.

Before I tackle the multiple meanings of “imperialism” during the 1890s in Section Two, I would like to draw attention to the affinity between Marlow’s recapitulation of “imperialism” and Conrad’s. Conrad took the Congo trip in 1890 and wrote “Heart of Darkness” nearly a decade later; Marlow similarly narrates a story about a journey undertaken some time before. In both cases, the interval of time provides them with hindsight to narrate their past experiences. As I will demonstrate, because of the sudden development in Britain of a different “imperial sentiment” after 1895, it is essential to grasp the fact of the belated apprehension of a previous experience’s significance—shared by Conrad and Marlow—in order to

evaluate their evaluations. I believe that it is vital to read “imperialism” in “Heart of Darkness” as a contingent historical phenomenon that was taking a different shape in the late 1890s, and taking shape at an unprecedented pace owing to the European “scramble for Africa.”⁴⁶ As Stanley’s Expedition anticipated, the 1890s was a period when it was virtually impossible to single out *an* “Imperialism” amid the fierce, divergent, international struggles in Europe for African colonial interests.

I would argue that without acknowledging “imperialism” as a fragmented historical phenomenon, modern discussion of “Heart of Darkness” runs the risk of totalizing “imperialism” and ends up silencing the sense of competing “imperialisms” that Marlow precisely conveys to his audience. There was no monolithic “Imperialism” lying there for Marlow to experience. Not only was it fragmented by intense competition among European countries, but Marlow’s evaluation of “imperialism” is also as contingent as “imperialism” itself in late-1890s Britain. Accordingly, Marlow’s narrative of an earlier imperialist experience plays down some undesirable traits of “imperialism” for his small English audience on the *Nellie*. An acknowledgement of the changing, fragmented nature of “imperialism”, and of the equally contingent interpretation of it, helps to tackle the manager’s ambiguous statement that is the key to the understanding of imperialism and conspiracy in “Heart of Darkness”: I am referring here to the manager’s false idea of the inopportuneness of Kurtz’s “methods.”

⁴⁶ Pakenham traces the term “the scramble for Africa” to the year 1884. See Pakenham, p. xix.

II. “Unsound Methods”

As a member “of the new gang,” Kurtz believes that “[e]ach station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (91). Marlow says:

He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things. “You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability,” he would say. “Of course you must take care of the motives—right motives—always.” (148)

Desiring endorsement from “kings,” Kurtz is not alone in his thoughtful emphasis on the “right motives” in the pursuit of a “profitable,” civilizing enterprise. The explorations of the Congo region conducted by Henry Morton Stanley (1879-1882 and 1882-1884) contributed to the making of the Congo Free State under King Leopold II of Belgium. Initially, Leopold’s political ambition was disguised by his philanthropic pretense. He proclaimed at the Brussels Geographical Conference in September 1876: “To open to civilization the only part of our globe where it has yet to penetrate, to pierce the darkness which envelops whole populations, it is, I dare to say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress.”⁴⁷ In order to “open up” Africa, Leopold “t[ook] care of the motives” at least to the extent of promoting the idea that exploring Africa was a noble “civilizing” mission and a project against slavery. Not only was

⁴⁷ Quoted in Pakenham, p. 21.

this project philanthropic, according to Leopold, it was also a “scientific” mission to survey the unknown continent for geographic knowledge. One explorer particularly engendered Leopold’s interest in Africa: Henry Morton Stanley, the well-known explorer who “found” David Livingstone in 1871.

Unlike Kurtz, who did not have the luck to meet “kings” after his explorations, Stanley was warmly admitted to the service of Leopold after his Congo exploration (1874-1878) by which he intended to “complete Livingstone’s mission to ‘open up Africa to Christianity.’”⁴⁸ Since Stanley’s unique knowledge of Africa was indispensable to Leopold’s political scheme to acquire colonial interests in “this magnificent African cake,”⁴⁹ the king sent “two Commissioners” to meet Stanley as soon as the explorer “descended from the express” at Marseilles railway station on 13 January 1878. Stanley recalled: “I was made aware that King Léopold intended to undertake to do something substantial for Africa, and that I was expected to assist him.”⁵⁰ Afterwards, under Leopold’s keen sponsorship, in the name of the *Association Internationale Africaine* (AIA), established in 1876, and the new *Comité d’Etudes du Haut-Congo* (CEHC), founded in 1878, Stanley completed two subsequent explorations that created the foundation for

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ H. L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880-1914*, original Dutch version pub. in 1991, trans. by Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Praeger, 1996), p. 89.

⁵⁰ Stanley, *The Congo*, Vol. I, p. 21. Also see Wesseling, p. 89. These “two Commissioners” are Baron Greindl and General Sandford, “a former American Minister at Brussels and a member of the Executive Committee of the A.I.A.” See *H. M. Stanley: Unpublished Letters*, ed. by Albert Maurice (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1955), p. 11.

Leopold’s Congo “state.” During his second expedition (1882-1884), Stanley managed to make about 300 unequal treaties with various tribes to transfer their sovereignty to the *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC), founded in 1882. As H. L. Wesseling argues, under “the halo of philanthropic altruism and disinterested research,” the establishment of the AIC marks an important stage in Leopold’s political ambition in “advancing from the idea of running a business to one of running a state.”⁵¹ Leopold’s Congo Free State was eventually recognized by European countries during the Berlin Conference (November 1884-February 1885) that settled the political boundary of each participant country’s colonial interests around the Congo region. As Sidney Low, writing about the significance of Stanley’s explorations, pointed out in 1904, it was Stanley that “initiated . . . the ‘scramble for Africa’ in which Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal have taken part.”⁵² With Stanley’s participation, as Low noted, “the Congo was policed, surveyed, placed under control” in five years.⁵³ A French politician had predicted in 1878 that Stanley’s project to “open up” the “Dark Continent,” while encouraging “scientific and philanthropic enterprise,” would ultimately “have a material effect on the progress of the world.”⁵⁴ It is the “white” half of the world that mostly

⁵¹ Wesseling, pp. 98, 119. In sketching the history of Congo Free State, I rely upon Wesseling and Scott B. Cook. See Cook, *Colonial Encounters in the Age of High Imperialism* (New York: HarperCollins [sic], 1996), pp. 33-64; Wesseling, pp. 73-103.

⁵² Quoted in Stanley, *Autobiography*, p. 395.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁵⁴ Stanley, *The Congo*, Vol. I, p. vi.

benefits from the “material effect” of European colonial control in Africa. Yet the real political implication of Stanley’s “geographical” exploration was largely unseen by his contemporary audience who regarded him as a “civiliser” and “messenger of good tidings.”⁵⁵

When Conrad journeyed to the Congo in 1890, what he would have witnessed was the intensifying colonial conquest of West and Central Africa by European nations that had been in progress for two decades.⁵⁶ Moreover, what he would have seen was that the philanthropic pretense of the European “civilizing” mission was gradually giving way to an active political intervention into African indigenous sovereignty through military operations designed to establish protectorates. For example, when Marlow witnesses a French man-of-war bombarding the people of the western coast, it is a fiction that is true to life. Marlow observes: “It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts” (61). Conrad recalls in a letter to a Polish historian: “If I say that the ship which bombarded the coast was French, it is quite simply because *it was* a French ship. I recall its name—the *Seignelay*. It was during the war (!) with Dahomey.”⁵⁷ During March to October 1890, the warfare between France and Dahomey—the small but defiant kingdom ruled by Behanzin—caused heavy

⁵⁵ Stanley, *Autobiography*, pp. 343, 405.

⁵⁶ The chief European powers in these areas were Portugal, France, Belgium, Germany; whereas Britain was acting in the Niger area.

⁵⁷ Conrad to Kazimierz Waliszewski, 16 December 1903, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 3, ed. by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 94. The letter was originally in French.

casualties on both sides. It was not until the subsequent military campaigns between 1892 and 1894 that France eventually defeated Behanzin and took over his kingdom in order to gain strategic access to the lower Niger area.⁵⁸ The experience of encountering the French “war” against Dahomey would have led Conrad to fully appreciate what Salisbury said in 1892 about typical French militarism in West Africa. As Salisbury noted, while Britain followed “the policy of advance by commercial enterprise,” France conducted colonial affairs “by a succession of military expeditions.”⁵⁹

The episode of the French man-of-war in “Heart of Darkness,” backed up by Conrad’s testimony, helps to situate the fictional background of Marlow’s journey specifically in the early 1890s. And when Marlow recapitulates his experiences, he does so from a vantage point of looking back at history. In this light, the manager’s remarks about Kurtz’s inopportune “methods” are thus scornfully presented by Marlow to his English audience on the *Nellie*. As the manager tells Marlow: “Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see *the time was not ripe* for vigorous action” (137, emphasis added). As Marlow would have been aware of the rapid scramble for Africa in the late 1890s, the “time” for “vigorous action” by Europe could never have been riper.

⁵⁸ See Wesseling, pp. 201-204. For a detailed account of the French occupation of West Africa, see Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), pp. 93-115.

⁵⁹ Quoted in A. S. Kanya-Forstner, “Military Expansion in the Western Sudan—French and British Style,” in *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, ed. by Prosser Gifford and W. M. Roger Louis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 409.

Kurtz's "methods," as Marlow understands, consist of a dubious mixture of philanthropic rhetoric and militant conquest. As Marlow notes, against the vast unexplored landscape, the steamer carrying Kurtz and the relief company symbolizes "the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessings" (148). Yet Kurtz differs from the manager and his band in "taking care" of the "right motives" in order to conceal the ugly side of the "conquest of the earth" (50). Like the French colonial warfare witnessed by Marlow, Kurtz's "method" is also a true-to-life fiction that firmly puts him in the ranks of contemporary explorers of the "Dark Continent." Like Stanley, whose name has been inscribed "indelibly upon the surface of the [African] Continent"⁶⁰ in place names such as "Stanley Falls" and "Stanleyville," Kurtz has also "discovered lots of villages" and "a lake" (128). In order to make his "civilizing" mission "profitable" (148), Kurtz "raided the country" (128) for ivory with his followers. The fact that "Kurtz got the tribe to follow him" (128) by the power of his "thunderbolts" (134)—his rifles and shot guns—shows that Kurtz's "shot-gun policy" is nothing but a miniature version of Britain's infamous "gunboat policy." As Pakenham notes, "the Maxim gun . . . became the symbol of the age in Africa."⁶¹ As any survey of European militarism in Africa would show, Kurtz's dictum "Exterminate all the brutes" (118) anticipates many European atrocities in the late 1890s. Kurtz is not the only European in his time to execute "[r]ebels" (132). This was a standard feature of the "symbolic" (130) display of power

⁶⁰ Quoted in Stanley, *Autobiography*, p. 393.

⁶¹ Pakenham, p. xvii.

over indigenous people. Against the resisting tribes in West Africa, Lothar von Trotha, a German general, also ordered “a *Vernichtungsbefehl* (‘extermination order’)” that left 20,000 tribal people dead in the Omaheke desert. As the battle of Omdurman shows, Britain was not incapable of performing such atrocities: about 10,000 Sudanese were dead, and the British troops left the 15,000 wounded Sudanese to die by themselves.⁶²

Similarly, Kurtz’s taking a local mistress represents another strategy of colonial control. This was summed up by a French manual in 1902 which offered practical guidelines for Europeans in West Africa. In *Guide Pratique de l’Européen dans l’Afrique Occidentale*, the author lists five important reasons for Europeans taking local African mistresses: “health precautions,” “respect,” “discipline,” “hygiene,” and “instruction.”⁶³ As the manual argues, a mistress is generally “healthier” than recourse to prostitutes; a bond with a local chief’s daughter will “facilitate the administration of the country”; discipline will be enforced by taking a local mistress, since soldiers and servants look down upon a European without a wife; the caring offered by the mistress is vital for a European in order to survive in the lethal tropical climate; lastly, taking a local mistress is the most effective way of learning local language so as “to penetrate to the heart of secret customs.” Therefore, as the manual emphasizes, the bond with a local mistress has “long been accepted as *within the colonial moral code*.”⁶⁴ It is

⁶² These two cases about European atrocities are from Pakenham, *ibid.* p. xvii.

⁶³ Quoted in *France and West Africa: An Anthology of Historical Documents*, ed. by John D. Hargreaves (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 206-209.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Hargreaves, pp. 207-208. Emphasis added.

partly by such a strategy of “colonization through the bed”⁶⁵ that Kurtz seems to have succeeded in entering “the heart of secret customs” for colonial control.

Another common practice shared by Kurtz and the contemporary African explorers of his time is the ritual of “blood brotherhood,” whose extravagant version in “Heart of Darkness” is perhaps referred to in those rumoured “ceremonies” (131), often accompanied by what Marlow describes as “unspeakable rites” (118). Throughout Stanley’s Congo expeditions, he had engaged in many rituals of “blood brotherhood” with local chiefs: he followed local custom in order to gain treaties for protectorates. Stanley describes one occasion in the district of Irebu where he made “blood brotherhood” with chief Mangombo in 1883:

The next day we made blood brotherhood. The fetish-man pricked each of our right arms, pressed the blood out, then, with a pinch of scrapings from my gun-stock, a little salt, a few dusty scrapings from a long pod, dropped over the wounded arms, and the black and white arms were mutually rubbed together. The fetish-man took the long pod in his hand and slightly touched our necks, our heads, our arms, and our legs, muttering rapidly his litany of incarnations.⁶⁶

At Bumba latter that year, Stanley made “blood brotherhood” with chief Myombi, and proudly recorded that “for the fiftieth time my poor arm was scarified, and my blood shed for the cause of civilisation.” Stanley estimated that the audience of

⁶⁵ This phrase is Hargreaves’s, *ibid.*, p. 206.

⁶⁶ Stanley, *The Congo*, Vol. II, pp. 23-24.

such ritual consisted of “one thousand people of both sexes.”⁶⁷ In “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow has not seen those “ceremonies” offered to Kurtz, while he censors information about Kurtz’s “unspeakable rites.” Yet, however “unspeakable” Marlow might have assumed these “rites,” there is nothing “unspeakable” about Kurtz’s intention of establishing ritual bonds with local chiefs. Stanley spoke quite frankly about the tactic of “blood brotherhood.” He wrote to the chief agent of the Dutch Company at Banana Point, Congo, that the bond of “blood brotherhood” is indispensable to his “philanthropic, scientific, and commercial” mission. Stanley argued that his three-fold mission “cannot be done . . . without great tact, patience, long-suffering, and winning manners. . . . The many times that I have made blood-brotherhood with the chiefs above will stand me in good stead now.”⁶⁸ It was “the white arm over the brown arm” during the ritual,⁶⁹ but such rituals actually produced the political situation in which the “white” had power over the “brown.” By the process of ritual bonding, Stanley made treaties with local chiefs to transfer the sovereignty of their people and the land to AIA. In “Heart of Darkness,” Kurtz also pursues his “immense plans” (143) by establishing ritual bonding with local communities. Unlike the “ceremonies” Stanley had practiced, however, those “rites” offered to Kurtz symbolize the public display of his personal sovereignty. As Marlow learns: “The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁶⁸ Stanley’s letter to Albert Jung, 7 January 1879, in *The Congo*, Vol. I, p. 30.

⁶⁹ Stanley, *The Congo*, Vol. II, p. 89.

(131). But as in the case of Stanley, these “rites” politically stand Kurtz in good stead in the face of other European scramblers for the land.

In the same way as contemporary explorers “scrambled” for Africa, Kurtz establishes his private sphere of influence in the inner district. His “immense plans” are conceived as a philanthropic, commercial, and “civilizing” undertaking. Yet such a project inevitably leads to “the threshold” (143) of political control over the original inhabitants of the land. Like Leopold, Kurtz shows that the “civilizing” mission will easily and inevitably metamorphose into political conquest. At the same time, Kurtz’s competition with the manager for political-territorial conquest reflects the competing imperialisms in the scramble for Africa. The conspiracy of the manager constitutes the manager’s counter maneuver against Kurtz to regain the sphere of influence. Before his audience on board the *Nellie*, Marlow scornfully reports the manager’s misreading of Kurtz’s “methods”: “I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares” (138). Marlow disagrees with the manager on two fundamental issues about the “methods” of “imperialism.” Firstly, the manager believes that “the time” is not yet “ripe for vigorous action.” This implies that there will be a time that is “ripe” for such “vigorous action.” However, Marlow, like Conrad, has perceived the colonial scramble at its prime time. He understands that Kurtz’s “vigorous action” is precisely part of a larger international competition to win a portion of the colonial “cake.” It would be a mistake for the manager to wait for a “riper” time, since the Continental competition for

imperial enterprise was such that, as the Berlin Conference shows, no European country would want to be behind during the “scramble.” Secondly, the manager substitutes the moral issue of “methods” (137) with a temporal issue of *timing*. The manager implies that the same “vigorous action” will be appropriate when the time is “ripe.” However, Marlow’s hindsight makes him realize that Kurtz’s “methods,” while previously applicable, are no longer morally legitimate at the time when the story is told on board the *Nellie*. To his English friends, Marlow foregrounds their own present concerns about “imperial methods” in relation to the manager’s misreading of history. At the heart of the matter is the sudden resurgence and re-evaluation of British “imperial” sentiment after 1895.

The manager’s misreading of history and his idea about the inopportuneness of Kurtz’s “methods” are thus to be seen in a specific historical context in which the *timing* of a particular “imperial method” is as crucial as its morality. Marlow’s response to the manager’s misreading of history can best be understood by reference to the multilateral competition among “imperialisms” in Europe in the late 1890s. During the period between the first installment of the three-part serialization of “Heart of Darkness” in February 1899, and the novella’s publication in book form three years later, the European “scramble” for Africa, which took place in the late 1880s, contributed to a sudden upsurge of “imperial sentiment” on an international scale.⁷⁰ In Britain, there was an upsurge of

⁷⁰ For a lucid account on a smaller scale than Pakenham’s huge *Scramble for Africa*, see Wesseling. For a much briefer account, see Cook, pp. 1-63. Apart from Africa, Cook also discusses the Pacific region and India to emphasize European colonial expansionism as a global phenomenon.

nationalist sentiment, often accompanied by aggressive jingoism. This was the immediate background to the Boer War (October 1899 to May 1902), which was severely criticized by liberal-radical figures such as J. A. Hobson and E. D. Morel. When Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness” between December 1898 and February 1899, the “imperialism” he had in mind was, accordingly, a specific sort of militant “imperialism” in relation to the European partition of Africa, and a jingoist “imperialism” that permeated much of nationalist sentiment in Britain during the late 1890s. It is crucial to grasp the historical contingency of the term “imperialism” in “Heart of Darkness,” because Anglo-American criticism of Conrad in the 1990s often totalizes “Imperialism” and occludes the multilateral historical process of the partition of Africa as witnessed by Marlow. In the 1990s, in the face of the long history of European imperial expansion, it is understandable that literary critics should wish to deploy a convenient term such as “Imperialism” to stand in for the complexity of the historical phenomenon. As Edward Said says, “[a]t some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.”⁷¹ However, what so urgently concerns Marlow before his English audience on the *Nellie* is *which* “method” and *which* European nation would be best to control, to win, and to settle the foreign territories. It is a choice among different “imperialisms.” In Britain in the late 1890s there emerged a number of different ways of “thinking about” colonial conquest. Marlow’s “choice

⁷¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; London: Vintage: 1994), p. 5.

of nightmares” is thus not only a choice of the better “method” for colonial conquest, but also a choice of how to “think about” the political reality of imperial expansionism. To “think about” colonial conquest, however, as Conrad’s contemporary liberal critics showed, is primarily an internalized and domestic issue. Before I tackle this point in Section Three, I would like to consider another question: What did “imperialism” mean to Conrad during the late 1890s?⁷²

* * *

On Christmas day 1899, about two months after the outbreak of the Boer War, Conrad wrote to a Polish relative about the Boers: “Much might be said about the war. My feelings are very complex—as you may guess. That they are struggling in good faith for their independence cannot be doubted; but it is a fact that they have no idea of liberty, which can only be found under the English flag all over the world.”⁷³ Although in later days Conrad proclaimed himself to be a “homo duplex”—that his “point of view is English” without

⁷² In *Envisioning Africa: Racism and Imperialism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), Peter Ederly Firchow also points out the importance of understanding the meanings of “imperialism”: “critics of *Heart of Darkness* should keep in mind that for Conrad all of these words [imperialism, racism, race] . . . did not convey the same meaning(s) to him as they do to us” (17). However, apart from citing a few lines from Hobson and even the Oxford English Dictionary, Firchow does not fully investigate how Conrad understood “imperialism.” Firchow overlooks the fact that, as far as Britain and Europe are concerned, the meanings of “imperialism” were changing rapidly during the 1890s, owing to European nations’ colonial expansion.

⁷³ Conrad to Aniela Zagórska, 25 December 1899, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 230.

becoming “an Englishman,”⁷⁴ in this letter Conrad pondered over a specifically *English* sentiment about colonial warfare with the Boers. On the one hand, Conrad sympathized with the Boers; on the other hand, he believed that the “idea of liberty” was an English national virtue, and not part of the Boers’ character. He seems to have believed that the dissemination of this national virtue was to be found “under the English flag all over the world”—namely, along with Britain’s territorial conquest. Thus, from the perspective of the English idea of liberty, the colonial advance and imperial expansion of the British Empire represented an extension of this national virtue.

In this letter, Conrad reflects the imperial sentiment of his time. As Richard Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt note, Britain’s rapid colonial expansion contributed to an unparalleled emergence of “imperial sentiment” in 1898:

Imperialism had become the expression of a sentiment which many Britons could share for different reasons. It expressed Anglo-Saxon kinship and solidarity with the self-governing dominions, it gave expression to a feeling of racial superiority, to imperial pride, to a determination not to be ousted by foreign rivals, to grow and expand economically.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Conrad to Kazimierz Waliszewski, 5 December 1903, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. III, p. 89. Conrad wrote: “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning.”

⁷⁵ Richard Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt, *Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge

In his version of “imperial sentiment,” Conrad considered the Boer War in the context of the international competition for colonial interests faced by the British Empire. Thus, he believed that the war was “not so much a war against the Transvaal as a struggle against the doings of German influence.”⁷⁶ In the case of the atrocities in the Congo Free State—forced labour and amputations as punishment—and its monopoly, Conrad similarly adopted an English viewpoint and regarded the issue as the wrong-doings of “European powers,” excluding Britain. He wrote to Roger Casement: “the fact remains that in 1903, seventy five years or so after the abolition of the slave trade . . . there exists in Africa a Congo State, created by the act of European Powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the blacks is the basis of administration, and bad faith towards all the other states the basis of commercial policy.”⁷⁷ This letter leaves open the possibility that, for Conrad, imperial expansion could be justified by the English ideas of liberty and free trade.

Two decades before, as Koebner and Schmidt show, the term “imperialism” had been established as a party slogan during the debate between the Liberals and the Conservatives about the “character” of the British Empire. Gladstone did not disagree with Disraeli about the actual existence of the Empire, but he took issue specifically with Disraeli’s policy of “territorial aggrandisement, backed by military display.”⁷⁸ Gladstone

University Press, 1964), p. 215.

⁷⁶ Conrad to Zagóska, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 230.

⁷⁷ Conrad to Roger Casement, 21 December 1903, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. III, p. 97.

⁷⁸ William Gladstone, “England’s Mission,” *Nineteenth Century* (September

believed that Disraeli's policy of expansionism jeopardized Britain's traditional spirit of liberty and respect for national independence.⁷⁹ But in the 1890s, a new tide of sentiment began to strip "imperialism" of much of its derogatory sense. The downside of imperial expansionism was then attributed to "jingoism" as a form of "aggressive imperialism." In 1895, therefore, Lord Rosebery was able to speak of "liberal imperialism," as against jingoistic, military aggrandisement. He defined this as follows: "Liberal Imperialism implies, first, the maintenance of the Empire; secondly, the opening of new areas for our surplus population; thirdly, the suppression of the slave trade; fourthly, the development of missionary enterprise; and fifthly, the development of our commerce. . . ."⁸⁰ In 1897, Chamberlain, who had been appointed Colonial Secretary in 1895, promoted a new "imperial idea" in the same liberal tradition. Regarding the tropical subjects of the British Empire, he argued:

. . . the sense of possession has given place to a different sentiment—the sense of obligation. We feel now that our rule over these territories can only be justified if we can show that it adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people, and I maintain that our rule does, and has brought security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew their blessings before. In carrying out this work of civilization we are fulfilling what I believe to

1878), quoted in Koebner and Schmidt, p. 145.

⁷⁹ See Koebner and Schmidt, pp. 135-165.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Koebner and Schmidt, p. 194. For the taking over of imperialism's derogatory sense by "jingoism," see Koebner and Schmidt, pp. 196-204.

be our national mission. . . .⁸¹

In “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow expresses a similar national pride in Britain’s “imperial idea.” At the beginning of his narrative, he stimulates the imperial sentiment of his audience by stressing the righteousness of Britain’s role in civilizing the world. He says about the map: “There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there . . .” (55). Before his English audience, he also carefully specifies that the Trading Society he works for is a “Continental concern” (53). Like his contemporary liberal imperialists, Marlow does not question the existence of the British Empire. Rather, in the face of international scramble and contesting empires, what matters to Marlow and his audience is who does the “real work.”

During the Boer War, the term “imperialism,” which had become invested with much British nationalist sentiment, underwent another drastic change. For Britain’s European neighbours, “imperialism” came to mean the expansion of British nationalism. As Émile Zola observed in 1900:

There is in England much of what we call *imperialism*; that is to say, a sort of national impulse which may lead her to extremes, a desire to extend her colonies, to make herself mistress of the most important posts in the world, or to acquire what the word imperialism denotes, dominion over the world. Such is England’s dream, and her symptoms in this regard are indeed alarming.⁸²

⁸¹ Chamberlain, speech at the Royal Colonial Institute, 31 March 1897, quoted in Koebner and Schmidt, p. 210.

⁸² *North American Review* (April 1900), quoted in Koebner and Schmidt,

During the Boer War, as Koebner and Schmidt point out, the indictment of British expansionism by Continental Europe was shared by some liberal-radical figures such as J. A. Hobson in Britain. A small group of liberals and radicals in Britain also condemned Britain's military imperialism. Their common enemy, however, was not "imperialism" as such; rather, they sought to attack a specific form of "imperialism" — "imperialism" tainted with greedy capitalism, demoralizing militarism, and most importantly, the parochial nationalism of Britain as exemplified by the Boer War.⁸³

It was in this context that Hobson published *Imperialism: A Study* in 1902: he regarded British "imperialism" in the late 1890s as a "perverted," "debased" form of nationalism. Hobson asserts at the beginning of his critique: "Nationalism is a plain highway to internationalism, and if it manifests divergence we may well suspect a perversion of its nature and its purpose. Such a perversion is Imperialism, in which nations trespassing beyond the limits of facile assimilation transform the wholesome stimulative rivalry of varied national types into the cut-throat struggle of competing empires" (*IM* 9). Hobson calls this perverted form of nationalism "New Imperialism," and suggests that it dates back to 1870. In contrast to Chamberlain's belief in *Pax Britannica*, Hobson argues that Britain's two-decade colonial expansionism shows that "*Pax Britannica*, always an impudent falsehood, has become a grotesque monster of hypocrisy" (*IM* 126). "Competing empires" and "hypocrisy" are the two key terms in Hobson's

p. 244.

⁸³ See Koebner and Schmidt, pp. 245-252.

critique of imperialism. Abroad, British nationalism turns into military imperialism in a “cut-throat struggle” among European nations. At home, there appears a concomitant propaganda to mask this perversion and debasement of British nationalism. Hobson argues that imperialism “implies militarism now and ruinous wars in the future” (*IM* 130). He also believes that it engenders autocracy abroad, instead of promoting the spirit of democracy. The pressure of “competing empires” makes it inevitable for Britain to adopt the policy of military aggression to acquire “territorial aggrandisement” (*IM* 152). As a result, except in some “white” British colonies such as Australia and Canada, Hobson believes that in most colonies, “the spirit, the policy, and the methods of Imperialism are hostile to the institutions of popular self-government” (*IM* 152).

Second, Hobson argues that this debased imperialism depends upon continual “falsification” and sham rhetoric at home. According to Hobson, “the gravest vice and the most signal peril of Imperialism” is the “falsification of the real import of motives” (*IM* 198). Attacking Leopold’s philanthropic pretense, Hobson writes: “It is difficult to set any limit upon the capacity of men to deceive themselves as to the relative strength and worth of the motives which affect them . . .” (*IM* 198). Hobson believes that the public are readily deceived by politicians’ sham rhetoric of patriotism and philanthropy, and that this is directly attributable to imperialism: imperialism requires “presentable” motives in order to manipulate the public for its maintenance at home. Hobson notes that “out of a medley of mixed motives, the least potent is selected for public prominence because it is the most presentable”; as a result, “[t]he whole policy of Imperialism is

riddled with this deception” (*IM* 198). Apart from Hobson’s pioneering economic critique of imperialism,⁸⁴ his great merit lies in this “psychological” explanation of imperialism. Hobson argues that there are two main factors that sustain imperialism in its debased form: the “phrase-mongering” tactics of politicians, and the complacency of the general public. “Imperialism,” Hobson points out, “has been floated on a sea of vague, shifty, well-sounding phrases which are seldom tested by close contact with fact” (*IM* 206). Hobson argues that the “hard naked facts” of the colonial contest have been falsely presented by propagandists, by “masked words” (*IM* 211), to the home audience. He contends: “Imperialism is based upon a persistent misrepresentation of facts and forces, chiefly through a most refined process of selection, exaggeration, and attenuation, directed by interested cliques and persons so as to distort the face of history” (*IM* 211). In addition, in the case of British imperialism, Hobson finds a specifically British trait of complacency in the readiness of the public to blindly accept such falsifications of history. Hobson expresses his alarm at this combination of a “phrase-mongering imperialism” and a complacent public: “The gravest peril of Imperialism lies in the state of mind of a nation which has become habituated to this

⁸⁴ Hobson’s critique of imperialism has been wrongly overshadowed by his famous—or infamous—economic theory of “underconsumption.” Yet in recent years, there has appeared some reappraisal of Hobson’s *tour de force* in entertaining the ethical dimension of imperialism. For discussion of the misunderstanding of Hobson’s critique, see Lars Magnusson, “Hobson and Imperialism: An Appraisal,” in *J. A. Hobson after Fifty Years: Freethinker of the Social Sciences*, ed. by John Pheby (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 143-162. For Hobson’s economic theory of imperialism, see Michael Schneider, *J. A. Hobson* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 89-106.

deception and which has rendered itself incapable of self-criticism” (*IM* 211).

Third, Hobson distinguishes between a “sane” imperialism and an “insane” one. According to Hobson, a “sane” imperialism devotes itself to “the protection, education, and self-development of a ‘lower race’”; whereas an “insane” imperialism “hands over these races to the economic exploitation of white colonists” (*IM* 246). Hobson believes that imperialism as a “compulsory” measure is justifiable if it contributes to the “civilization of the world” (*IM* 234); nevertheless, he finds that imperialism in real-life colonies too often ends up creating detribalization and forced labour for the benefits of chartered companies. Hobson attacks the “wanton exhibitions of hypocrisy” (*IM* 280) of those “concession-mongers” (*IM* 260) whose primary objective is to acquire colonial profits. He argues that white colonialists conduct a “parasitic” exploitation of the “lower races.” Nowhere can he see any mutual exchange of benefits in Britain’s tropical colonies. Instead of promoting civilization in the colonies, Europeans rely upon “parasitism” to “extract wealth from the country” and then retire “to consume it at home” (*IM* 282). At the core of this “insane” imperialism, Hobson believes that there is a conspiracy of “a small minority of white men, officials, traders, and industrial organisers” (*IM* 27) responsible for the demoralization of private commercialism. Hobson writes: “The famous words of Sir Thomas More are as true now as when he wrote them: ‘Everywhere do I perceive a certain conspiracy of rich men seeking their own advantage under the name and pretext of the commonwealth’” (*IM* 46).

Hobson’s conspiracy theory of imperialism originated in

his visit to South Africa as a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* during the Boer War. His two-month stay (August to October, 1899) made him discard the “mask words” of politicians and to perceive the “facts” of how imperialism really worked. He believed that jingoism against the Boers was “simply one act in the press conspiracy.”⁸⁵ In particular, however, Hobson’s anti-Semitism led him to believe that a Jewish conspiracy was responsible for nursing the Boer War. Hobson accused the “German Jews” of a conspiracy to manipulate imperial sentiment and to take over colonial politics in order to “advance the private, political, and business interests of a small body of men.”⁸⁶ For Hobson, in the same anti-Semitic strain, another grave vice of “New Imperialism” in South Africa was its tendency to mutate into capitalistic imperialism sustained by Jews “of Continental origin.”⁸⁷ Still, despite Hobson’s conspicuous anti-Semitism in adopting the popular belief in a Jewish conspiracy, his conspiracy theory of imperialism usefully foregrounds corrupt human agents as one of the perils of “New Imperialism.” This theory enables him to tackle imperialism not simply as an economic issue, but as an issue of political manipulation that involves an international elite of European financiers.⁸⁸

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⁸⁵ Hobson to C. P. Scott, quoted in Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa, 1895-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 201.

⁸⁶ Hobson, *The Psychology of Jingoism*, quoted in Porter, p. 203.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Magnusson and Porter also emphasize this political context of Hobson’s conspiracy theory. See Magnusson, pp. 146-147; Porter, p. 206.

At the time when Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness,” “imperialism” had different layers of meanings. It meant, first of all, Continental Europe’s “scramble” for colonial interests disguised as “civilizing” missions. Conrad wrote to William Blackwood about the inception of “*The Heart of Darkness*”: “The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinc[t]ly. . . .”⁸⁹ Unlike Zola, Conrad was not speaking from the viewpoint of a Continental Europe that regarded “imperialism” specifically as the expanded form of British nationalism. Rather, Conrad adopted a British point of view to attribute the “criminality,” “inefficiency,” and “selfishness” of imperial enterprise to Britain’s neighbours at the Continental end of Europe. Like his contemporary British audience, Conrad seems to have believed in Britain’s moral and racial superiority in the colonial contest. As he wrote to Waliszewski in the letter quoted above, it is “the *difference* between the races that [he] wanted to point out” in the episode of the French man-of-war.⁹⁰ Conrad blamed French militarism and “Continental” imperial enterprise for the colonial atrocities he witnessed. Secondly, “imperialism,” for Conrad, meant the international contest of empires to “oust” the British Empire. Conrad wrote to E. L. Sanderson on 26 October 1899: “We all know, we know instinctively that the danger to the Empire is elsewhere—that the conspiracy (to oust the Briton) of which we hear is ready to be hatched in other

⁸⁹ Conrad to William Blackwood, 31 December 1898, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. II, pp. 139-140.

⁹⁰ *Collected Letters*, Vol. III, p. 94.

regions.”⁹¹ Again Conrad was speaking from the side of the British public. In “Heart of Darkness,” Conrad follows a line similar to Hobson’s conspiracy theory to locate “the danger to the Empire”—“elsewhere,” on the Continent. Like Hobson, Marlow discovers a small group of Continental European traders engaging in a conspiratorial “cut-throat struggle.” The conspiracy at the Central Station described by Marlow anticipates Hobson’s thesis that an “insane” imperialism is at work characterized by the conspiracy of a small group of Continental Europeans.

Thirdly, imperialism meant to Conrad, as to Hobson, a perverted form of nationalism sustained by “mask words.” In “Heart of Darkness,” Conrad tackles precisely this perversion in the context of contesting empires. Marlow says: “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” (117). On the one hand, Marlow presents the “right” side of Kurtz, his English affiliation, in his admiration of Kurtz’s “immense” idea of civilizing work. On the other, Marlow denounces Kurtz’s “French side,” the side of Kurtz that adopts para-military expansionism for colonial profits. As Marlow notes, Kurtz’s “method” is “[n]o method at all” (138). Like Hobson, however, Marlow detects the common strategy of those two sides: they both falsify reality through “noble and lofty expression” (147).

⁹¹ Conrad to E. L. Sanderson, 26 October 1899, in *Collected Letters*, Vol. II, p. 211.

On board the *Nellie*, Marlow conveys to his audience the discrepancy between metropolitan complacency and the reality at the empire’s periphery. Marlow says near the end of his story:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. (152)

For Marlow, as for Hobson, the word “imperialism” carries an emotive connotation because they had both *seen* the horrible reality “out there.” Their trips make them “know the things” that their audience at home “could not possibly know.” In telling his story, Marlow warns his audience of the fact that what really happens “out there” is very different from what the home audience is made to believe. Even before he meets Kurtz, Marlow has been seduced by Kurtz’s “unbounded power of eloquence” and his unfailing ability to deliver an endless “magic current of phrases” (118). Like the metropolitan audience,⁹² Marlow also appears at first to appreciate Kurtz’s imperial sentiment as preached by his “pamphlet” (118):

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, “must necessarily

⁹² In this section and the next one, I use “metropolitan” to describe the people and their attitude relating to “the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth” (45).

appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,” and so on, and so on. “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,” etc. etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. (118)

As I have argued, Kurtz acquired his colonial profits in the same manner as did his real-life peers engaging in the “scramble” for Africa: following a private agenda under the cover of high-minded, imperial work. Moreover, as I have suggested, “imperial sentiment,” backed by the idea of racial superiority, surged across Europe in the 1890s, partly as a result of new developments in print media. Like Leopold and Stanley, Kurtz also makes use of the media to promote private aspirations “in the magnificent folds of eloquence” (147). Marlow says: “He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, ‘for the furthering of my ideas. It’s a duty’” (148-149). In the early stages of his trip, Marlow falls victim to Kurtz’s manipulation of imperial sentiment and nearly ends up being taken in by Kurtz in the same way as the metropolitan audience are manipulated.

However, Marlow’s dislocation from the comforts of metropolitan living—from the illusory security provided by “the butcher and the policeman” (116)—enables him to fully appreciate the real horror of how the proclaimed mission of European traders has been perverted into a greedy “cut-throat struggle.” After Marlow has heard how Kurtz has “collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen” (113) ivory through the systematic raiding of the country, the spell of Kurtz’s “noble and lofty expression” (147) is broken. Telling his experience

with hindsight before his home audience on board the *Nellie*, Marlow works to uproot his own complacency and dispel the ensnarement of Kurtz’s “mask words.” As Marlow says: “in the light of later information,” Kurtz’s argument “strikes me *now* as ominous” (118, emphasis added). Following the same liberal attitudes as Hobson to indict imperialism, Marlow also shows the perils of a “phrase-mongering imperialism.” He reveals how Kurtz’s eloquence, his emphasis on “civilizing” duty, masks a sinister project, dark and inhumane, to “[e]xterminate all the brutes” (118). At the core of Kurtz’s imperial idea, Marlow eventually discovers a “hollow sham” (147): “avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power” (147-148).⁹³

III. Masking, Unmasking, and Anti-Masking: Imperialism Internalized

As I have shown, Marlow tells his story about Kurtz in

⁹³ As any student of Conrad knows, mainstream criticism of “Heart of Darkness” has long privileged the metaphysical overtone of Kurtz’s fanaticism—his “heart of darkness.” Nearly all the canonical interpretations of this novella show that it is imperative to address one issue, namely: what if Kurtz’s belief in himself is actually a fanaticism of his own “dark” power? As I have pointed out, my purpose here is to nuance the conspiracy theme in “Heart of Darkness” in relation to the historical context of Europe’s imperial scramble for colonies. I seek to undermine the much-reiterated “metaphysical” interpretation of Kurtz’s “dark heart.” I hope to draw attention to the fact that Kurtz’s conquest and the manager’s conspiracy are indeed as “secular” as Europe’s colonial conquest. Therefore, I will not discuss Kurtz’s colonial fanaticism in a moral or metaphysical sense. Rather, I situate the ethical issue of Kurtz’s conquest in the light of Hobson’s critique of imperialism.

order to caution his metropolitan audience on board the *Nellie* against the ensnaring “noble and lofty expression” promoted by a debased imperialism. Yet, while Marlow despises the sinister intent of Kurtz’s “methods,” he shows his “loyalty to Kurtz” (150) in preserving Kurtz’s “reputation” (139). Marlow regards Kurtz’s pronouncement of “the horror” (149) as embodying “the supreme moment of complete knowledge” (149). It signifies for Marlow a moment of self-criticism, however evanescent, that Hobson rarely encountered in the real-life “cut-throat struggle” of imperialists. As Marlow says, “[t]he most you can hope from it [life] is some knowledge of yourself” (150). For Marlow, Kurtz remains “remarkable” not because of his non-method “method,” but because, as his final “pronouncement” reveals, Kurtz manages to acknowledge the falsehood of the imperial idea. Marlow says:

I was within a hair’s-breath of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. . . . He had summed up—he had judged. “The horror!” He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth. . . . (151)

As Marlow understands it, Kurtz finally “glimpses” the truth about his own sham, and it is because of this moment of self-knowledge that Marlow remains loyal to him. However, the way in which Marlow preserves Kurtz’s “reputation” (139) ends up being as dubious as the “mask words” he tries to uproot.

First, Marlow engages with Kurtz’s Russian devotee in a counter-conspiracy to safeguard Kurtz’s “reputation.” Threatened by the manager’s conspiracy to eliminate both Kurtz and the Russian agent, Marlow “promise[s]” the latter “complete discretion” (139) in handling “matters that would affect Mr. Kurtz’s reputation” (138). He then provides the Russian with some cartridges “with proper secrecy” (139), and lets him escape from the Inner Station. When Marlow returns to the “sepulchral city” afterwards, he gives an inquiring journalist Kurtz’s “famous Report for publication” (154)—but with “the postscriptum torn off” (153). Accordingly, in this effort, Marlow is guilty of a censorship comparable to that of the “phrase-monger imperialism.” His ambivalence lies in the fact that after he has unmasked the debased imperialist’s sham rhetoric, he requires another set of “mask words” to transmit his knowledge to the selected home audience.

In other words, while Marlow succeeds in dismantling the falsehood constructed with “gorgeous eloquence” (155) before his English friends, he accomplishes his task only at the cost of creating another falsification before Kurtz’s metropolitan acquaintances in Continental Europe. When Marlow has the chance to “say something” to Kurtz’s Intended, he ends up telling a lie. Therefore, Marlow’s narration goes through three distinct stages as far as the issue of the “mask word” is concerned. In the early part of the narrative, Marlow first portrays himself as the victim of Kurtz’s masking “eloquence.” After he has perceived the sinister reality of Kurtz’s “methods,” Marlow unmaskes the ensnarement of Kurtz’s “noble and lofty expression.” However, in the end, in order to preserve Kurtz’s “reputation,” Marlow not only withholds the sinister

“postscriptum” of Kurtz’s report, but he also lies to the Intended about Kurtz’s last words. It is ironic that, while Marlow seeks to unmask the colonial reality, he creates another set of “mask words” in order to provide the Intended with some “real and saving illusion” (159). Although Marlow’s narration unmasks the colonial reality to the privileged metropolitan audience on board the *Nellie*, the fact that he has to lie for Kurtz’s “reputation” indicates that he nevertheless yields to the ensnarement of “mask words.” He thus performs an ambivalent gesture of masking-in-the-form-of-unmasking—what might be called an *anti-masking*:⁹⁴ Marlow reinstates the masking effect he also tries hard to uproot.

Like Hobson in *Imperialism: A Study*, Conrad shows that “the danger to the Empire is elsewhere”: this danger consists of the conspiracy of a small group of continental Europeans, as the intrigues at the Central Station illustrate. Moreover, like Hobson, Conrad also foregrounds the peril of “mask words” manipulated by “insane” imperialists, as illustrated by Kurtz’s case. Similarly, just as Hobson sees the “grave vice” of “New Imperialism” as a conspiracy of financiers “of Continental origin,” Marlow rejects the manager’s conspiracy for Kurtz’s “unsound methods.” However, Marlow’s subsequent effort to preserve Kurtz’s “reputation” is an ambivalent gesture designed to obscure the reality he also tries to unmask. While Marlow’s “choice of nightmares” remains a choice between nightmarish ways of conducting the imperial project, his critique of

⁹⁴ I coin this term, following Mary Louise Pratt’s precedent in using “anti-conquest.” See *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

imperialism, in the form of anti-masking, uproots one kind of “unsound” imperialism only to uphold another form of imperialism.

Therefore, “Heart of Darkness,” like Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study*, is significantly marked by one kind of imperial sentiment of the late 1890s. The critique offered in both works remains “imperialist” in the contingent sense of the word. Like Hobson, Marlow’s indictment of a “perverted” imperialism is itself “imperialist,” since Marlow lives in a historical context in which “imperialism” also means a way to consolidate the British Empire amid the “cut-throat struggle” of contesting empires. Secondly, like Hobson, Marlow’s critique is “imperialist” because both evaluate European imperialisms by Britain’s allegedly “sounder” way of doing the “real work.” Thirdly, although Hobson and Marlow both present Continental imperialism as being managed by white conspirators, their critique is still “imperialist,” because the alternative their critique implies is not to discard imperialism, but rather to replace one form of imperialism with another operating according to “sounder” and “saner” liberal principles.

Moreover, this critique is conspicuously “imperial,” since issues of imperialism are understood as internalized, domestic European issues. In their common effort to dismantle the imperial rhetoric of “mask words,” Marlow and Hobson locate the “darkness” of a debased imperialism in the metropolitan heart of Europeans. This effort displaces territorial conquest with sociological and psychological probing. In *Imperialism: A Study*, Hobson emphasizes how “New Imperialism” turns into jingoistic territorial expansionism, and then goes on to demonstrate that “New Imperialism” is not beneficial to the

British Empire. What is needed, Hobson argues, is to jettison imperialist “psychological” problems, such as complacency and the falsification of facts. Once imperialism is “sane” and “sound,” European nations should establish a disinterested international system of trusteeship for mutual welfare with the colonies.⁹⁵ Yet the economic statistics and sociological analysis presented by Hobson, ironically, produce another set of “mask words” to obscure the reality of imperial work and territorial conquest. The original inhabitants of the conquered colonies have no say in determining the outcome of the European “scramble;” neither do they play any active part in the sociological and psychological probing of imperialism in the metropolitan home of the empire. Instead, these peoples are reduced to maps and statistics. The metropolitan audience, therefore, is made to perceive the problem of imperialism as a domestic and internalized issue: that is, the main stage of imperialism is at home, the metropolis, while the colonies are always backstage. In “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow’s critique of imperialism undergoes a similar displacement: it, too, internalizes and domesticates imperialism as a form of metropolitan probing. After all, the one who has the “choice of nightmares”—the choice of imperial methods—is not the original inhabitant of the land where Kurtz contests imperial work with the manager. It is the “imperialists”—those believing in imperial sentiment of some kind—such as Marlow and Kurtz, who have the “choice” of methods that will determine how other peoples are to be ruled and how their land is to be administered.

⁹⁵ Hobson, pp. 328-355.

Salisbury commented on the partition of Africa by European nations: “We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.”⁹⁶ In “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow’s early fascination with maps registers the same discrepancy between metropolitan understanding and colonial reality. Marlow says: “It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery . . .” (52). Yet, those European-invented place names convey to Marlow, as to his metropolitan audience, little sense of the actual process of colonization and imperial conquest that has been transforming the living spaces of the original inhabitants. Marlow brings home his experience of visiting those places in order to unmask what he believes really happens “out there.” Ironically, as I have argued, this effort is accompanied by a strategy of anti-masking that once more filters the colonial reality for his home audience. While Marlow uproots one kind of imperial idea for his private audience, a selected group on board a private yawl, he consolidates another one for the journalist and the Intended—he withholds part of the truth to create a “saving illusion” and to protect Kurtz’s “reputation”—and thus ends up leaving the colonial reality further away from the metropolitan home.

During the early stage of Marlow’s journey in the French steamer, he finds that his “idleness” and “isolation” shut him “away from the truth of things” (61). Yet even when Marlow has witnessed the truth of colonial atrocities and experienced

⁹⁶ Quoted in Wesseling, p. 128.

the “air” (78) of conspiracy, he turns away from this reality by immersing himself in his “work.” Thus Marlow says about fixing his steamer: “I like what is in the work,—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others . . .” (85). Later, Marlow comments on a copy of *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship* he finds in the deserted hut:

. . . at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work. . . . The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. (99)

As Marlow notes: “No, I don’t like work” (85). Yet, he likes “what is in the work.” Marlow finds the damaged steamer his “influential friend” (85); Stanley, interestingly, also considered his practical work in the Congo Free State his “friend.” Stanley wrote: “My only comfort was my work. To it I ever turned as to a friend. It occupied my days, and I dwelt fondly on it at night.”⁹⁷ As I have shown, Stanley, like Leopold, promoted the “work” of creating a Congo state through dubious philanthropic and scientific pretenses. Similarly, Marlow’s preoccupation with what he finds “in the work,” rather than the work itself, reveals itself as a refusal to address reality. Just as the sham rhetoric of the “civilizing” mission displaces the cruel facts of colonial conquest, Marlow’s idea of work maintains and conceals the imperial idea of his time. Marlow claims that

⁹⁷ Stanley, *Autobiography*, p. 351.

what saves the ugly fact of imperial conquest is the “idea” behind it—“an unselfish belief in the idea” to which you can “offer a sacrifice” (51). In his emphasis on “the right way of going to work,” Marlow again internalizes the practical work of the colonies and converts it into an idea. Much of the imperial sentiment in the 1890s, showing the same concern for “the right way” to do the “real work” of empire, internalizes imperialism by reducing it to the metropolitan ethic. Imperialism was sustained at home as a sentiment and abroad by conquest. Yet both the sentiment and the conquest, as Marlow and Hobson show, are subject to metropolitan self-criticism that in effect disguises part of the reality of imperial conquest from the metropolitan audience. As Marlow notes, what really matters to the metropolitan “imperialists” is not the “conquest of the earth” (50), but the redeeming “idea” behind it—namely, how to “think about” the reality of overseas conquest.⁹⁸

* * *

A similar strategy of anti-masking is prevalent in some of the criticism of “Heart of Darkness” in the 1990s. It is curious that even though a century has gone by since the publication of “Heart of Darkness,” the same imperial idea, folded in another set of masking rhetoric, still exists in some contemporary criticism of “Heart of Darkness.” The current “postcolonial” approach demands that each student consider Conrad in relation to Chinua Achebe’s essay on the racism of Conrad. As Andrew Michael Roberts notes, Achebe’s essay “has probably

⁹⁸ Significantly, Marlow tries to convey the colonial reality to a selected metropolitan audience. His effort brings to mind the Marlow of *Lord Jim* who reveals “the last word” to the privileged man at home. Metropolitan probing can sometimes be the prelude to a conspiracy of silence.

provoked more discussion, and fiercer arguments, than any other single piece of Conrad criticism” because it problematizes “the politics and ethics” of Conrad’s canonical status.⁹⁹ As Robert Burden demonstrates in “Conrad’s Heart of Darkness: the Critique of Imperialism and the Post-Colonial Reader,”¹⁰⁰ a typical criticism of “Heart of Darkness” nowadays would begin by addressing Achebe’s argument: does Conrad, a “thoroughgoing racist,” really “eliminat[e] the African as human factor” so as to dehumanize the continent?¹⁰¹ By engaging itself in sophisticated discussion that draws on up-to-date theories of “postcolonialism” and textuality, such criticism would tell students of Conrad that the answer is yes and no, and that Achebe’s critique, often invalidated by his misreading of Conrad, is partly justifiable because of its politics.¹⁰²

What is relevant to my argument are not issues such as “Is Conrad a racist?” or, “Is Conrad an anti-imperialist?” that has preoccupied Conradian critics for more than two decades.

⁹⁹ Andrew Michael Roberts (ed.), *Joseph Conrad* (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 109-110. Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” first pub. in 1977, rpt. in Roberts, pp. 109-123. Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, which focuses on issues of representation, similarly, contributes to a new approach to discuss race and imperialism in Conrad that no “postcolonial” criticism of Conrad can do without. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

¹⁰⁰ Robert Burden, “Conrad’s Heart of Darkness: the Critique of Imperialism and the Post-Colonial Reader,” *L’Epoque Conradianne*, 18 (1992): pp. 63-83.

¹⁰¹ Achebe, in Roberts, p. 117.

¹⁰² See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), especially pp. 256-271; Hugh Mercer Curtler, “Achebe on Conrad: Racism and Greatness in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Conradiana*, 29:1 (1997): pp. 30-40.

Rather, I would like to argue that the strategy of anti-masking is to be found precisely in the criticism that presents itself as “post-colonial.”¹⁰³ I will discuss two examples of this kind of criticism that approaches Conrad in the context of racial representation and imperialism. These “postcolonial” criticisms profess to unmask imperialism and racial representation in “Heart of Darkness,” but their unmasking, like that of imperialists a century ago, reinstates the imperial idea they seek to uproot.

In *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: “Bewildered Traveller,”*¹⁰⁴ John W. Griffith painstakingly discusses Conrad’s engagement and disengagement with the imperialist discourse of his time. For Griffith, Marlow’s journey is “a process of negotiating the tenuous personal and cultural identities so often described in anthropological works.”¹⁰⁵ Griffith argues that Conrad shows the typical “anthropological dilemma” of the Victorian period: that is, a “cultural dislocation” in face of “primitive cultures” that registers the anxiety as “how to translate the experience of another culture.”¹⁰⁶ Although Griffith does not openly address Achebe’s argument, his idea of reading “Heart of Darkness” through the anthropological notion of cultural relativism implicitly challenges Achebe’s belief in Conrad’s “racism.” For

¹⁰³ For the politics of the term “postcolonialism,” see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998). Also see Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: ‘Bewildered Traveller’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

example, Griffith argues that “[i]n Kurtz, we see the dangers of transgressing cultural boundaries and passing this off as cultural relativism.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, against Said’s idea of imperialist discourse, Griffith seeks to defend the European misrepresentation of “primitive cultures” as being the result of the “anthropological dilemma”:

. . . it does not necessarily follow that the *motivation* for such distortions was cultural imperialism . . . anthropologists and even travel writers often attempted to reproduce what they believed to be the most crucial characteristics of the other culture. While they often failed in this attempt, *the intent seems far less insidious* than Said and others would have us believe.¹⁰⁸

Griffith’s argument effectively reproduces Marlow “redeeming idea” in “Heart of Darkness.” While Marlow believes that “What redeems it [the conquest of the earth] is the idea only,” Griffith also attempts to redeem European misrepresentation of other cultures by foregrounding “motivation” and “intent.” Moreover, this argument also curiously conforms to Kurtz’s idea of imperial conquest. As Kurtz says: “Of course, you must take care of the motives—right motives—always” (143). As I have argued, the “imperial sentiment” of the 1890s involved precisely this need to “take care” of the “right motives” in order to accomplish imperial conquest in a “sounder” and “saner” manner. Griffith analyzes an impressive amount of the anthropological works of Conrad’s

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25. Emphasis added. For Said’s idea, apart from *Orientalism*, see *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

time in order to find the middle ground between Conrad’s racial misrepresentation and his anxiety over cultural relativism. But he actually reinstates the imperialist idea of the 1890s—the idea of “taking care” of the motives—and ends up reproducing the imperial idea that Marlow seeks to, but fails to, discard.

Another example I wish to consider, in conclusion, is the issue of empire and its representation as discussed by Christopher GoGwilt in *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*.¹⁰⁹ Using Homi Bhabha’s idea of the ambivalent colonial discourse, GoGwilt argues that “Heart of Darkness” shows “a problem of imagining community” by creating a hybrid, “Western” identity.¹¹⁰ For GoGwilt, “[t]he scramble for Africa becomes a scramble for authority over explaining the misrepresentation of Africa.” He argues that “Heart of Darkness” shows “how this crisis of imperialism becomes a crisis of representing ‘All Europe.’”¹¹¹ GoGwilt argues that Marlow’s misreading of Towson’s book not only transforms Africa’s “blank space” into a “nowhere,” it also constitutes a “site of the misreading of culture.”¹¹² Moreover, this cultural misreading of Africa is counterpointed by a similar misreading of Europe’s own cultural and historical continuity. As a result, GoGwilt’s idea

¹⁰⁹ Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ GoGwilt, pp. 121-126. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), especially pp. 104-107. Also see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (1983; London: Verso, 1991).

¹¹¹ GoGwilt, p. 121.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

of “double-mapping”—in this case, a failed mapping of both Europe and Africa—extends Achebe’s argument on Africa’s misrepresentation into issues of Europe’s failed attempt to truly represent itself. According to GoGwilt, the misrepresentation of Africa in “Heart of Darkness” registers a crisis in Europe—a crisis embedded in Europe’s imperial discourse that fails to imagine a coherent identity for itself.¹¹³

GoGwilt argues that, although Kurtz’s hybrid origin makes him “an abbreviation for ‘all Europe,’” this hybrid identity also signifies a slippage into a “Western” identity.¹¹⁴ However, as I have shown, it is important to acknowledge not only the multiple meanings of “imperialism” in the 1890s, but also the historical context of competing empires in Conrad’s time. During the Boer War when Conrad had just finished “Heart of Darkness,” the term “Europe” often meant Continental Europe. For Conrad, as for other British liberal imperialists in the 1890s, the kind of “imperialism” he denounced was a specific kind of jingoist imperialism often associated with the conspiracy that originated in Continental Europe to “oust” the British Empire. This understanding of the contingent meanings of “Europe” and “imperialism” is vital to Marlow’s experience of conspiracy. Marlow suggests that the conspiracy against the British Empire has been hatched “elsewhere.” In other words, while Marlow’s narrative sometimes slips into an ambiguous “European” identity as GoGwilt notes, it nevertheless upholds a rigid and fundamental distinction within this “European” categorization, and presents “Europe” as consisting of competing empires. In

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

the case of Marlow’s “critique of imperialism,” GoGwilt fails to address the multiple meanings of the term that, as I argue, provide Marlow with the essential ground to conduct his inquiry. The word “imperialism” in GoGwilt’s phrase the “critique of imperialism” is not the same “imperialism” that Marlow or his contemporary liberal imperialists would have had in mind. GoGwilt’s effort to dismantle the ambivalence of imperial discourse in “Heart of Darkness” erases the multilateral process of competing imperialisms during Europe’s “scramble” for Africa. In addition, it inadvertently sustains the imperial sentiment of the 1890s by internalizing imperialism as metropolitan probing. For GoGwilt, colonial reality is subject to Europe’s misrepresentation of it, whereas Europe’s own self-scrutiny marks its failure to represent itself. The failure of such “double-mapping,” as GoGwilt implies, remains the failure of the metropolitan European mind. Therefore, GoGwilt’s discussion, like Marlow’s narrative, moves further away from the “reality” of imperial conquest in “Heart of Darkness,” and focuses more on the European, metropolitan mind.

Commenting on the merits of Achebe’s attack on Conrad, Roberts points out that Achebe addresses a crucial question: “*What does it mean to have as one of the best-known and most influential texts about Africa a work from which African history, culture, language, art, customs, ideas and religions are wholly absent?*”¹¹⁵ As I have argued throughout this article, issues of imperialism are to be entertained only after the contingency of “meanings” has been fully nuanced according to the peculiar historical context in which Conrad wrote “Heart of Darkness.”

¹¹⁵ Roberts, p. 10. Emphasis added.

“Imperialism” in 1890, when Conrad visited the Congo, differed from the “imperialism” Conrad had in mind when he adopted liberal attitudes similar to Hobson’s in order to denounce certain kinds of “imperialism.” Modern criticism of “Heart of Darkness” often conflates “what it meant then” with “what it means now.” In asking “what it means,” Roberts’s sentence does not specify *to whom* Conrad’s misrepresentation “means.” Does it refer to liberal imperialists of Conrad’s time? Or does it “mean” to the conspiracy of Continental imperialists? Or, does it “mean” to the undefinable “postcolonial reader” of the 1990s to whom “imperialism” may mean the post-Cold War “imperialism” of the “West”? Curiously, this question is seldom addressed to Stanley’s dozens of books about Africa that are full of his opinions and observations about “African history, culture, language, art, customs, ideas and religions.” Was Stanley, therefore, not a “thoroughgoing racist” in Achebe’s sense of the term, or, did his description succeed in presenting Africa in a humanized way? Neither, to the best of my knowledge, has this question ever been raised in relation to Hobson’s seminal critique of imperialism in *Imperialism: A Study*, a book which criticizes the “scramble” for Africa, but a book again in which “African history, culture, language, art, customs, ideas and religions are wholly absent.” Posing questions such as Roberts’s or Achebe’s in relation to “Heart of Darkness” follows the same dubious logic as does Marlow’s anti-masking in displacing the actual process of imperial conquest with metropolitan probing. These contemporary critics of “Heart of Darkness” have been working according to a different set of “mask words,” but essentially in the same spirit of imperial sentiment as the 1890s, to eradicate the actual

process of imperial conquest implicated in Marlow’s narrative. Modern readers, however, do not have to yield to “the choice of nightmares” within contemporary Conradian scholarship. The approach and argument in this article are designed to demonstrate that, after all, it is possible to put out a “hesitating foot” (151) to confront the bare “reality” of the European heart of darkness.

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「算計的氣氛」：
〈黑暗之心〉裏的陰謀與帝國主義

鄧鴻樹

摘 要

本論文將探討〈黑暗之心〉裏的陰謀與帝國主義之關連。本文認為，經理對克爾茲的陰謀呈現了十九世紀帝國主義者的陰謀野心。另外，馬羅眼中的「帝國主義」是詭譎多變的歷史事件。

本文將以兩個重要的歷史背景討論〈黑暗之心〉裏的陰謀主題：一八八七年的「艾明拯救探險」；以及哈伯遜的《帝國主義研究》。〈黑暗之心〉中經理的陰謀實際上蘊藏與「艾明拯救探險」相同的陰謀——瓜分土地。本文將探討該陰謀所代表的新帝國主義時代，並以〈黑暗之心〉為例，闡釋「帝國主義」在十九世紀歐洲列強競爭下之多元性。

關鍵詞： 康拉德、陰謀、帝國主義