

Poetic Prose and Imperialism: The Ideology of Form in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

By John Parras

Inscribed in the 1899 novella Heart of Darkness, and serving as context for the characters' upriver journey, is the history of an immense enterprise of cultural appropriation, a "fantastic invasion"¹ that drastically influenced the course of modernist aesthetics: namely, the expansion of narrative prose into the realm of poetry--a literary phenomenon tied, in Conrad's work, to late-nineteenth-century European colonialism. The ideological struggle between poetry and prose in Heart of Darkness affects thematic as well as formal structures of the novella, played out in the friction between lyric and narrative modes as well as in the tension between artistic and imperialist practices. Thus, Heart of Darkness offers a unique opportunity for gauging not only the aesthetic relations among genres, but also the interpenetrations of genre and history, of literature and social practices.

Jean-Paul Sartre's pronouncement that prose is an attitude of mind applies equally well to poetry, and this essay begins with an analysis of the "poetic attitude" inscribed in Heart of Darkness--the set of working assumptions governing the text's posture toward poetic discourse. I offer an account of how poetry is figured and employed, how its traditional literary territory is invaded by the ambitious prose of the novella. I am interested not only in Conrad's implementation of poetic techniques such as repetition, rhythm, image and symbolic pattern to pioneer a modernist prose style, but also in the specific ways the categories poetry and prose are constituted as cultural categories in the uniquely Conradian, and in the generally modern, universe. It is not so much the technical or formal differences between verse and prose that are at issue here than the different practical functions assigned to each, what ideological purposes each serves within the particular historical context of late Victorian imperialism. The genre of poetry, in particular, is saturated with historically

variable preconceptions that play a decisive role in determining its scope in the social as well as in the literary realm. Since, as Heart of Darkness so acutely demonstrates, poetry is situated within a system of discourses whose values are determined institutionally and socially, we need to consider it not simply as the lyrical expression of a private individual but rather as a collective utterance that serves to legitimize or subvert predominant structures of power and knowledge. Thus, working with Fredric Jameson's assumption that "form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right,"² I first consider the ideological ramifications of Conrad's hybrid poetic prose, discussing the divergent social functions of poetry and prose in Marlow's imperial world. Singling out especially the dialectical contest I see operating between a nonlinear, subjective lyricism and the sequential, rational demands of narrative, I then assess the roles these fundamentally distinct discourses play in constituting--and thus limiting or liberating--human subjectivity within the colonial realm of Conrad's novel.

Remarks on the poetic aspects, however variously conceived, of Conrad's writing style have become staples of Conradian scholarship; rare it is to find a critical study that does not at least briefly assess the "musical," "lyrical," "rhythmic," "suggestive," "incoherent," "non-representational," "subjective," or "atmospheric" qualities of Conrad's fiction. This is particularly true with regard to Heart of Darkness, generally considered the most poetic text of Conrad's oeuvre. Unfortunately, critical discussion of, say, the "aura of poetic allusion"³ in that work often does not proceed much beyond vague, typically reverent, passing observation (with the notable exception of Ian Watt's work, mentioned below). Though Conrad's own remarks on the so-called symbolist aspects of his work fail to clarify matters, it is probable that, like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and other modern British novelists, Conrad infused his prose with the methods of French Symbolist poetry in order to counter what was perceived as the increasingly burdensome demands of narrative realism and to add notes of mystery, symbolism and musical form to fictional prose. For modern

fiction writers, the techniques of Symbolist verse suggested ways of representing the mind and emotions that transcended the rationalist analytical methods typically employed by discursive prose forms, including the realistic novel, of the nineteenth century. The result, in Heart of Darkness, was not merely a new type of formally innovative prose; the poetic forms employed in Conrad's novella also suggested new avenues of perceiving and interpreting the imperial experience. While these new ways of looking and understanding did not necessarily result in subversive critiques of imperialist practice, they did offer liberating glimpses of alternatives to imperialist ways of approaching the world.

Despite the poetic qualities of the text--its preoccupation with repetition, rhythm and pattern, subjective, dream-like experience, and open-ended symbolism--poetry is explicitly mentioned only once in the story. This takes place late in the narrative, at the Inner Station, just as the Russian "harlequin" is taking his leave of Marlow. Interestingly, the Russian sums up his impression of Kurtz by referring to the latter's poetic talent:

"Ah! I'll never meet such a man again. You ought to have heard him recite poetry--his own too it was, he told me. Poetry!" He rolled his eyes at the recollection of these delights. "Oh, he enlarged my mind!"

(140)

The force of this little scene derives in part from the incongruity between the word "poetry" and the alien context in which it is uttered. As the Russian's amazement and Marlow's quiet irony intimate, so delightful and esoteric a pursuit as poetry is decidedly unanticipated and out-of-place in the filthy, brutish world of the Congo. But Kurtz, of course, is singular and astonishing. Despite his ultra-utilitarian bent--exemplified by his unsurpassed success in obtaining ivory--he also finds time to engage in the expressly quixotic pursuit of composing verse. At this point in the narrative, Marlow already knows that Kurtz is a painter, and later

on he learns that Kurtz had also been "a great musician" with a solid chance for "immense success" (153). These cultural pursuits--poetry, painting and music--comprise the artistic triad Conrad sets up as antithetical to the prosaic, routine practices of capitalism and colonialism. Unlike "correct entries" and "readable reports," art plays no essential role in the bureaucratic system of the company. It doesn't serve to obtain ivory or reform savage customs, but rather "enlarges the mind"; it is a disinterested or marginal "delight" at odds with the sober duty and efficiency required by the Company. Indeed, art as portrayed in Heart of Darkness can also serve to critique the imperialist project, as evidenced by Kurtz's painting "representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre--almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister" (79)--obviously insinuating the hypocritical aspects of European "justice" in Africa.⁵

We know too that Kurtz was a master of written prose. His report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs is described by Marlow as "a beautiful piece of writing" demonstrating an "unbounded power of eloquence--of words--of burning noble words" (118, *emphasis added*). Eloquence for Conrad, as Jeremy Hawthorn has pointed out, is a highly ambivalent and suspect talent, a word that Conrad "hardly ever uses innocently" and that "nearly always implies a morally suspect facility with words, an ability to build beautiful verbal structures which are at variance with what is really the case."⁶ With regard to Kurtz's report, eloquence and nobility of purpose serve to associate prose with the ideological strategy of couching grand ideas about progress and civilization in fine, often empty, rhetorical phrases that beguile individuals with the dubious notion that they are participating in a noble collective mission. Another work of prose--Towser's An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship--drives home this point. Marlow comments:

The matter looked dreary reading enough with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures and the copy was sixty years old. ...Not a very enthralling book, but

at first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern about the right way of going to work which made these humble pages...luminous with another than a professional light" (99, *emphasis added*).

Such light is not the illuminating radiance of art, here, but rather the sham, blinding glare of the often hypocritical ideas bolstering the "great work" of civilization. Towser's book, Marlow suggests, tries to raise the work of imperialism above the realm of toil and plunder by quietly glorifying it as a noble collective mission in which the "honest concern" of every individual plays an essential role. Read in the larger context of the novel, however, Marlow's reading of Towser is called into question by less confident observations, such as the understated remark that "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (50-51). If Towser's book represents one of those ideas that "redeems" the "brute" conquest of the earth ("What redeems it is the idea only" [50-51]), it does so only if one does not look into it too much, only if one refuses to contemplate a larger historical picture that takes non-European and anti-imperialist viewpoints into consideration.⁷

Conrad's fictional prose comprising Heart of Darkness occupies an ambivalent space somewhere among these other discourses of art, poetry, rhetoric, reports, non-fictional prose. As a romantic story of adventure set in a real world of colonial exploitation, the work serves--to some extent it is difficult to measure--to reproduce imperial ideology and participates at least marginally in the task of constituting subjects who will be prepared to carry out the demands of life and work in an era of capitalist expansion: "to celebrate adventure," one critic writes, "is to celebrate empire, and vice versa."⁸ However, the complexity of Conrad's text renders its ideological status radically ambivalent. Despite the profoundly disturbing racism critics have exposed in the work, it does take long strides

toward critiquing the most egregious excesses of colonialism and debunking the most prominent clichés of capitalist thought.⁹ The very possibility of "imagining the unimaginable"--civilizers as savages, cannibals as restrained beings, England as seat of darkness and Africa a place of light--does at least indicate that the narrative vessel of Heart of Darkness is piloted by one attuned to complexities and unsettling implications, by an eccentric who "did not represent his class" (48).¹⁰

That Marlow is to be distinguished from typical seamen/colonialists is borne out most explicitly by the manner in which he relates "one of [his] inconclusive experiences," as the frame narrator disparagingly puts it (51). For Marlow's "inconclusive" manner of telling, a narrative technique that is compared to a spectral haze, expresses merely an ambiguous morality, an ethical ambivalence reinforced by the novel's much-discussed undermining of traditional narrative progression, climax and closure. Heart of Darkness resists the textual closure of traditional narratives, which supposedly yield an "inner" substance of meaning. Meeting Kurtz provides no conventional end-punctuation to the tale. Full signification is endlessly deferred by Conrad's "rhetoric of enigma," by a Symbolist aesthetic that refuses to overtly "name," and by the tale's complex, nested frame narration.¹¹ Edward Said and others have argued that such a loss of narrative certainty corresponds with and reflects the demise of imperial confidence and mastery;¹² indeed, in Heart of Darkness it does seem as if the narrative disruptions signal a loss of confidence in imperial modes of cognition, which at times lack the capacity to comprehend Africa. Hearing the strange music of drums in the forest, for instance, Marlow admits,

“Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell.... We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet.... The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us--who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings” (95-96).

The inadequacy of European ways of understanding the African world is driven home in another way when Marlow comments on the utterly inappropriate manner the company has devised to pay the cannibals--with lengths of copper wire which cannot be traded. Marlow observes: "unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them" (104). Like these pieces of useless copper wire, European narrative traditions seem unfit for the African experience, and it is perhaps in order to compensate for such deficiency that Conrad "poeticizes" Marlow's storytelling. As mentioned above, Marlow's narrative techniques--which result in a fog of semantic ambiguity, an "outer haze of meaning surrounding the story"--may of course be associated with what are now generally considered to be the Symbolist methods of Modernist novels I touched on earlier.¹³ In Heart of Darkness, interestingly enough, the image of a haze plays a crucial symbolic role in at least one key episode, when the steamer, mired in fog, is threatened by a "savage clamour" (105) from the bush. Marlow reports: "What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, always around her--and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere..." (102). The narrative uneasiness and concomitant threat to imperial mastery symbolically elicited by haze in the novel is perhaps best reflected in one pilgrim's fearful comment: "We will all be butchered in this fog" (102).

It is telling, too, that Conrad himself associated the symbolic, suggestive, and inconclusive quality of prose writing specifically with poetry and art. To be a writer, he wrote in a 1895 letter, "you must treat events...as the outward sign[s] of inward feelings," and to accomplish this "you must cultivate your poetic faculty...."¹⁴ He writes in another, later letter:

A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character. All the great creations of literature

have been symbolic, and in that way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty.¹⁵

Though in the same breath Conrad explicitly dissociates himself from the "literary proceedings" of the "Symbolist School of poets or prose writers," his work undeniably stands on the shoulders of that movement, owing a debt not only to the avant-garde techniques pioneered by Symbolist poets but also to the increased respect the novel gained in part by associating itself with what was then considered the "morally superior" genre of poetry.¹⁶ Indeed, in addition to its Symbolist inheritance, Conrad's text hints at the influence of nineteenth-century poems rooted in the tradition of oral storytelling, such as "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner."¹⁷ Marlow is, then, a remote descendent of the conventional seaman-storyteller so prevalent in lyric verse. He is kin to the narrator of Wordsworth's "The Thorn" as well as to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, and such a poetic ancestry makes itself felt as a strange, submerged, almost hidden presence in Conrad's text. For poetry in Heart of Darkness finds expression less in outright rhetorical flourish or stylistic techniques than in the prose's "unconscious" poetic attitudes and obscured origins. Running parallel with the narrative of Marlow's journey upriver is another journey--the effaced passage of prose fiction into the "impenetrable" literary forests of nineteenth-century Symbolist and lyric-inspired verse.

It would be instructive now to take a close look at one particularly allusive passage in Heart of Darkness, one that occurs near the beginning of the second section of the tale, after Marlow finally gets his rivets and the rusty old steamer begins its uncertain voyage upriver to the Inner Station. The passage begins with what seems to be a straightforward realistic description of the African landscape:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on,

deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On the silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands (92-93).

The apparently realistic use of language here, however, may on closer inspection be recognized as comprised of poetic tropes. The opening simile, the personification of nature ("rioting," "kings," "sunned themselves," "mob"), and the oxymorons ("empty stream," "great silence," joyless sunshine) all serve to convey the extremities of an African experience that tests not only the senses but the language used to describe sensory experience. Despite the great distances and the absence of people, the landscape seems close and crowded, an effect perhaps of the passage's prolixity and parataxis ("warm, thick, heavy, sluggish"). There is a faint suggestion of social anarchy ("rioting," "mob") that seems not accidental, and the thick alliteration, assonance and consonance in the sentence "On the silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side" appears quite deliberate. Taken together, these devices indicate a close attention to the texture of language, to what might be called Conrad's poetic rhetoric; the well-crafted style underscores the constructed, artificial and non-mimetic nature of even realistic description.

Conrad follows up this description of the physical setting with psychological and tonal speculations:

you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had once known--somewhere--far away--in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect (93).

Drawing his readers/listeners in with his use of second-person pronouns, Conrad here continues his use of contrasts (river with desert, past with present, dream with reality, stillness with unrest) and moves toward a more abstract depiction of Africa ("implacable force," "inscrutable intention") as a malevolent, vengeful other. In the concluding section of the passage, Conrad invokes the European values--hard work, perseverance, dutifulness--that will supposedly protect an individual (Marlow, in this case) from such life-threatening African vengeance:

I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it anymore; I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the nights for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality--the reality I tell you--fades. The inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for--what is it? half-a-crown a tumble (93-94).

It is not difficult to understand why this passage is often cited by critics intent on underscoring Conrad's poetic force. Perhaps nowhere in the text is naturalistic description of the voyage upriver so intimately blended with symbolic suggestiveness as in this single paragraph. Replete with the concrete sensory details expected of conventional realistic description, the passage also resonates with a figurative energy that serves to characterize the journey symbolically as "something more than" an autobiographical, naturalistic account of one man's experience of European colonialism in the African Congo. Marlow's voyage becomes a figure for civilized man's apprehensive return to his primeval origins, a voyage in which the self is frighteningly bewitched, stripped of the ideological conventions it once relied on to understand the world, and confronted by a malevolent reality which stares back at the disoriented traveler with an unsettling gaze. The voyage becomes a figure for the

search for truth, a "truth stripped of its cloak of time" (97) that can only be found beyond the margins of knowledge set by European civilization. Thus, over and above a purely stylistic strategy, in Jameson's words, "to derealize the content and make it available for consumption on some purely aesthetic level," there is also the production of a new metaphysics, "a new myth about the 'meaning' of life and the absurdity of existence in the face of a malevolent nature."¹⁸ This myth is couched in an adventurous, exotic search for universal truth or primitive knowledge that displaces or, in Said's vision, "obscures the highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced."¹⁹

As a search for truth, the figure of the voyage may be associated with another enterprise with similar goals--the literary project, the work of writing and interpreting. For Marlow's journey upriver bears striking similarities to Conrad's act of producing the story. Like Marlow the steamboat captain, Conrad the writer must proceed "mostly by inspiration"; like Marlow watching the channel for "signs of hidden banks...and dead wood," Conrad must be sensitive to meaningful details along his way in order to produce "with immense effort a thin trickle of MS"²⁰--a curious trope which interestingly connects Conrad's literary production with the "precious trickle of ivory" (68) Kurtz extracts from the bush. That Conrad himself associated his project of writing with Marlow's captainship is suggested by a letter Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett in which he refers to Heart of Darkness as a story "I myself tried to shape blindfold";²¹ Marlow offers a similar analogy when, offering his listeners a figure for his piloting the steamboat, he suggests picturing "a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road" (94).²² Marlow's task of keeping the steamboat afloat and moving it upriver toward the Inner Station, then, is analogous to Conrad's task of keeping the story moving forward toward its revelation.

In such a scenario, the figure of the river plays a central role in representing the linear movement of narrative plot, a concept closely linked with the broader notion of

progress--that typical, even essential, principle of the imperialist mind-set. The forest, on the other hand, may serve as a figure for poetic suggestiveness, indeterminacy, incoherence, inconclusiveness, and ambiguity.²³ That the forest is "impenetrable" might be considered a figural evocation of the utter difficulty of navigating past and present poetic discourse.

Conrad's depiction of nature in Heart of Darkness is eerily similar to that found in Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances," for instance, and Conrad's anthropomorphism of nature seems imbued with Wordsworthian Romanticism: posited as the city's other, as a retreat from civilization, nature is personified as an agent of ultimate knowledge and truth.²⁴

Unlike Wordsworthian nature, however, the forest Marlow encounters is utterly alien to human sympathy; it is inscrutable, impenetrable, and ultimately unreadable. Moreover, the truth it contains is no longer a source of peace but of distress. This is because, over the stretch of the hundred years since Wordsworth's day, nature had been transformed from a beneficent school of universal sympathy to a swamp of moral darkness; through an unrelenting socio-cultural syllogism powered by capitalist enterprise, it had become the place of Kurtz's horrors, the out-of-sight site of the unchecked machinations of imperialism. "By the time Conrad arrived," Hunt Hawkins writes of Conrad's arrival in the Congo in 1890, "pressure from Arab slaving, along with increasing Belgian exploitation, had devastated the region."²⁵ Indeed, the forest, which "looked at you with a vengeful aspect," seems to accuse its observer of some horrible infraction, the "fantastic invasion" of Africa by greedy and callous explorers in search of raw materials and new markets. Indeed, as Marlow tries to describe the strange uneasiness the forest inspires in him, he seems to touch a soft spot in one of his silent listeners aboard the Nellie, as if he had probed into a source of hidden guilt. It is arresting that this tender spot pertains to working for profit, performing "monkey tricks" and "tight-rope" acts for "half a crown a tumble." Significantly, this is one of the few crucial points in Conrad's text where the narrative breaks out of Marlow's frame tale in order to insert what amounts to an admonitory ideological threat: "Try to be civil,

Marlow, 'growled a voice" (36). It is as though some invisible hand intervenes at the precise moment Conrad comes too close to exposing the fact that nature is treated merely as raw material for the capitalistic labor process, a fact that the alienating, anthropomorphic myth had just attempted to displace.

On another level, the Romantic and Symbolist attitudes of Heart of Darkness do underscore its gestures toward socially unmediated, subjective, even hallucinatory experience. In wanting to strip away the traps of civilization in a return to primitive nature, Conrad's tale attempts to reaffirm the stability of the subject who is able to stand apart from society and engage in a pure consubstantiality with the world. Yet in Conrad's work, this desire for unmediated experience is clouded by the suspicion that consubstantiality with "pagan"²⁶ or savage nature will result in meanings too meaningful, meanings too horrible, for an individual to bear--as borne out in the example of Kurtz. Thus Marlow is troubled by a double burden: the pervasive anxiety of meaninglessness that gives rise to his metaphysical and anthropomorphic treatment of nature, and the fear that an indulgent surfeit of meaning will result in insanity or death.

The apprehension that experience--particularly the reified experience of Company bureaucrats--is meaningless leads Marlow to explore--at least tentatively--what might be called, to use Leo Bersani's term, "fragmentary" desire; Bersani defines fragmentary desire as an individual's quest for "heterogeneity of...desiring impulses," the urge to go beyond her socially defined, centered self by transgressing the limits of conventional forms both social and literary.²⁷ In Conrad's passage quoted at length above, such fragmentary desire can be associated with what I distinguish as Marlow's poetic proclivities, his obsession with gleaning the meaning of the forest's "impenetrable" and "bewitching" gaze, his desire to "enlarge the mind" by contemplating peripheral or exfoliative meanings not related to the central interests of capitalist enterprise, figured in the text as navigation and captainship. Opposed to these fragmentary desires are what Bersani calls "structured" desires, which

provide the basis for coherency and unification of the self by sublimating heterogeneous urges into some dominating interest or project. In the passage from Heart of Darkness quoted earlier, Marlow's structured desires are what protect him from being inundated or overwhelmed by the forest's horrible meanings. Marlow invokes such structured desires as a series of "excuses" for his not understanding the forest; even his rhetoric becomes firmly structured by anaphora as he claims he avoided fully returning the forest's gaze because "I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern...the signs of hidden banks.... I had to keep a look-out for signs of dead wood we could cut up in the nights for next day's steaming." Forced to attend to such "surface truths," to the demands of seamanship and steam, Marlow absolves himself from confronting the dangerous peripheral seductions which might diffuse or dissipate his otherwise structured existence.

As the demands of captainship parallel the strictures of narrative, Marlow's preoccupation with the forest holds analogous to the text's engagement with poetry. Virtually effaced, yet tingeing the entire novella, poetry becomes an unrestrained play of the imagination that threatens to fragment and incapacitate the boat captain--and the narrator--in hallucinatory speculations about the forest's "inscrutable intention." Too much poetry would stop the flow of narrative and short-circuit novelistic suspense by becoming sidetracked with other, nonlinear desires. Because of this, poetic or fragmentary desires are diametrically opposed to the prosaic work of imperialism, which proscribes the practice of certain activities (speculating about "hidden" meanings) and demands engagement in others (steering the boat) in order to preserve that unified self capable of functioning in the Western capitalist, colonialist or imperialist system. Ultimately, then, the dialectic of poetry and prose in Heart of Darkness is implicated in broader historical and metaphysical issues, issues which find their supreme expression in the contradictory figure of Kurtz, whose paradoxical character attempts to embrace both poetry and imperialism.

In Kurtz's world, the poetic sensibility is subsumed by the dominant cultural authority of prose; ultimately, any aesthetic pursuit becomes equated with a violent rupture from justice. One such rupture is compellingly illustrated upon the steamer's arrival at the Inner Station, when Marlow, surveying the scene with a telescopic field glass, comes across what he had initially thought to be "attempts at ornamentation" (57): a series of posts arranged around the station that were topped by peculiar knobs of wood. "I returned [my sight]," Marlow explains, "deliberately to the first I had seen--and there it was black, dried, shrunken, with closed eyelids--a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth..." (57). In the Congo, then, ornamental beauty is replaced by signs of a violent system of authority and dominance.²⁸ At Kurtz's Inner Station, the "merely" ornamental is replaced by what Marlow calls the "symbolic" (57)--the "expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing" (57) message of authority emitted by this display of the decapitated, mutilated, shrunken heads of so-called "rebels" (58). Yet intriguingly, despite the obvious political ramifications of that term ("rebels"), Marlow insists on the apolitical, non-commercial and non-utilitarian aspects of this gruesome exhibit of power: "I want you clearly to understand," Marlow tells his listeners, "that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts..." (57). Marlow's attempt to efface the social and political implications of those "non-ornamental" heads by identifying their existence with Kurtz's personal excesses is permeated with layers of Conradian narrative irony we will perhaps never be able to penetrate. The fact, however, that Marlow, on seeing Kurtz for the first time, becomes aware of the failure of referential discourse, of the radical disjunction between words and things, may indicate that Conrad is at least aware of the non-referential aspects of much of his own discourse. Hawkins makes a similar point: "as Conrad presents history...it is at best no more than words, and words are opaque, unable to convey reality. Worse than that, words are treacherous, unstable, shifting,

distorting. Conrad frequently voiced his mistrust of language, the very medium of his craft.”²⁹ The disjunction between history and fiction in Heart of Darkness seem unbreachable. Reading Conrad, are we not, as Watt has put it, made aware instead of "the ease with which the individual can be unaware of the disjunction between his words and his works in a society which is so widely and deeply fissured by the contradictions between its pretenses and its realities" (235)?

Read as a representation of the unconscious imperial mind-set, Heart of Darkness disturbingly suggests poetic prose's intimate connection with the more concrete activities of colonization and their ideological effects. Lyrical narrative seems to conscript poetry into its service, enslaving it to carry out the crucial task that more sequential narrative is thought no longer capable of accomplishing: to produce meaning. The supreme conventional ending of traditional plot--"his last words were your name"--is shown to be an outright and unserviceable lie. Thus, only through a bewildering encounter with the unknown; only, to use Arthur Rimbaud's words, through "a long, gigantic and rational derangement"³⁰ of traditional orders could turn-of-the-century civilization attempt to save itself from its own horrors. Were it not for characters like Kurtz, who take the logic of imperialism to its extreme conclusions, who find illumination in the abyss of human travail, would the crimes of the colonialist enterprise be as clearly visible? Would we be thinking about Conrad's work at all if it weren't for the "poetic force" of Kurtz's transgressions, his explorations beyond the structured desires of imperialist discourse? Is it not madness itself, as Foucault has suggested, that compels us to desist our own madneses?³¹

Notes

1. "Heart of Darkness," in The Complete Works of Joseph Conrad, vol. 16 (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924) p. 26. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.

2. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 141.
3. C.B. Cox, Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination (London: Dent, 1974), p. 47.
4. Peters, John G. Conrad and Impressionism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
5. For a discussion of the implications of Kurtz's painting, see Brian W. Shaffer, The Blinding Torch: Modern British Fiction and the Discourse of Civilization (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 47-57.
6. Emphases added. Quoted in Allon White, The Uses of Obscurity (Boston: Routledge, 1981), p. 125. See White for further discussion of Conrad's "deep suspicion" of eloquence and rhetoric.
7. For other discussions of the significance of Towser's book, see Homi K. Bhabba, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp. 102-122, and V.S. Naipaul, "Conrad's Darkness," in The Return of Eva Peron (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. 215-216.
8. Martin Green, Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p.37.
9. On racism in Heart of Darkness, see essays by Chinua Achebe, Francis B. Singh, and C.P. Sarvan in Heart of Darkness, 3d ed., ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988); Patrick Brantlinger, "Epilogue: Kurtz's 'Darkness' and Conrad's Heart of Darkness," in Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914 (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988); and Hunt Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism in Heart of Darkness," Conradiana 14:3 (1982): pp. 163-171.
10. On Marlow's sympathies for Africans, see Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism in Heart of Darkness," p. 168.
11. For a full discussion of these narrative issues, see for instance Peter Brooks, "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's Heart of Darkness," in Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York: Vintage, 1984).
12. Benita Parry, "Narrating Imperialism," in Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History, eds. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 227-246.
13. For a general discussion, see Melvin J. Friedman, "The Symbolist Novel: Huysmans to Malraux," in Modernism: 1890-1930, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 453-466. Other significant appraisals of poetic prose include E.M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, 1927), Alan Friedman's The Turn of the Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), and Ralph Freedman's The Lyrical Novel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
14. "To Edward Noble," 28 Oct 1895. The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume I: 1861-1897, eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 252, emphasis added..

15. "To Barrett H. Clark," 4 May 1918. Joseph Conrad on Fiction, ed. Walter F. Wright (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), p. 36.
16. See, for instance, Henry James's critical essays on fiction in Henry James: Selected Literary Criticism, ed. Morris Shapira (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981). Northrop Frye likewise sees fiction's reputation as dependent on poetry when he states that "any attempt to give literary dignity to prose is likely to give it some of the characteristics of verse." Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 263.
17. On comparisons of this poem with "Heart of Darkness," see Warren U. Ober, "Heart of Darkness: 'The Ancient Mariner' a Hundred Years Later," in the Dalhousie Review 45 (Autumn 1965), pp. 333-337, and Alan D. Perlis, "Coleridge and Conrad: Spectral Illuminations, Widening Frames," Journal of Narrative Technique 12 (Fall 1982), pp. 167-76.
18. Jameson, pp. 214 and 216, respectively.
19. Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 10.
20. "To William Blackwood," 13 Dec 1898. The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume II: 1898-1902, eds. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 129.
21. From a letter to Edward Garnet quoted in Robert F. Haugh, Joseph Conrad: A Discovery in Design (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 35, emphasis added.
22. Emphasis added. The morally resonant word "blindfold" also recalls the obvious symbolism of the blindfolded woman of justice in Kurtz's painting.
23. On the aesthetic and metaphysical ramifications of forests in Western literature, see Robert Pogue Harrison, Forests: The Shadow of Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
24. Jonathan Culler, "Intertextuality and Interpretation: Baudelaire's 'Correspondences,'" in Nineteenth Century French Poetry, ed. Christopher Prendergast (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990) p. 122.
25. Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism in Heart of Darkness," 164.
26. A term associated with Arthur Rimbaud. For a full discussion of the affinities of Rimbaud and Kurtz, see John Parras, Modern Poetic Prose: Lyricism, Narrative, and the Social Implications of Generic Form, Diss. Columbia University, 1996 (UMI, 1996), 9616730, pp. 153-159.
27. Leo Bersani, A Future for Astyanax (1969. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 5-7.
28. In a widely reported 1898 incident that followed a "punitive military expedition," Stanley Falls station chief Captain Léon Rom apparently used human heads as "decorations" for his flower bed. Cf. Adam Hochschild, King Leopold's Ghost (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) p. 145.
29. Hunt Hawkins, "Conrad's Heart of Darkness: Politics and History," Conradiana, 24: 3 (1992), p. 208.

30. "Le Poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de *tous les sens*." "A Paul Demeny," 15 Mai 1871. Rpt. in Arthur Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) pp. 304-305.

31. Cf. Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965).