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*The Depths of the Heights: Reading
Conrad with America's Soldiers*

FOR ONE WHO HAS SPENT HIS ENTIRE ADULT life in academic settings, a trip to Colorado Springs, Colorado, seems like an inverted *Heart of Darkness* where, instead of going deeper in towards the horror, the horror, you ascend to space and light. The skies are open above you; and the air, while there's not much of it at 6000 feet, is clean and clear. You find yourself constantly looking up, thinking large thoughts, or no thoughts at all. To the west are the Garden of the Gods and the immensity of Pike's Peak. Just to the north is the campus of James Dobson's vast Focus on the Family, a corporate headquarters, gift shop, and museum of its own history. A couple of miles north from there is the New Life Church founded by the now-disgraced and departed Ted Haggard, both mall and amusement park, filled with milling youth groups on their way to another large room, another inspiring message delivered by a guy in blue jeans who was lost and now is found. And just over there, at the end of that road that winds towards the Rockies, and below the spot where those tiny figures are gently descending to earth (no matter when you happen to glance up), that's the gleaming, geometrical Air Force Academy, where I had been invited to lead a seminar—on *Heart of Darkness*, as it happens—with faculty from humanities Departments.

Going up Academy Boulevard was like traveling to some primal nexus of mystic patriotism, military service, and evangelical Christianity. I found myself worrying that the seminar I was about to lead—one week, nearly twenty hours on one text—might create cognitive dissonance in this place, despite the fact that they, not I, had chosen the text. The Academy is not known for its dedication to literary study; what it has become known for over the past few years are a series of

metastasizing scandals concerning religious harassment by evangelicals, cheating, and unpunished sexual assault. All this might put it in the same category as Brussels as represented in Conrad's book, a city that makes Marlow think of a "whited sepulchre," a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew that describes Pharisees, who "appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."

The more I reflected on the upcoming seminar, the more starkly its Conradian implications stood out. Of course, to a Conradian, all situations are Conradian, but still, it cannot be denied that *Heart of Darkness* has an exceptional representational plasticity. So primal is the situation, so elemental the narrative form (up the river, down the river), so compellingly does the text capture the general theme of modernity-and-its-other, that there are, it sometimes seems, more metaphorical hearts of darkness in the world than any other body parts, or than hearts of any other hue. Modernity generates hearts of darkness with an efficiency, and on a scale, that could only be called modern. Google "Heart of Darkness" and "Joseph Conrad" and you get fewer than 400,000 entries; leave off Conrad so that you are looking not for a text but a concept, and you get nearly 2,000,000. And the characters in the text are so iconic, and are presented with such hyperreal clarity—one at a time, with each occupying a segment of the text—that they seem almost allegories of some aspect of selfhood, like figures in *Pilgrim's Progress*. No matter who you are, you should be able to find yourself somewhere in *Heart of Darkness*.

In fact, you can probably find yourself in several places. Depending on the circumstances, you can float from one icon to another. One moment, you can feel yourself to be an African mistress, wild and free and full-bodied; but then, you discover, the kaleidoscope has turned a tiny bit, and you are actually the Intended—desiccated, deceived, betrayed, and pathetic. Or you could approach a given task in an uncommitted Marlovian spirit as a job involving a bit of adventure with no historical or ideological burden at all—but then find that you are Kurtz, the exemplar of the horrors of modernity laid bare. This actually happens to Marlow, who finds, to his deep discomfiture, that he is insistently linked with Kurtz: the two of them, he hears, are both considered part of "the new gang—the gang of virtue." Everything in the text has, it seems, a "heart" that both negates and expresses it.

So what was I at this moment, and what was my heart? I was an academic going to lead a seminar. An innocent undertaking—but what, precisely, was my job, in its deepest essence? Specifically, what was my relation to the war in which the nation, with the assistance of the Air Force Academy, was currently engaged? Was my real assignment to "humanize" the military, at a time when the conduct of the war was widely seen as degrading the nation that undertaken it? Which of us was the agent of enlightenment—the military that was hard at work creating the conditions of democracy in a distant land, or me? Was I supposed to "darken" the imperial

mission by introducing doubt, fiction, language, and the exposure of ideology into a scene of unreflective patriotism? Did my small mission have a colonial character of its own? If so, how could I accomplish, excuse, or refuse it? Had this mission really been thought through? It seemed the best thing to do was just to keep driving up that road to the hotel, and go to bed.

And so, the following morning at 8:30 AM on a crystal-clear day in July, with questions thronging in my head, I took my seat in a clean but windowless room, along with eighteen members of the Academy faculty. They ranged from a sixty-eight year old senior professor, a civilian who had spent most of his distinguished career at Dartmouth and the University of Maryland, to an undergraduate cadet, with colonels, lieutenant colonels, majors, captains, and some civilian professors in between. They were in the unfamiliar but, for them, refreshing situation of being the “students,” while I was in the unfamiliar and discomfiting situation of being addressed as “Sir” by uniformed personnel. Dissonance all around.

But a seminar is a seminar and so we began. This book, I said, is about someone who leaves the familiar world and ventures into the unknown. Conrad himself had done this, not just by going up the Congo River on a steamer, but by leaving Poland as a teenager and joining the French merchant marine. What, I asked, might motivate someone to do that?

In an American undergraduate classroom, this question might merely have served to get people talking, but since most people in the room would have chosen to go down the expected path, from one protected environment to another, the answers themselves might not have been particularly productive. The question would not have been understood as an invitation to talk about oneself. Here, the question provoked a dozen or more narratives that attempted to map Conrad’s and Marlow’s experiences onto their own decisions to join the military. Each one of the stories that unfurled had its own strikingly individual trajectory. The military might be a subculture in which “the individual” is regarded as an impediment to “trust” or “discipline,” something to be broken down rather than fortified, but each person in the room had come to the military in his or her own way. The Academy had, for them, represented an honorable solution to some difficult problems, a bracing summons to patriotic duty, a way of carrying on a family tradition, a gateway to the world, a life of order and clarity, a way of experiencing managed risk, an opportunity to take pride in oneself, or simply a decent job. “I know exactly why I’m here,” one said. “If I hadn’t joined the military, I’d be driving a milk truck in Auburn, California.” The seminar included those who themselves had graduated from the Academy, as well as those who had joined out of college, during the first Gulf War, at the invasion of Afghanistan, and more recently. Not all were from small towns, not all were escaping grinding poverty or lack of opportunity. In fact, the lone cadet in the seminar was a rogue debutante from North Carolina, who

had astonished her family by foregoing an easier life in favor of military service. All seemed to assume that *Heart of Darkness* was written by a man, Conrad, whom they could understand and who understood them; a man who escaped from unpromising circumstances by joining an institution with an honorable tradition of discipline and service; a man who, as a boy, had wanted to see the world. It was also, more pointedly, about a man, Marlow, who had found himself caught up in a much larger and different narrative than any he had foreseen. It was also about a man, Kurtz, whose commitment to discipline—"the discipline that makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle," as the inscription on the dormitory at the Academy reads—had failed. And it was about an imperial power pursuing an unworthy mission that was justified with rhetoric appealing to the highest universal values.

Like Conrad and Marlow, the members of the seminar were acutely aware of their own marginal status within the institution they had joined. As humanist professors, they represented the "academy" part of "military academy," Athens rather than Sparta, their task being not to teach engineering, aeronautics, or military strategy, but literature, history, and philosophy. But their position on the edge of the main mission gave a certain edge to their comments. Professionally sensitive both to rhetoric and to danger, they were, I noticed, keenly aware of the powerful link between idealistic pronouncements made by high officials and violence visited upon others, including themselves. The Norton edition we were using included a passage of soaring rhetoric attributed to Leopold II, the Belgian sovereign who administered the Congo as a personal possession, with an eye to maximum profit from ivory regardless of the human cost borne by Congolese natives. In a piece entitled "The Sacred Mission of Civilization," Leopold contended that "if, in view of this desirable spread of civilization, we count upon the means of action which confer upon us dominion and the sanction of right, it is not less true that our ultimate end is a work of peace." A connection was immediately drawn to President Bush's 2003 Christmas message to American troops: "You are confronting terrorists abroad so that . . . people around the world can live in peace." When military people hear talk of world peace, they prepare for deployment. "As Walter Benjamin said," a uniformed colonel commented (from out of the clear blue, it seemed to me), "there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism." In general, I began to realize, the participants in this seminar had a highly developed capacity for detecting connections between civilization and barbarism, idealism and violence. Again on the first day, someone asked what had a gifted man like Kurtz was doing in the jungle. Someone else mentioned "the Intended," his fiancée back in Brussels; another noted the piano in her apartment, with its ivory keys. After a pause, one young officer, who had been entirely silent

until then, ventured her first comment, and it was startling and decisive: “She killed him.”

Having taught Conrad many times before, I found myself constantly bumped off balance by comments indicating, for example, considerable sympathy for Marlow as a man who found himself on a mission more problematic than the one he had signed up for and who had to decide whether this new mission still commanded his loyalty; and even for Kurtz as a man sorely tested by extreme isolation and by the deep corruptness of the task he had been assigned. There was less sympathy for Edward Said or Chinua Achebe, authors of two critical texts also included in the Norton edition, texts that have been so firmly attached to Conrad’s in American teaching practice that they almost seem part of it. Said had charged Conrad with an inability to imagine a state of affairs in which Europeans were not dominating Africans; Conrad, he said, could not “grant the natives their freedom.” In American colleges and universities, this argument generally sweeps all opposition aside; here, it met resistance. “The natives don’t want ‘freedom,’” a captain said; “they just want the Belgians to go away. And freedom wouldn’t be Conrad’s to grant anyway.” This critique seemed to be clinched when it was aligned with President Bush’s description of liberty as “God’s gift to humanity,” a gift America was divinely charged with delivering. Achebe’s famous accusation that Conrad was racist received a respectful hearing, but was ultimately dismissed on the grounds that “racism” in the modern sense did not exist in Conrad’s day. It appeared that, from the seminar’s point of view, both Said, a Palestinian, and Achebe, a Nigerian, were “too American” in their perspectives.

Shortly after we reached this comfortable affirmation of the superiority of creative artists over critics, however, we hit a snag. I had wanted to talk about how Marlow insistently turns things inside out. The first instance occurs in his very first words, when he gestures upriver towards the English heartland and says, “This, too, has been one of the dark places of the earth.” Again and again, I noted, Marlow casually offers his listeners a thought-experiment involving a total reversal of present circumstances. Another example would be his explanation of the curious fact that his party encountered no natives on their two-hundred mile tramp to the Central Station. I read the passage: “Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to traveling on the road between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon.” On this day, Wednesday, we had another participant, a young black woman who was only able to attend this one session. She had been looking attentively at me, but at this point she stared down at the book and did not look up for another hour, until the session ended. Two days later, I spotted her at the end of a hallway during one of our breaks, but wasn’t able to make contact, and never saw her again. Conrad presents such

difficulties. Once, some years ago, I was phoning the university bookstore, ordering that semester's texts, including *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* "The . . . Nigger . . . of . . . the . . . 'Narcissus,'" the bookstore employee repeated very slowly as she wrote it down, with, I thought, a certain accusatory emphasis.

The distance between the past horrors of the Congo Free State and the enlightened politics of the present day in America had in a sense made things easy for us. The morality of the case may have troubled Marlow, but after a century of universal condemnation of Leopold's administration, it did not trouble us: the issue was settled. The pastness of the past, and the consolidation of history's judgment, can have an anesthetic effect on discussion. On the last day, however, the anesthesia wore off as we took up Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which translates *Heart of Darkness* into terms that American military people could understand immediately. On this day, the conversation, which had been so free, candid, and direct, became stressed and troubled. In an undergraduate classroom, the discussion might center on Brando's Kurtz; here, it fastened immediately and almost exclusively on Robert Duvall's Lt. Colonel Kilgore, an Army officer (First Squadron, Ninth Cavalry) who, in a famous scene, leads a helicopter attack on a Vietnamese beach village, with speakers blaring "The Ride of the Valkyries." Weathering VC mortars and machine gun fire, he wipes out the village and lands Willard (Martin Sheen) on the river so he can hunt Kurtz down. Mission accomplished, Kilgore adds a gratuitous napalm strike ("I love the smell of napalm in the morning") that improves the surfing. The helicopters, like the playing cards Kilgore places on the corpses of his victims, bear the motto "Death from Above."

In ways the participants appreciated, Kilgore was an excellent officer. He had, as Willard notes, a "weird light around him. You just knew he wasn't gonna get so much as a scratch here." He was devoted to his men and had earned their trust. Under him, they felt motivated and safe. And yet, as one of the women in the seminar pointed out, he deliberately chose to land at a place he knew to be defended in preference to another location where there was no surfing, and lost both men and equipment as a consequence. And while he was a passionate surfer, he killed with a disturbing indifference. Was there a problem? The nation was at war, and some of the Vietnamese, at least—hard to tell which—had the means and the motivation to kill Americans. What did we think of Kilgore?

As a way of approaching, or avoiding, this question, we took up the issue of "Death from Above," which was, after all, what the Air Force was all about. In one sense, a colonel said, death from above is easier and cleaner to inflict than "grime on the ground" (the Army's job) because there is greater distance between one's action, in a plane or a silo, and its consequences. Another participant noted that more imagination is required for the Air Force soldier to grasp what he or she is doing—but, she seemed to imply, because of the increased risk, almost a certainty

in some cases, of civilian casualties, there is a greater shock to the conscience for those who do grasp it. That kind of shock is not good: you can, as one put it, lose your mojo and become tentative, doubtful, or uncommitted, placing yourself and others at greater risk.

About one-third of all Air Force personnel have been to Iraq in recent years, but I was reluctant to ask whether any in the room had actually dropped or launched weapons. When they spoke, they focused on training missions. A female lieutenant colonel recalled being trained to turn the key that would launch a missile from a silo. When she subsequently visited Moscow, it struck her that if that training session had been real, and Moscow had been the target, everything around her would be toxic rubble. Another participant, a male captain, noted that the key used in training was not spring-loaded like the real key, and had a different feel. Pause. Another recalled sending a man whose wife had just given birth to twins on a dangerous assignment during the invasion of Grenada because he was “the most qualified person available,” a decision that still troubled him over twenty years later. He did not say whether the man returned, but he did note that the officer who took his place in that decision-making position committed suicide two months after returning home.

Diverted into channels of personal reflections, the conversation seemed to be losing its way, in search of the main current. There were longer pauses between comments—greater depth but sluggish progress, albeit with moments of sudden clarity emerging from the fog. After nearly an hour circling around Kilgore, a lieutenant colonel with a Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan (dissertation on Seamus Heaney’s treatment of violence), and a refugee from the milk trucks of Auburn, California, broke the silence by saying—as I recall—the following: “I wear this uniform because I believe that, in the end, our way of life is better than any other at defending the *sanctity of the individual*. My understanding of history teaches me that violence is always going to be part of human existence, and my moral sense says that managed violence, in the service of the right principles, is better than the alternatives. What we try to do here . . . is train . . . *reluctant killers*. We teach them how to do things that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. That’s what we do. We stand there in front of our cadets, and we train them to do things they would never do if the nation didn’t ask it of them. And even though the nation asks it, and no matter how disciplined they are, they will still be haunted by what they’ve done. And they have to be. If they aren’t, then we’ve only trained Kilgores, murderers without a conscience.”

After a long silence during which we all stared at the table, we took a break.

The humanities have been the subject of an immense quantity of elevated rhetoric. Distinguished people have described and defended the need for a national investment in the teaching and research in literary studies, history, philosophy, and

the arts. I have read many of these testimonials and have written some myself. I do not recall seeing this particular approach taken before. But this statement grasped the nettle with a boldness that grew in the mind during that long silence, and thereafter.

What are the humanities about if not the cultivation of an informed conscience, a habit of reflection in which the flow of thoughtless action and means-end calculation is interrupted by a consideration of historical contexts and ethical considerations, by an imaginative awareness of the character and consequences of action, by a deep investment in the human condition and its possibilities? If those with such knowledge and such capacities do not assume some kind of responsibility for worldly action, including the management of violence, then that responsibility passes to the Kilgores, and the Kurtzes, of the world.

Even those who serve in the military do not always, much less naturally, think in these terms. Hard training is required in order to achieve an understanding so deeply counterintuitive. What this training inculcates is not simply competence in destruction, but the proper attitude to have toward it. The stated mission of the English Department at the Academy includes instilling in cadets “an appreciation for the culture they’ve promised to defend” even as they carry out the violence that culture occasionally requires. Insofar as humanistic study imbues people with a moral imagination, the real burden of the humanities, as opposed to their manifold pleasures and benefits, does not fall on professors, students, or the culture-loving population in general. That burden is allocated to those whom society charges with the conscience-testing task of sanctioned killing. In a democracy with a volunteer military, the weight falls on that small number of people who have chosen to bear it by enlisting. For them, it is, as Marlow put it, always “a choice of nightmares.” For the rest of us, the key is never spring-loaded, the flights are all simulated.

We had spent a good deal of time over the course of the week talking about the ways that honorable people get ensnarled in and somehow committed to large patterns of action that they would not, if given the option, choose or approve of. Marlow continually remarks on how insistently he is identified with the ivory trade, Belgian rapacity, and Kurtz. It struck me on this final day that despite never having worn a uniform, I was now part of the American military mission, part of homeland defense, even of Operation Iraqi Freedom. My honorarium had been approved by the Pentagon (I was a very small unit in the Wide Area Workflow), which expected me to provide professional development for those whose job was, in a sense, to produce soldiers who would kill with an attitude worthy of a morally enlightened democracy committed to the sanctity of the individual. This mission was implicitly informed by the conviction that a conscience with the capacity to be deeply disturbed, even traumatized, is a precious thing, an indicator of democratic principles and ethical values.

In a culture whose commitment to the freedom of the individual often seems to begin with the freedom from guilt, the military perspective on the humanities is well worth pondering.

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