



Conrad in Trump Country

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ABSTRACT

A meditation on the relevance of Conrad’s “mythic realism” for an understanding of the fears, angers, and desires that have surfaced in a volatile contemporary American populism. Drawing on D.H. Lawrence, Greil Marcus, Michael Taussig, and on a reading of *Heart of Darkness*, the essay argues that we need to go beyond critical distance and rationality to grapple with the violence that both supports and subverts liberal moral and social orders.

More than forty years ago, the opening chapter from J. Hillis Miller’s *Poets of Reality* inspired me to write about Conrad. It’s a pleasure to be on the same program with him and offer my appreciation.

But that was then. Where are we now?

The day after Trump’s election, like many, I was in shock. The news cycle that had previously preoccupied and often reassured me now felt extremely toxic. All I wanted to do was bury my head in the sand until I calmed down. And that would take a while.

To occupy my waking hours (sleep was less under control . . .), I returned to a project on Joseph Conrad. Something of a regression. I’d been working on it since graduate school, on and off—abandoned several times. Maybe I could somehow revive this early enthusiasm, a reading (yet another reading!) of *Heart of Darkness*.

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1 Escapism and self-absorption.

2 But as I re-entered Conrad's universe—*Heart of Darkness* along with its
3 accompanying novels, letters, and essays—I found much of relevance to our
4 present moment. A kind of lucid grappling with ambiguous realities, dark
5 truths. Conrad, for all his pessimism, was never a cynic. Reading him today
6 helps us “stay with the trouble,” as my colleague Donna Haraway might say.

7 * * *

8 A quotation from D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1923:

9
10 Always the same. The deliberate consciousness of Americans so fair and
11 smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish. Destroy! destroy!
12 destroy! hums the under-consciousness. Love and produce! Love and pro-
13 duce! cackles the upper consciousness. And the world hears only the Love-
14 and-produce cackle. Refuses to hear the hum of desperation underneath.
15 (Lawrence, qtd. in Marcus 154)

16
17 Both Conrad and Lawrence have something to say about our current moment
18 in the United States.

19 “The hum of desperation underneath”: that hum is no longer so muffled in
20 our current conjuncture—a willingness to blow it all up, roll the dice, embrace
21 the con-man. . . . How to understand this oft-remarked popular “anger”? We
22 can chalk it up to Clintonism and Wall Street, blaming the cruelties of the
23 unfettered market, the abandonment of neoliberalism's victims. All true. But
24 there's something deeper to contend with, something profoundly “American”
25 bubbling in Trumpist populism, that D.H. Lawrence and Greil Marcus are on
26 to. Something to do with loss, rage, violence, and redemption.

27 Greil Marcus is writing about Bob Dylan and American roots music, mes-
28 sages from a world he calls “the old weird America.” After invoking Lawrence,
29 he adds: “With Doc Boggs that hum [of destruction and desperation] is right
30 on the surface.” Doc Boggs was an Appalachian banjo player and singer, forty
31 years a miner and United Mine Workers member, who recorded some songs in
32 the 1920s, lost everything, got religion for a time, pawned his banjo, and then
33 was rediscovered by Mike Seeger during the 1960s folk revival.

34 Seeger recorded Boggs's life story, and Marcus makes a chapter out of it.
35 The hard, dangerous work of mining. Alcohol and fights. The 1920s and 1930s
36 in the hills of lawless western Virginia where a lot of men carried guns and
37 shot at each other over small arguments. Often about some matter of respect.

38 Boggs tells Seeger about an almost-realized plan to murder all his in-laws:
39S “I'm not bragging about it or nothing like that. That's the kind of person I was,
40R and if a person do enough to me today, they'd cause me to kill them.” [. . .]





“I just didn’t want to be run over and walked on.” [Looking back at his youth] “I’d as much as kill someone as to be walked on.” And now, presumably older and wiser: “I’d let a fellow walk on me a little bit . . . before I’d kill ’im.”

Boggs lived in what turned into Trump country. And folks from his homeland have lately been feeling walked on, more than a little bit.

And it was always more than personal . . .

“Boggs explained, again and again,” Marcus writes, “All of this—it was not really about him. It was about the USA.” From Seeger’s tape: “I felt I’m just as good as the other person. We’s all borned equal. Came into this world with nothin’, we go out with nothin’. We all supposed to have the same chance, under our Constitution, in *this world*” (166).

Anger, revenge, redemption . . . “under our Constitution.”

This weird old America and its mostly rural roots . . . I used to love this music (I was a folk musician)—its vernacular “surrealism,” as Marcus calls it. Bizarre juxtapositions: the songs of loss, nostalgia, murder, death, and redemption. It had a certain campy charm for me then. Now I’m scared.

I’m feeling my way in Conrad’s darkness, here and now in the USA—the thinness of civility, the violence of liberal civilization, inseparable from its rationality and noble ideals, summed up in Kurtz’s idealistic, but empty peroration and its scrawled addendum: “Exterminate all the brutes!” No one doubts the authenticity of that outburst.

The scrawl is what seethes under the surface, can’t be said in public. Marlow had to tear off the addendum before presenting the text to a Belgian journalist—if it was going to make any sense. The scrawl reveals the racism and fear-driven aggression that drives the law, justifies the imposition of order. The proximity of madness and idealism.

You’ll all recall Bertrand Russell’s summation of *Heart of Darkness*: “Of all that he had written I admired most the terrible story called *The Heart of Darkness*, in which a rather weak idealist is driven mad by the horror of the tropical forest and loneliness among savages. This story expresses, I think, most completely his philosophy of life. I felt, though I do not know whether he would have accepted such an image, that he thought of civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava” (Russell 87).

For Conrad, rationality is always menaced. He takes self-delusion and phantasm seriously, recognizing that these dangerous desires, hopes, and fears can’t be refuted, or somehow cured, by enlightened truth, by facts and reason.

* * *

The volatile entanglement of fact and myth is explored, with help from Conrad and Walter Benjamin, by the anthropologist Michael Taussig in his bril-

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liant book, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1978). It's a study of imperial terror and its aftermaths.

Taussig begins with the early twentieth-century rubber boom in the Putamayo region of Colombian Amazonia—a case of rapacious and at times genocidal extractive capitalism. He compares it to King Leopold's Congo, a decade earlier, with a link provided by the anti-Imperial reformer, Roger Casement.

Casement wrote two detailed, carefully documented reports that went some way to publicizing, and restraining, the abuses first in the Congo, then in the Putamayo. When Joseph Conrad, then a sea captain named Korzeniowski, arrived in Africa in 1899, he met Casement, whom he found to be the only sympathetic white man on the scene. I can't go into their brief encounter and subsequent relations, or Casement's later career as an anti-colonial Irish nationalist.

Taussig develops a comparison between Conrad's myth-infused writing about the Congo and Casement's reportage. He draws on Frederick Karl, who distinguishes “three Congos: Leopold's, which operated behind intricate disguises and deceptions; Casement's which was close to the reality; and Conrad's, which fell midway between the other two, as he attempted to penetrate the veil, and yet was anxious to retain its hallucinogenic quality” (Karl 287).

Conrad's fantastic realism, Taussig writes, “requires leaving the ambiguities intact—the greatness of the horror that is Kurtz, the mistiness of terror, the aesthetics of violence, and the complex of desire and repression that primitivism constantly arouses. Here the myth is not ‘explained’ so that it can be ‘explained away,’ as in the forlorn attempts of social science” (21).

You have “to feel your way,” Taussig writes, “deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness, something very different from moralizing from the sidelines or setting forth the contradictions involved. The political artistry involved in the mythic subversion of myth has to involve a deep immersion in the mythic naturalism of the political unconscious of the epoch” (11).

“In the political unconscious immerse . . .”?

Immersion is dangerous. Taussig worries, and so do I: “might not a mythic derealization of the real run the risk of being overpowered by the mythology it is using? Is there not the distinct desire in *Heart of Darkness* for Kurtz's greatness, horrible as it is? Is not horror made beautiful and primitivism exoticized throughout this book?” (10).

Better to stay on the solid ground of critical realism and hard facts? Safer, perhaps—like Marlow clinging to his steamboat and its “surface wisdom”—but at a cost. The cost of repressing, or explaining away, the beliefs, fantasies, desires, wild hopes, ugly fears, raging anger, that underlie regimes of repression and terror.





Taussig draws from Brecht, Benjamin, magical realism . . . to evoke this jagged and dreamlike reality. He doesn't dismiss Casement's factual documentation, which was appropriate and effective for a government inquiry, but he suggests that it barely scratches the surface of the Congo or Putamayo terror.

And suddenly I'm remembering Vietnam: Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and the excessive, fantastic "realism" of *Apocalypse Now*.

* * *

How to respond adequately to the manic reality of *contemporary* America? Do we double down on rationality? Verifiable statistics, etc. Just keep on fact-checking and in the end folks will agree with us?

Facts need to be part of compelling narratives and these must address psychic not just material realities—dreams, desires, fears, hopes . . .

Have we finally learned the limits of cultural and ideological "critique?" For example: Thinking of Republican voters in depressed states as uneducated, or governed by false consciousness (e.g., Thomas Frank, *What's Wrong with Kansas?*). Yes, ideologies need to be demystified. And criticism can reveal the "constitutive outsides" of social and semiological systems. These and other modes of critical analysis contribute to a project of subversion or destabilization. All this is good and illuminating. For decades, the 1980s and 1990s, during the rise of neo-liberal hegemony, it was what I and many other left-intellectuals were doing. We became quite sophisticated. But the transformative politics of that kind of critical work proved sadly limited.

It's one thing to speak of "othering," or of "constitutive outsides." But were we really confronting the interpellative, the creative power of scapegoating? Its role in the creation of solidarity, the binding of communities. We might have learned something from *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*

In social and cultural life (as opposed to science and philosophy) truth and facts make sense only within larger stories that work for people, that reflect and express their lived worlds and their fantastic dreams.

Recently, we've become accustomed to thinking that too many of our fellow citizens are living in a political world created by the "bubble" of Fox News, or internet conspiracies. But after Trump's victory we awoke (I awoke, anyway) to a nasty consciousness of the "bubble" in which I had been living and thinking—a world sustained by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*.

Bubbles of reality. From the start, *Heart of Darkness* foregrounds separate, incommensurate worlds: Africa and Europe, of course, and also masculinity and femininity. Marlow: "Women are out of it," living in a world of alternative facts. But the structuring role of gendered worlds in the text, and especially its conclusion, goes much deeper than Marlow's evident misogyny (which is not Conrad's more complex, troubled masculinity).

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1 The story ends with Marlow's compromises with truth-telling: Kurtz's
 2 addendum torn off; the lie to the Intended; the carefully staged and witnessed
 3 narration in the darkness. Truth: not a matter of simple illumination, not if it
 4 presupposes language, translation and communication. Truth needs to be
 5 received, understood . . . by someone.

6 "Truth is good," an African proverb has it, "and everything that is true is
 7 not good to say." This too, is a kind of "restraint."

8 Marlow's initial "abhorrence" of lies is challenged by the story's unfolding.
 9 He will need to find a way between Kurtz's absolutist voice and the Harlequin's
 10 passive listening. Marlow practices a kind of active listening and translating in
 11 his relations with an intermittently personalized wilderness that both threatens
 12 and signals enigmatically. The mediation is dramatized at the story's end, by
 13 confronting two discrepant audiences: the Intended, and the men on the Nel-
 14 lie's deck.

15 There's much more to say, but I need to conclude.

16 We need to stay with the trouble in our truth-telling. I've already registered
 17 my ambivalence with respect to fantastic realism, Taussig's "mythic subversion
 18 of myth," its potential for complicity with a relativism of anything goes / post-
 19 facts, etc. Yet I also think that we need to find ways to not explain away the
 20 violence and myth. People like me need to listen more, be less condescending
 21 to those other Americas—the threatened communities and potentially nihilistic
 22 masculine individualism that has made (and is unmaking) our country. I'm
 23 forced to grapple with the necessary "lost cause" of Conrad's "national idea" (as
 24 he wrote to R. B. Cunninghame Graham in a famous letter just as he was fin-
 25 ishing *Heart of Darkness* [see *CL* 2:158–61]). The volatile egalitarianism of Doc
 26 Boggs's "Constitution."

27 Critical distance and cosmopolitan values—the safety, the moral and politi-
 28 cal virtue, they promise—aren't enough.

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