

At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes Against Humanity and the Banality of Evil

*Birgit Maier-Katkin**
*Daniel Maier-Katkin***

ABSTRACT

This article, while rooted in critical literature, is interdisciplinary, drawing upon political and social theory, history, law, and social sciences to address the problem of evil in an environment dominated by crimes against humanity: the Congo during the reign of the Belgian King Leopold. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, is based in part on the author's experiences aboard the steamship *Roi des Belges* on the Congo River in 1890. The narrative contains three representations of evil: the base, primitive, perverse allure of lust and greed in the deepest recesses of the human psyche; evil at the heart of civilization and modernity; and the banal complicity of ordinary people whose silence and denial allows evil to prosper.

Without impugning the quality or importance of *Heart of Darkness*, either as literature or as part of the global discourse on human rights, it is nevertheless argued that the primitive allure of evil is emphasized in the narrative to the detriment of representations of more subtle and civilized

* *Birgit Maier-Katkin* is Assistant Professor of German in the Department of Modern Languages at Florida State University. Her scholarly work is focused on twentieth century German literature and culture with a particular emphasis on exile writers, human rights abuses in the Third Reich, and the multigenerational construction of memory of everyday experience in cultures dominated by crimes against humanity.

** *Daniel Maier-Katkin* is Professor and Dean of the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University, where he is also affiliated with the Center for the Advancement of Human Rights. He is a graduate of Columbia Law School where he was a founding editor of the Columbia Survey of Human Rights Law, and of the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. His published work focuses on civil liberties and reform in the administration of justice, but his interests are becoming increasingly focused on humanities scholarship.

manifestations of evil. By redirecting attention to background elements of the story, including the behavior of the Belgian regime and especially the banal complicity of the protagonist Marlow, this essay aims to contribute to the discourse on crimes against humanity and the advancement of human rights.

I. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*¹ is a highly compact piece of writing containing an inner story within an outer frame. It arouses suspense, turns on elements of surprise, and concludes unexpectedly, all the time (in the tradition of the novella) focusing awareness on aspects of reality that are seemingly inexplicable and inaccessible to reason.² Conrad achieves this through blending elements of realism with dreamlike states and environments, writing with great beauty in an adopted language. *Heart of Darkness* has earned a place in the canon of Western literature and in the global discourse on human rights. It has been criticized as racist and sexist by some authors, such as African author Chinua Achebe.³ But Achebe is perhaps mistaken to dismiss the novella as a bad book about Africa without acknowledging that it is a very good book about European Imperialism, and more generally about the problem of evil: the heart of darkness in the primitive recesses of the human soul and of life itself, at the heart of civilization, and without spectacle or grandeur in the banal complicity and conformity of most of humanity.

In the outer frame, in sharp contrast to the inner story, Marlow is located entirely within the commodious and efficient boundaries of Western civilization. He is aboard the cruising yawl, *Nellie*, with four friends: a company director, a lawyer, an accountant, and the unidentified narrator who, like Marlow, has a great deal in common with Conrad himself. These men all lived on or near the sea, and all were honorable and accomplished gentlemen of the British Empire at its Victorian zenith. In the novella Marlow and his four companions are at anchor in the Thames Estuary off Gravesend, the environment described as flat, without feature in the haze,

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1. JOSEPH CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS* (Robert Kimbrough ed., 3d ed. 1988). In addition to a meticulous rendering of the original text, the Norton Critical Edition contains a wealth of background and source documents on Conrad and on the Congo and a thorough introduction to criticism of the work through most of the twentieth century.
 2. For a discussion of the novella as a literary form, see MARY GARLAND, *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO GERMAN LITERATURE* 631 (3rd ed. 1997).
 3. Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, 18 *MASS. REV.* 782–94 (1977); see also Hunt Hawkins, *Joseph Conrad, Roger Casement, and the Congo Reform Movement*, 9 *J. OF MODERN LITERATURE* 65 (1981/1982).

the air dark, the horizon indistinct as a meeting point of earth, sky and water; nature characterized as serene, brilliant, benign, immense, and profound. The language hints of earlier creation and the primitive power of less domesticated nature, themes that later dominate the inner narrative. The travelers await the turning of the tide, looking seaward, aware of London upstream, first mentioned as the “biggest, and the greatest, town on earth,”⁴ and then a page later as “monstrous.”⁵ Upriver, a “mournful,” “brooding gloom”⁶ arises above the smog and lights of the city establishing tension between nature and civilization, suggesting without definition the possibility of evil, establishing the “sinister resonance” of the story that Conrad hoped “would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck.”⁷

Marlow, sitting legs crossed, back straight, arms dropped, palms outward in the position of an idol or Buddha begins to talk about his time, some years ago, in an unnamed, unchartered, and undeveloped part of the world. In the dark he becomes a mystical, disembodied voice recalling earlier and alien events to an audience of friends “tolerant of each other’s yarns—and even convictions.”⁸ Marlow does not expect them to be aroused to some new course of action; the narrator characterizes the group as resigned to hearing about “one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences.”⁹ Later there is an uncertain suggestion that one or more of the friends may have been lulled to sleep; but the narrator who relates the story to us is captivated, like the wedding guest in Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,¹⁰ by a tale full of horror. Indeed, it is the narrator, rather than Marlow, who seems compelled to propagate the story beyond the intimate circle of the *Nellie* to readers who may be aroused to some new course of critical moral thinking or action.

Conrad’s contribution to the discourse on human rights is centered on three brilliant depictions of the origins and nature of evil: the base, primitive, perverse allure of evil in the human heart; the heart of darkness in the soul of civilization; and finally the banal evil resident in the day-to-day conformity of ordinary, decent people like Marlow. While it is probably correct that *Heart of Darkness* is “the most powerful thing ever written” on

4. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 7.

5. *Id.* at 9.

6. *Id.* at 7, 9.

7. JOSEPH CONRAD, *Introduction to YOUTH AND TWO OTHER STORIES* (Heinemann 1921), *reprinted in* CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 3, 4.

8. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 7.

9. *Id.* at 11.

10. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER* (John Phelps Fruit ed., B. H. Sanborn & Co. 1899).

the Congo,¹¹ it is also the case that the narrative's excessive fascination with the primitive manifestation of evil, as is represented in the encounter with the antihero Kurtz, detracts attention from more significant representations of ordinary evil that make abusive regimes possible.

II. PRIMITIVE EVIL

The outer frame containing the *Nellie* and its occupants dissolves as the narrative shifts to Africa and the European imperial presence. Marlow, in his meditative pose, seems psychologically withdrawn from the *Nellie* and from Western civilization. He follows memory to a less commodious river leading "back to the earliest beginnings of the world," intimating feelings of loss and disconnection, butting "all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known."¹² The order, efficiency, refinement, and ideas of civilization, so present in the outer frame, are conspicuously absent in the inner story, which is filled with chaos, inefficiency, fecundity, and the base, primitive power and allure of nature. The older, reflective Marlow, telling his story on the deck of the *Nellie* seems impelled, like the Ancient Mariner, to speak not only for the elucidation of others, but also out of some deep need "to dream the nightmare out to the end."¹³ Marlow describes himself as disquieted, his "imagination . . . want[ing] soothing."¹⁴ Even the voice of the narrator (presumably very close to Conrad's own) declaims that there was a "faint uneasiness inspired by [Marlow's story] that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river."¹⁵ The sinister resonance of the sombre scene foreshadows the tight circle of the more secretive inner story of Marlow's encounter with evil in Africa, and his efforts to rescue Kurtz, the antihero in *Heart of Darkness*, from the jungle and from himself.

As the inner story begins, there is a suggestion that people who go to Africa are changed by the experience. The doctor who evaluates the adequacy of Marlow's health for the challenges ahead is "not such a fool" as to expose himself to the dangers of travel to such exotic and uncivilized

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11. William Roger Louis, *Morel and the Congo Reform Association, 1904–1913*, in E.D. MOREL'S HISTORY OF THE CONGO REFORM MOVEMENT 171, 205 n.1 (Wm. Roger Louis & Jean Stengers eds., 1968) (quoting letter from E.D. Morel to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (7 Oct. 1909)).
 12. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 35.
 13. *Id.* at 69.
 14. *Id.* at 70.
 15. *Id.* at 30.

places, but observes that it would be of scientific value to observe the mental changes of individuals on the spot.¹⁶ There was apparently such a change in the emotional disposition of the Dane Fresleven, Marlow's predecessor as captain of the *Roi des Belges*. Fresleven is referred to as "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs,"¹⁷ but death came to him with a spear between the shoulders at a moment in which he was filled with anger and indignation, fighting with an old native over two chickens.¹⁸ Marlow, like Conrad himself,¹⁹ was changed by the experience of Africa, and returns to Europe cynical and somber with such knowledge of the world as makes it impossible to remain comfortable in the "old dispensation."²⁰

Still, the most dramatic transformation in *Heart of Darkness* arises from Kurtz's encounter with the primitive. Kurtz was a universally charismatic man about whom his Intended (the unidentified woman who remained in England and was betrothed to Kurtz) says with unintended irony: "Men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act. His example . . ." ²¹ He was a cultured man, gifted in music, art, and rhetoric,²² a born leader with great potential. There was every expectation that he would rise in the corporation and in European society. Kurtz came to Africa seeking adventure and advancement, but soon recognized that his skills, attributes, and cultural advantages prepared him to assume eminence, wealth, and power—indeed the trappings of a powerful deity in native culture. Kurtz could "charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour."²³ It was as if the "wilderness" with its intimations of chaos and

16. *Id.* at 15.

17. *Id.* at 12.

18. See *id.* at 12–13. There is a reference to the historical event on which this element of Conrad's story may have been based in George Washington Williams, *Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo*, reprinted in JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, *GEORGE WASHINGTON WILLIAMS: A BIOGRAPHY* 243–54 (1985).

19. G. Jean-Aubry, Conrad's first biographer, comments that Conrad himself was changed by the Congo, both in a general and permanent deterioration in his physical well-being, and by a loss of innocence in favor of a more somber and cynical understanding of the ways of the world. See G. JEAN-AUBRY, *JOSEPH CONRAD, LIFE AND LETTERS* 141–43 (1927); see also Edward Garnett, *Introduction to JOSEPH CONRAD, LETTERS FROM CONRAD* xii–ix (Edward Garnett ed., 1928).

20. T.S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*, in *THE GOSPELS IN OUR IMAGE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY BASED ON BIBLICAL TEXTS* 29 (David Curzon ed., 1995). For a thoughtful discussion of Conrad's general pessimism and his skepticism about improving human nature or achieving human rights, see Hawkins, *supra* note 3.

21. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 75.

22. In the film *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando, reads poems by T.S. Eliot including *The Hollow Men*. In *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz is characterized as "hollow"; and Eliot's poem begins with an epigraph between the title and the first line of verse: "Mr. Kurtz—he dead. A penny for the old guy."

23. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 51.

primitive impulses “had found him out early . . . [and] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know . . . and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating.”²⁴ Marlow puts forward a theory of human nature consistent with the social and psychological insights of Freud, Weber, and Durkheim, even in some ways Nietzsche, by projecting civilization as a system of restraints on powerful (perhaps even seething or polymorphically perverse) desires and impulses.²⁵ He asserts that Kurtz became “savage” in the “region of the first ages,” disconnected as it is from the restraining impulses of civilization, untrammelled, without sidewalks, or policemen or the restraining voices of neighbors and public opinion, containing only solitude and silence without the “holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums.”²⁶ The outer frame of the novella, involving the *Nellie's* voyage on the Thames instantly reappears and disappears as Marlow remarks to his companions that the impact of anomic conditions of such extreme isolation are unimaginable to them, though not to him, because their circumstances had always been comfortably civilized. In this society of friends, as well as in Africa, there is a maginality about Marlow arising in part from his access to understandings that others do not have.

Kurtz's destiny, shaped by primitive circumstances and potentialities, was to assume “a high seat amongst the devils of the land.”²⁷ Marlow is told—by one who knows—that Kurtz has presided at “midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand—to Mr. Kurtz himself.”²⁸ This is a manifestation of evil more radical than the Faustian bargain with the devil; Kurtz falls into evil as some men into love. Conrad characterized *Heart of Darkness* as experience “pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case,”²⁹ and this is probably true in connection with Kurtz. Conrad's Congo diaries indicate that he met brutal men such as Edmund Barttelot who bit, whipped, and

24. *Id.* at 57.

25. Freud, Weber, Durkheim, and Nietzsche, all contemporaries of Conrad, emphasize the aggressive impulses of humanity and the role of society in establishing systems of restraint on behavior, Freud approvingly, and Nietzsche more critically. For more information on Freud's theories, see, e.g., SIGMUND FREUD, *CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS* (James Strachey ed. & trans., 1961). Similarly, for information on Nietzsche's theories, see, e.g., FRIEDRICH WILHELM NIETZSCHE, *THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS* (Horace B. Samuel ed. & trans., 1918).

26. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 49.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 50.

29. CONRAD, *Introduction to YOUTH AND TWO OTHER STORIES*, *supra* note 7. In the introduction to the 1921 Heinemann (London) edition of *Youth and Two Other Stories*, Conrad comments that *Heart of Darkness* and one other story (*An Outpost of Progress*) are all the spoil he brought out of Africa, “where, really, he had no sort of business.” *Id.*

murdered people, and Arthur Hodister who was famed for his harem of African women.³⁰ He may also have met Leon Rom, who was described in the 17 December 1898 issue of *The Saturday Review*, as having, much as Marlow describes Kurtz as having, had a collection of African heads on display “as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!”³¹

The eccentricities and extreme behavior of these agents of European imperialism may well have left a powerful impression on Conrad’s memory and imagination. Furthermore, the trope, with its trip up the Congo to rescue Kurtz, arouses expectations of hidden horrors in the jungle darkness. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the titillating seduction and perversion of Mr. Kurtz, Conrad, through Marlow’s telling of the story, has drawn attention away from other carefully constructed manifestations of evil in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad seems to have recognized this. In a letter dated 2 December 1902 he wrote: “What I distinctly admit is the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all. But the story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions I gave rein to my mental laziness and took the line of least resistance.”³² The association of Kurtz’s radical evil with primitive subconscious elements of the psyche and exposure to the primitive conditions of Africa,³³ makes it possible for Marlow, and apparently Conrad as well, to suggest that the greatest evil is not the cutting off of heads or hands, or even their collection—the European authorities did all of that systematically and on a grand scale³⁴—but rather doing it in uncivilized rituals of lust and self-aggrandizement.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, moral distinctions between the atrocities of savages and the atrocities of civilizations are impossible to justify. *Heart of Darkness* was written before the First World War, at a time when science, technology, and social institutions led not only to the

30. See JOSEPH CONRAD, *CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES* (Zdzislaw Najder ed., 1978).

31. ADAM HOCHSCHILD, *KING LEOPOLD’S GHOST* 145 (1998). Rom is not mentioned in Conrad’s Congo diary, which is brief in any event. Hochschild concludes that their paths may have crossed by comparing dates of Conrad’s travels with data about Rom’s whereabouts in Africa at the same time. This is plausible in light of the small size of the European community in those places. The article in *The Saturday Review* mentioning Rom appeared just days before Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness*. See *id.* at 140–49. Richard Harding Davis refers ironically to Rom’s display of human skulls as a “quaint conceit.” RICHARD HARDING DAVIS, *THE CONGO AND THE COASTS OF AFRICA* 45 (1907).

32. Robert Kimbrough, *Introduction to JOSEPH CONRAD, HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at x (quoting letter from Joseph Conrad (2 Dec. 1902)).

33. Here too Achebe sees Conrad’s racism. Achebe, *supra* note 3.

34. HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31. The inherently racist element of this prejudice (moral conviction) in favor of Eurocentric civilization against the primitive is clear even among progressives. See, e.g., VACHEL LINDSAY, *THE CONGO AND OTHER POEMS* (1914); see also Hawkins, *supra* note 3, at 69 (citing a letter from Conrad to Casement confirming that the cutting off of hands was a European innovation, and that, contrary to Leopold’s assertions, there was no such custom among the natives).

ascendancy of the West, but also to belief in millennial progress. Only a few years later it became apparent that the blessings of the Enlightenment could be turned to aerial, mechanical, and chemical warfare. Before the twentieth century ended, modernity produced Auschwitz, atomic and hydrogen bombs, napalm, ethnic cleansing, and ecological disasters. We need not accept Marlow's geography of hell that places Kurtz alone at the epicenter. For Adam Hochschild,³⁵ writing a century after Conrad, the central villain in the story of the Congo is the Belgian King Leopold—distant, patient, Christian, manipulating, technologically sophisticated—a thoroughly civilized and modern architect of power and wealth. Without impugning the quality of *Heart of Darkness* as it is, we may nevertheless observe that had Conrad fought the line of least resistance, the indictment of crimes against humanity committed in the name of the high civilization of Europe might have stood out in sharper relief to readers of his own and subsequent generations.

III. EVIL AT THE HEART OF CIVILIZATION

Conrad often made short pleasure trips on the Thames with G.F.W. Hope (a company director who did in fact own a yawl named the *Nellie*), W.B. Keen (an accountant), and T.L. Mears (a lawyer). These gentlemen were, according to Ford Madox Ford, "the society in which Conrad lived at Stamford-le-Hope"³⁶ between September 1896 and September 1898, just months before the writing and publication of *Heart of Darkness* as a three-part serial in *Blackwood's Magazine* in February, March, and April 1899. It is as if Conrad created Marlow, placed him among his friends, preserved his voice for readers, and invested him with autobiographical details of his own experience, including his brief service as captain of the steam ship *Roi des Belges* on the Congo River during the reign of King Leopold, when murder, disease, famine, forced labor, torture, maiming, and sadistic cruelties were elements of international trade in ivory and rubber. As many as ten million Congolese may have been victims of crimes against humanity in the period between 1885 and 1908; the first modern human rights organization, the Congo Reform Association, was formed in response.³⁷

Due to the single-minded and devoted efforts of Edmund Dene Morel, the founder of the Congo Reform Association, journalistic accounts and

35. HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31.

36. FORD MADOX FORD, HEART OF DARKNESS: PORTRAITS FROM LIFE 59–60 (1937), *reprinted in* Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS, *supra* note 1, at 197.

37. For a good discussion of the history of the Congo and of the Congo Reform Association, see HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31.

early Kodak photographs documenting human rights abuses, such as the cutting off the hands of children as punishment to their parents, were in wide circulation.³⁸ Hands were also cut off the corpses of murdered men, women, and children as evidence soldiers could show to their commanders to prove cartridges were not being expended wastefully on shooting game. The world traveler and journalist Robert Harding Davis noted that “these hands, drying in the sun, could be seen at the posts along the river”;³⁹ and references to Leopold’s cruelties found their way beyond the critical press into the writings of such popular literary figures as Mark Twain⁴⁰ and the poet Vachel Lindsay,⁴¹ as well as Conrad. Amidst the body of literature addressing these atrocities, *Heart of Darkness* is especially powerful, in part because of the extent to which it is based on memory.

As the outer frame of the novella fades, events shift from the deck of the *Nellie* to an earlier time when Marlow was on the Continent preparing to go to Africa. There is open talk in that environment, as there was in Europe at that time, of the inferiority of the natives, accompanied by moral fervor to do good works bringing civilization and Christianity to Africa. This, combined with conspicuous silence about entrepreneurship and profits, begins to make Marlow feel uneasy, as if being led into some conspiracy. It foreshadows subsequent descriptions of the vicious exploitation of Africa and Africans—early instances of organized state and corporate crimes against humanity perpetrated through largely impersonal bureaucracies; the sort of event that became a hallmark of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. Conrad’s contribution to the discourse on human rights is an early description of crimes against humanity as darkness at the heart of civilization.

The transition to the inner story begins with Marlow’s ambivalent observation that Britain too “has been one of the dark places of the earth.”⁴² On the one hand, this sentiment accepts cultural relativism. The center of the world’s greatest empire was once an uncivilized and uncharted region of the globe; the legions of Roman soldiers, politicians, and entrepreneurs who made their way there took risks on unmapped territories peopled by primitive and hostile natives. On the other hand, the grammatical construction of the sentence presumes that what was once dark has become enlightened. Civilizations rise and fall; the lowly may be uplifted. In the final analysis, Marlow, Conrad, and most Europeans of their period (and perhaps our own) conclude that the burden of progress and history requires the extension of cultural, scientific, and/or religious light to persons sitting in

38. *Id.* at 215.

39. DAVIS, *supra* note 31, at 45.

40. MARK TWAIN, KING LEOPOLD’S SOLILOQUY: A DEFENSE OF HIS CONGO RULE (1905).

41. LINDSAY, *supra* note 34.

42. CONRAD, HEART OF DARKNESS, *supra* note 1, at 8.

darkness.⁴³ Marlow's first impressions of the European presence in Africa include foppishness, aimless destructive activity, rusting and misuse of machines and resources, scarring of the land with ugly and inefficient industrial projects, emaciated and collared natives beaten, mutilated, shot, or worked to death in chain gangs. He senses immediately that he is to become acquainted with "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."⁴⁴ Virtually every other European in the story is either an agent of this devil or a fellow traveler.

Marlow is exotic as an Englishman in a continental enterprise, set apart from others by language, cultural strangeness, and alienation. He is a man separated from the world, a wanderer, who describes himself as less centered even than most other seamen, who feel at home aboard a ship and are without curiosity about the exotic lands that extend beyond the ports of call. This hints at Conrad's own feelings of marginality during his time in Africa,⁴⁵ and perhaps also his awareness of "otherness" in his adopted homeland, having been born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowsky in Poland and only in adult life becoming Joseph Conrad, "the spoiled adopted child of Great Britain and even of the Empire."⁴⁶ It may be that such marginality facilitates the capacity of individuals to recognize the presence of complex, organized crimes against humanity, or perhaps to empathize with victims.

The most important critical reports in addition to *Heart of Darkness* that arose from visitors to Leopold's Congo were those of "outsiders" of one type

43. Mark Twain was critical of this attitude. See MARK TWAIN, *TO THE PERSONS SITTING IN DARKNESS* (1901); MARK TWAIN, *TO THE PERSONS SITTING IN DARKNESS AND CONCERNING THE REV. MR. AMENT* (1926). For a less critical example, see RUDYARD KIPLING, *THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN* (1899). On the other hand, there is grudging recognition of shared humanity in RUDYARD KIPLING, *Gunga Din*, in *GUNGA DIN AND OTHER FAVORITE POEMS* (1990). See also LINDSAY, *supra* note 34. Even George Washington Williams, a leading contemporary African-American critic of Leopold's regime in the Congo, applauds the beneficent goal of bringing "the blessings of civilization" to Africa, and contemplates the possibility of emigration to Africa by a small number of "educated blacks from the Southern United States" to work in conjunction with Christian Missions (the "one ray of hope for the Congo") in the pursuit of enlightenment and justice. See George Washington Williams, *A Report upon the Congo-State and Country to the President of the Republic of the United States of America*, in JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, *GEORGE WASHINGTON WILLIAMS: A BIOGRAPHY* 264-79 (1985), *reprinted in* CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 84-97.

44. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 20.

45. In letters written in September 1890 Conrad declared that "[e]verything here is repellent to me. Men and things, but men above all" and that he regretted "having come here. I even regret it bitterly." He describes himself as physically ill and "not a little demoralized." *THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF JOSEPH CONRAD* VOL. I 62 (Frederick R. Karl & Laurence Davies eds., 1983). The prominent characteristic of the social life among the whites in Africa, he noted, was "people speaking ill of each other." CONRAD, *CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES*, *supra* note 30, at 7.

46. CONRAD, *Introduction to YOUTH AND TWO OTHER STORIES*, *supra* note 7.

or another.⁴⁷ William Sheppard was an African-American Presbyterian Minister and missionary. Roger Casement,⁴⁸ an overtly but not openly gay Irishman, was knighted for his distinguished, humanitarian work on behalf of the British Foreign Service, but was executed some years later for trying to forge an alliance between the Germans and the Irish in World War I. Perhaps the most terse and accurate assessment of the situation in the Congo was offered by George Washington Williams, an African-American journalist, in an open letter to King Leopold (“Good and Great Friend”) dated 18 July 1890 declaring that

Against the deceit, fraud, robberies, arson, murder, slave-raiding, and general policy of cruelty of your Majesty’s Government to the natives, stands their record of unexampled patience, long-suffering and forgiving spirit, which put the boasted civilisation and professed religion of your Majesty’s Government to the blush.⁴⁹

Marlow, like these other outsiders, reports on black men being beaten to death for minor violations and others crawling away from work camps to die in the shade of a grove. These literary inventions seem to draw on references in Conrad’s Congo diaries to finding the bodies of several dead Africans, one who had been shot (Conrad describes the “horrid smell” of the body), another in a position of “meditative repose” on a road; the third, a “skeleton tied up to a post . . . (near a) white man’s grave—no name. Heap of stones in the form of a cross.”⁵⁰ Marlow is set apart from cruelty. He alone recognizes the shared humanity, capacity for self-restraint, and intelligence of the natives on the *Roi des Belges*. He makes other white men resentful of him for blowing the steam whistle to frighten away the natives at whom they shoot as sport. Chinua Achebe is correct that Conrad provides no voice to the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*;⁵¹ nevertheless, Marlow is aware of their

47. See generally HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31. Edmund Morel, perhaps the most important voice raised in opposition to Leopold’s crimes against humanity, is more of an enigma, but his understanding of the Congo was based on investigative work in Europe rather than field visits to the Congo.

48. Conrad’s diary entry for 13 June 1890 states: “Made the acquaintance of Mr. Roger Casement, which I should consider as a great pleasure under any circumstances and now it becomes a positive piece of luck. Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic.” CONRAD, CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES, *supra* note 30, at 7. Conrad and Casement continued to be friends over the next twenty years, although Conrad broke with Casement completely and would not sign a petition for clemency when he was convicted of treason. See Hawkins, *supra* note 3, at 67–68.

49. George Washington Williams, *An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo*, in JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, GEORGE WASHINGTON WILLIAMS: A BIOGRAPHY 243–54 (1985), reprinted in CONRAD, HEART OF DARKNESS, *supra* note 1, at 103, 112.

50. CONRAD, CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES, *supra* note 30, at 8, 9, 13.

51. Achebe, *supra* note 3.

unjustifiable suffering, and his characterization of Europeans as duplicitous perpetrators of crimes against humanity is a rebuttal of any claim that *Heart of Darkness* is inherently racist.

Influencing the collective memory of the Congo seems to have been one of Conrad's goals. "Fiction," he wrote, "is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting—on second-hand impression."⁵² Nevertheless, and despite the continuing popularity of *Heart of Darkness*, a book that has been read by millions of high school and college students, the history of the Congo was largely forgotten in the twentieth century.⁵³ Without denigrating Conrad's accomplishment, it may be suggested that the historical impact of *Heart of Darkness* was undermined by two blemishes. First, the indictment of crimes against humanity was subsumed, for reasons already noted, to Conrad's artistic interest in Kurtz's absorption with savagery. Second, Marlow, and perhaps Conrad as well, conveniently separates himself and the British Empire from the narrative's withering critique of radical genocidal and ecologically destructive evils perpetrated in the name of religion and enlightenment. It is, asserts Marlow, only the "unselfish belief" in some undefined "redeeming" idea (apparently associated with colonial administration and progress) supported by devotion to efficiency that saves "us" from being mere conquerors taking the earth away from its inhabitants—mostly "those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses"—and doing so by brute force, which is no accomplishment, but only "an accident arising from the weakness of others, . . . not a pretty thing when you look into it too much."⁵⁴ There is nothing more than a hint in *Heart of Darkness* that the evils of imperialism may be pandemic in Western civilization even in the British Empire. The Romans who conquered Britain, and by implication the Belgians in Africa, Marlow says, "were no colonists, their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more. . . . They were conquerors . . . [who] grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale."⁵⁵ This leaves open the possibility that Conrad's adopted

52. JOSEPH CONRAD, HENRY JAMES: AN APPRECIATION 13–17 (1905), reprinted in CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 229, 231.

53. HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31, at 1–5. See also MICHELA WRONG, IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MR. KURTZ: LIVING ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER IN MOBUTU'S CONGO (2001). For a disturbing view of the continuing tragedy of Congo history, see Adam Hochschild, *Chaos in Congo Suits Many Parties Just Fine*, N.Y. TIMES, 20 Apr. 2003, § 4, at 3.

54. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 10.

55. *Id.*

homeland, and his friends aboard the *Nellie* are cut from a different cloth, redeemed by their ideals. There is a silent, perhaps disingenuous, complicity inherent in discussing only the derelictions of others, and this undermines the power of the narrative as social criticism. Perhaps it is an awareness of this on some level that explains why the novella ends not with Marlow's voice, but with that of the narrator, presumably Conrad's own voice, declaiming that the tide having turned, the *Nellie* began its voyage back up the Thames headed into "the heart of an immense darkness."⁵⁶

IV. BANAL EVIL

Neither the horrifying encounter with Kurtz and its attendant awareness of the power of the wild in the world and in the human soul, nor the recognition of evil at the heart of civilization are fully satisfactory explanations of the narrative's confessional quality. Willard, the Marlow character in the film *Apocalypse Now*, based on *Heart of Darkness*, explicitly characterizes the story as a confession.⁵⁷ But why? Marlow, unlike Coleridge's Mariner, shot no albatross. His own behavior in the face of overwhelming evil and degradation in Africa was, if not exemplary, at least reasonable and fairminded; perhaps to a greater extent than Conrad's during his time in the Congo.⁵⁸ The source of Marlow's disquiet is not revealed until very near the end, but his guilt and complicity with evil are foreshadowed by the narrative's quality of compulsion and especially by Marlow's comment early on that "I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget."⁵⁹

56. *Id.* at 76.

57. Willard's behavior in the film *Apocalypse Now*, like that of the Ancient Mariner, is more culpable than Marlow's in the book. Willard has been sent to find Kurtz in the jungle and assassinate him (a crime mitigated perhaps by the suggestion that Kurtz is tired of life); Marlow on the other hand struggles unsuccessfully to save Kurtz and extricate him from the jungle.

58. Several comments in Conrad's diaries suggest a degree of insensitivity: "Today [July 5] fell into a muddy puddle. Beastly. The fault of the man that *carried* me." CONRAD, CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES, *supra* note 30, at 10 (emphasis added). Two days later, after a day of walking (and/or being carried—and certainly having one's possessions carried) over a succession of "round steep hills," Conrad writes, "Hot, thirsty and tired . . . No water. No camp[in]g place. . . . Row with carriers. No water." *Id.* at 10–11. He then describes, on July 30, his companion, Harou, who was ill with a high fever, vomiting bile, being carried through the jungle, and complaining from time to time about the rebellious attitude of the carriers. *Id.* at 13–14.

59. CONRAD, HEART OF DARKNESS, *supra* note 1, at 29.

Nevertheless, at a critical moment after his return to Europe, Marlow tells a lie to Kurtz's unnamed Intended. Marlow knows the conditions of Kurtz's life in the wild, knows not only that the European presence in Africa is dominated by a "devil of rapacious and pitiless folly,"⁶⁰ but also that Kurtz personally had given himself over to lust, cruelty, and savagery. Marlow believes that in the final moments of life, Kurtz became aware of his own location in relation to the heart of darkness. This is the ambiguous meaning of Kurtz's dying declaration: "The horror! The horror!"⁶¹ Yet in the moment when the Intended inquires as to what was "His last word—to live with. . . . Don't you understand I loved him—I loved him—I loved him,"⁶² Marlow chooses not to give Kurtz "that justice which was his due."⁶³ Instead Marlow tells the Intended, "The last word he pronounced was—your name."⁶⁴ Whatever figurative meanings "the horror" may contain, perhaps among them the loss of the love of the Intended, Marlow has not told the truth.

This is an innocent, even a vital lie, uttered to make life possible.⁶⁵ Marlow says he "could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether."⁶⁶ Indeed, perhaps it would have been dark enough to have penetrated the light of Western civilization with the reality of the evils it has supported. Nevertheless, and particularly from a twenty-first century vantage point, after so many crimes against humanity and so much concealment,⁶⁷ it may be asserted that the kindness of a small lie in the interests of preserving the equanimity, or even the sanity of another, is problematic if it advances silence about cruelty and destruction. This lie is also the locus of Marlow's, and perhaps Conrad's, chauvinism and racism—chauvinism in believing that civilized women ought to be protected from the truth; racism in its lack of concern for the equanimity, sanity, and lives of millions of African men, women, and children. By lying to the Intended, his silence

60. *Id.* at 20.

61. *Id.* at 68.

62. *Id.* at 75.

63. *Id.* at 76.

64. *Id.* at 75.

65. For a good discussion of lying and moral choice, see SISSELA BOK, *LYING: MORAL CHOICE IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE* (1978).

66. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 76.

67. On the concealment of atrocities, see ANDREAS HUYSEN, *TWILIGHT MEMORIES: MARKING TIME IN A CULTURE OF AMNESIA* (1995). In the case of Nazi Germany, for example, although aspects of military, political, and economic history have been widely discussed since 1945, it was not until the 1990s that the widespread involvement of ordinary people with the regime began to be publicly discussed. See, e.g., ROBERT GELLATELY, *THE GESTAPO AND GERMAN SOCIETY: ENFORCING RACIAL POLICY, 1933–1945* (1990); CHRISTOPHER R. BROWNING, *ORDINARY MEN: THE RESERVE POLICE BATTALION 101 AND THE FINAL SOLUTION IN POLAND* (1992); DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGAN, *HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS: ORDINARY GERMANS AND THE HOLOCAUST* (1996); IAN KERSHAW, *HUBRIS: HITLER, 1889–1936* (1998); IAN KERSHAW, *NEMESIS: HITLER 1936–1945* (2000).

deceiving the world, Marlow has chosen not to “[d]isturb the universe,”⁶⁸ neither its gentle women nor its leaders of commerce. If there is irony in Marlow’s companions being involved in the same professions (lawyer, accountant, company director) as the administrators of Leopold’s evil regime, there is no evidence that it is perceived by them. Marlow, in the outer frame of *Heart of Darkness*, tells his story without risk or consequence as a cathartic entertainment in privacy among friends aboard the *Nellie*. It is the unnamed narrator who promulgates the story and preserves Marlow’s voice for subsequent generations.

Residing inside of Marlow’s lie is knowledge of exploitation, mass murder, barbaric cruelties, and the hypocrisy of civilization. Behavior like Marlow’s silence, unlike Conrad’s publication of the story, allows corrupt regimes to prosper unopposed, and denies succeeding generations access to cultural memory of the past.⁶⁹ Marlow acknowledges sin, but not its magnitude; he confesses that he told a lie, but not that this lie made him complicitous with the devil of “rapacious . . . pitiless [and we may add murderous] folly.”⁷⁰ It is from Marlow’s lie and its attendant guilty knowledge that the confessional quality of the story arises—what T.S. Eliot has characterized as

The rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.⁷¹

Complicity involves “partnership in an evil action”⁷² not necessarily as a principal, but at least as one who supports and facilitates it. Marlow’s complicity, even though *Heart of Darkness* is his story, told in safety at considerable distance in time and space, springs into existence in the moment of his lie, and is a continuing act of concealment of grave and even perverse crimes against humanity.

68. This phrase is borrowed from T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in *THE MAKING OF A POEM: A NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETIC FORMS* 262, 263 (Mark Strand & Eavan Boland eds., 2000).

69. On the formation of cultural memory as a shared process involving contemporaneous society and transcending generations, see MAURICE HALBWACHS, *ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY* 40 (Lewis A. Coser ed. & trans., 1992). Halbwachs argues that individual memories are formed and acquired in a social context that requires them to be “in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of society.” *Id.* Thus, Marlow’s lie functions as a protective device to assure continuity and cohesion in society by promoting the illusory eradication of evil from memory and cultural discourse. See also DAVID GROSS, *LOST TIME: ON REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING IN LATE MODERN CULTURE* (2000).

70. CONRAD, *HEART OF DARKNESS*, *supra* note 1, at 20.

71. T.S. ELIOT, *Little Gidding*, in *FOUR QUARTETS* 29, 35 (1943).

72. OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (J.A. Simpson & E.S.C. Weiner eds., 2000).

In the years since the end of World War II, a substantial body of scholarly work examining the complicity of ordinary people with evil regimes has emerged. This is the central theme of Stanley Milgram's famous social-psychological laboratory studies of obedience to authority at Yale,⁷³ Theodor Adorno's important exploration of authoritarian personality,⁷⁴ and Hannah Arendt's brilliant and much criticized book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.⁷⁵ More recently, arising in part from the emphasis of the Annales School⁷⁶ on historical recovery of the details of everyday life, but also from the fascination of succeeding generations with seemingly inaccessible memories of the recent past, there has been an outpouring of scholarship in the fields of history and cultural studies on the complicity not only of Germans, but also of French, Poles, Ukrainians, Croats, Lithuanians, United States corporations, the Vatican, and even the "neutral" Swiss with the Third Reich.⁷⁷ Why and how do ordinary people sustain corrupt regimes? Inquiry of this type does not focus on the leaders of nations or on apparent aberrations, such as Kurtz, who become something "other." Rather, it focuses on normal people in everyday occupations, such as Marlow, whose behavior encourages and facilitates radical evil.⁷⁸

Heart of Darkness was written more than sixty years before Hannah Arendt's seminal discussion of the banality of evil.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Conrad captures the banal essence of evil in Marlow's lie as ordinary, commonplace, familiar, and perhaps even comfortable, rather than monstrous, spectacular, or satanic. That evil is banal does not diminish its overall

73. STANLEY MILGRAM, *OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY: AN EXPERIMENTAL VIEW* (1974).

74. T.W. ADORNO ET AL., *THE AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY* (1950).

75. HANNAH ARENDT, *EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM: A REPORT ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL* (1965).

76. The Annales School has pioneered the concept of social history, especially the history of everyday life, and history from the bottom up. The outstanding figure in the Annales movement is Ferdinand Braudel. See generally FERDINAND BRAUDEL, *THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD IN THE AGE OF PHILIP II* (Siân Reynolds trans., 1972); FERDINAND BRAUDEL, *THE STRUCTURES OF EVERYDAY LIFE: THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE* (Siân Reynolds trans., 1981).

77. See, e.g., Elizabeth Olson, *Swiss Report Says Gypsies Were Turned Back in Nazi Era*, N.Y. TIMES, 3 Dec. 2000, at A22. For a discussion of the complicity of the International Red Cross, see Jack Kelley et al., *Silent Witness*, USA TODAY, 2 May 1997, at 13A. On the plundering of victims of the Holocaust (with the help of Swiss banks) in Holland, Sweden, Argentina, and even among the Allies, see RICHARD Z. CHESNOFF, *PACK OF THEIVES: HOW HITLER AND EUROPE PLUNDERED THE JEWS AND COMMITTED THE GREATEST THEFT IN HISTORY* (1999). See also JAN T. GROSS, *NEIGHBORS: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN JEDWABNE, POLAND* (2001) (describing the Polish townspeople who slaughtered all the Jews in their village and blamed it on the Germans); for a review addressing continued silence about this massacre, see Steven Erlanger, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, N.Y. TIMES, 8 Apr. 2001, § 7, at 17.

78. STANLEY COHEN, *STATES OF DENIAL: KNOWING ABOUT ATROCITIES AND SUFFERING 100* (2001); EMMANUEL KANT, *RELIGION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE* (1960).

79. See ARENDT, *supra* note 75.

impact, nor the harm it causes. The complicity of ordinary people as perpetrators, fellow travelers, bystanders, and even sometimes as victims⁸⁰ has been the *sine qua non* of power and control in totalitarian regimes, whose sinister purposes require the exploitation of fundamental human impulses towards sociability, conformity, and obedience. The inability of ordinary people to distinguish between right and wrong may lead them to enthusiastically do what is wrong believing it is right. This inability is accompanied by a moral inversion in which higher order values, such as respecting the lives, liberties, and property of others, are subjugated to other genuine but lower order, more instrumental values, such as duty, loyalty, and efficiency.⁸¹ By lying, Marlow engages in such subordination of fundamental values; thus the need to disclose crimes against humanity is subjugated to the need to be kind to Kurtz's Intended.

Suppose Marlow had chosen to tell the truth. The equanimity and peace of the Intended would have been disrupted, and by extension that of civilization as well; but to what purpose? Would he have been believed? Or would Marlow, like Cassandra⁸² or the Ancient Mariner, be dismissed as the sort of visionary who carries a placard warning of the end of the world? Would he have placed himself outside the boundaries of community life?

Ultimately, Marlow's silent complicity, having seen the horrors of the world, arises from nothing more complex than the nearly universal human impulse to conform, to retain a comfortable place not too far from the center of one's culture, to accept the status quo, and permit "profitable" enterprise to develop, rather than to expect, anticipate, or search for moral failings and grave injustices among the leaders of society. The banality of Marlow's lie is perhaps the *de minimis* form of *mens rea*, complicity with regrets, almost bittersweet in its absence of denial and of action, acknowledging to oneself the existence of an evil, but nevertheless participating in a conspiracy of silence and concealment that allows it to flourish.

What moral attribution is to be made to such banal complicity? Hannah Arendt characterizes this type of evil as the sort of "trespass" for which Jesus urges forgiveness, and differentiates it from the sins of Hitler, Himmler, or Eichmann for which the awe and terror of judgment day are reserved.⁸³

80. *Id.* at 115–18. Perhaps most controversial is her characterization of the complicity of the *Judenrat* (leaders of Jewish communities) in organizing the deportations and subsequent transportation to death camps for which Eichmann was responsible.

81. *Id.* at 45–49, 70, 135–50.

82. In the *Iliad* Cassandra, the daughter of Priam, King of Troy, had the gift of prophecy, but also the curse that no one would believe her. Thus, her warnings to the Trojans about the disaster of war and specifically the danger that Greeks were hiding inside the famous wooden horse that they seemed to have abandoned outside the gates of Troy were ignored. M. S. SILK, *HOMER: THE ILIAD* (2d ed. 2004).

83. See ARENDT, *supra* note 75.

Perhaps the most troubling questions in the discourse on the banality of evil have arisen in relation to the complicity through denial and deception of the residents of small towns like Dachau or Mauthausen; these residents lived, and even for a while prospered, by selling goods and services or finding employment in the nearby concentration camps, where so much harm was done.⁸⁴ Similarly troubling is the Belgians' prosperity in Leopold's era, or Marlow's knowing the evil upon the land and either lying or remaining silent while it grows and prospers. In criminal law, and by extension in international human rights law, the greatest degree of culpability is attached to crimes including accomplice crimes, that are deliberate, purposeful, and willed. The next level of culpability is knowing.⁸⁵ Eichmann, for example, may not have willed or desired the death of the Jews, but he certainly knew where his trains were going. Marlow is no Eichmann, but he knew the effect of his lie. This is not to say that Marlow was a war criminal, nor even that his behavior is worse than that of many others who have assiduously avoided knowledge by looking away or shutting their eyes. As Cohen has pointed out, the paradox of denial is that it involves knowing and not knowing at the same time.⁸⁶ The all too human inability to see, understand, or set oneself beyond the boundaries of the herd gives rise to a powerful defense for Marlow, who sees but cannot act, and for the multitudes of others who cannot or will not see.

Beyond allowing criminal activities to continue in their own time, silent complicity becomes a self-perpetuating offense by denying subsequent generations access to truths about their past. Total recall of all aspects of historical events is not a human possibility. It is inevitable, for example, that the voices of followers will be less audible in the historical record than the voices of leaders, or that the voices of victims will be drowned out in the cacophony of victors. Successful acts of concealment, such as Marlow's lie, promote distortion in the social construction of memory by shrouding the actuality of events and allowing crimes to continue unexposed and unopposed. Conrad, unlike Marlow, was explicitly concerned about the preservation of truths about the past as an obligation owed to the future, and he had confidence in the capacity of literature and the arts to preserve elements of historicity, not in the sense of scientific examination of facts, but in exploration of meaning and motives in relation to events.

His belief that reconstruction of the past in memory includes but exceeds the boundaries of objective, factual historical recording is consistent with the Greek conceptualization of history and the arts as sister muses,

84. See GORDON J. HORWITZ, *IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH: LIVING OUTSIDE THE GATES OF MAUTHAUSEN* (1990). For a literary treatment, see ANNA SEGHERS, *THE SEVENTH CROSS* (1987).

85. See AMERICAN LAW INSTITUTE, *MODEL PENAL CODE AND COMMENTARIES* 225 (1988).

86. COHEN, *supra* note 78.

daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory.⁸⁷ This view was supported by Conrad's much admired contemporary, Henry James,⁸⁸ and has retained currency and influence in twentieth century historiography, literary, and cultural criticism.⁸⁹ In addition to its interpretative power as narrative, literature can also be approached as cultural artifact. In the same way that succeeding generations can learn about the table manners of distant ancestors through the backgrounds of the paintings of old masters, so too is it possible to find details about the moral condition of earlier generations through the record of literature in which they may be presented as asides (perhaps even unintended asides) to some question more central to the artist's interest, as in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow's complicity is secondary to Kurtz's absorption with savagery. Conrad's literary achievement and contribution to the discourse on human rights has influenced Western civilization's cultural memory of its own highly organized crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, without impugning the quality of *Heart of Darkness*, we may speculate that had Conrad resisted what he himself identified as "the line of least resistance," had he focused less on the horror of Kurtz's life and experience, that is to say, less on the primitive darkness of the human soul, both the crimes against humanity and Marlow's silent complicity with evil might have emerged as more central and more apparent.

V. AN EPILOGUE ON THE MORAL POSITIONS OF MARLOW AND CONRAD

Literary criticism has often approached Marlow as Conrad's alter ego. He appears in other stories,⁹⁰ and Conrad said of him, "He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time."⁹¹ In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad invested Marlow with details of his own life and placed Marlow among the friends with whom the

87. See, e.g., James B. Wiggins, *Re-Imaging Psycho-History*, 32 *THEOLOGY TODAY* 151–58 (1975/1976); James A. Notopoulos, *Mnemosyne in Oral Literature*, 69 *TRANSACTIONS & PROCEEDINGS AM. PHILOLOGICAL ASSN.* 465–93 (1938).

88. See Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*, *LONGMAN'S MAGAZINE* Sept. 1884.

89. See, e.g., Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *ILLUMINATIONS* 253, 255–66 (Hannah Arendt ed., 1968); Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (Richard Howard trans., 1986); Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999); Hayden White, *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, in *TROPICS OF DISCOURSE: ESSAYS IN CULTURAL CRITICISM* 81 (1978).

90. See Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1931); Joseph Conrad, *Chance: A Tale in Two Parts* (1921).

91. Conrad, *Introduction to Youth and Two Other Stories*, *supra* note 7, at 3.

author traveled in comfort and harmony aboard the *Nellie* during the time the narrative took form. Nevertheless, despite the closeness between author and character, it is important to distinguish between Marlow's voice and Conrad's. Marlow is, with Kurtz, one of two main anti-heroic characters in *Heart of Darkness*; his point of view is markedly different from Conrad's, and his actions and attitudes surrounding the lie to the Intended, with its attendant concealment of crimes against humanity, are subjected to irony and disapproval by Conrad, even if not with a suspension of affection.

One is hard-pressed to say that this great and important work of art might have been better had the author balanced the novella's moral message differently. Who can say that it would have been possible for Conrad to have told the story differently, or that any other version would have had the same elegance or lasting impact? Nevertheless, we may observe that in *Heart of Darkness* the primitive and perverse allure of evil is emphasized to the detriment of representations of more subtle and civilized manifestations, which are central to the discourse on crimes against humanity and the advancement of human rights.

Regardless of the weaknesses and imperfections in *Heart of Darkness* that derive from the excessive symbolism attached to the character Kurtz, Conrad, unlike Marlow, must be acknowledged as having stepped outside of the posture of silent complicity by communicating the atrocities of the Congo to a wide audience. Perhaps more might have been hoped of him. While asserting that England should advocate and promote humanity, decency, and justice, Conrad offered no criticism of British imperialism, and by and large declined to participate in the work of the Congo Reform Association or even to sign petitions against the excesses and brutalities of the Belgian regime⁹² on the grounds of being "only a wretched novelist."⁹³ Nevertheless, Conrad must be viewed as having succeeded, as Marlow did not, in piercing the silence that often shrouds historical events of which civilizations are justifiably ashamed.

By illuminating the potential for darkness that resides at the heart of civilization, Conrad challenges the presumptions of modernity about the uplifting effects of progress. On the eve of the twentieth century, before the phenomenon was articulated or studied, *Heart of Darkness* provided a clear and powerful account of state-sponsored terrorism and of the frame of mind and soul associated with the impersonal and bureaucratic organization of crimes against humanity. King Leopold was an early master of the Orwellian use of mass media and propaganda to suppress criticism and "spin" events. Indeed, the King chaired prestigious international human rights conventions

92. Hawkins, *supra* note 3; CONRAD, CONGO DIARY AND OTHER UNCOLLECTED PIECES, *supra* note 30.

93. JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, GEORGE WASHINGTON WILLIAMS: A BIOGRAPHY 262 (1985).

while implementing a brutal and exploitative imperial regime.⁹⁴ Thus, Conrad's considerable contribution to the literature of human rights was to bring awareness of the atrocities committed in the Congo to a wider audience in his own time, and to preserve a history different than the "official" version propagated by the Belgians and presented in textbooks long after imperial rule had ended.

Complicity arising through silent knowledge of crimes against humanity is an important and all too common historical fact, but is not well represented in the historical record, not even after the crimes themselves have been revealed; nor generally are instances of acknowledgment, such as Marlow's, in intimate discourse.⁹⁵ Acts like Marlow's lie, which shroud historical events in silence, rarely find a place in the memory of the past precisely because of their invisibility. Conrad, however, has provided us with a detailed account of the circumstances of Marlow's decision to conceal his knowledge of crimes against humanity in the Congo, and thus become an accomplice in evil. It is perhaps Marlow's banal sin, even more than the horrors associated with Kurtz's arousal by the primitive, or Leopold's greed, that accounts for Conrad's success in establishing the sinister resonance that hangs in the air and dwells on the ear of the twenty-first century reader long after the last note has been struck.

94. HOCHSCHILD, *supra* note 31, at 43–46, 92–93. In a letter to Casement, Conrad characterized Leopold's duplicity as "a most brazen breach of faith as to Europe. It is in every aspect an enormous and atrocious lie in action. If it were not rather appalling, the cool completeness of it would be amusing." Hawkins, *supra* note 3, at 69.

95. COHEN, *supra* note 78, at 222–27, 249–51, suggests the distinction between the complicity of silent knowledge and the form of complicity that involves acknowledgment but nothing more.