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## Terror, Terrorism, and Horror in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Terrorism is generally understood as a certain type of deliberately undertaken criminally violent act against a state, but it also includes the acts of governmental groups that violate human rights (see Paust 21; Stohl and Lopez 4). Whether directed against the state or perpetrated by the state, terrorism's purpose is to create and instill a sense of anxiety; its outcome is injury or death, or seizing, damaging, or destroying property. Kidnapping, massacres, torture, and mass executions are practices that have been associated with terrorism as well.

The earliest usage of the word cited in the OED refers to the regime-sponsored tactics of the Jacobins under Robespierre during the Reign of Terror, 1793–1794. Originally, Robespierre saw these tactics as a means to an end, the end being the eradication of vice and the establishment of a society of virtue. He famously declared to the 1794 National Convention in Paris: “In revolution it [the principle of popular government] is simultaneously virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal, and terror, without which virtue is powerless” (Zulaika and Douglass 106). However, as the Reign of Terror wore on, terror overwhelmed virtue. Seventeen thousand people lost their lives.

As Terry Eagleton's recent book *Holy Terror* (2005) reminds us, terrorism, whether sponsored by the state or directed against the state, has a long genealogy. Eagleton traces it back to Dionysius, whom he calls “a terrorist ringleader” and “an unbearable horror” (2), phrases which actually apply to the central character of the novel this paper deals with.<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain's 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, adds another link in the genealogy of terrorism. In this novel, the transposed American points out that before there was the violence of the French Revolution there was an earlier Reign of Terror. Twain's protagonist locates this first Reign of Terror in the political history of France, the thousand years “of wrong and shame and misery” (1949: 708) which preceded the events of 1793–1794. He calls this reign “the real Terror”

<sup>1</sup> Kurtz is a ringleader in the sense that he got a tribe to follow and adore him. See note 5.

because people were tortured and died of “hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heartbreak” (708). In effect, he is describing the dehumanized existence of those living and dying under state-sponsored terrorism. The phrase “state of terrorism” itself was, however, coined only in 1903 when the Rev. A. E. Scrivener used it to sum up his argument that on account of the natives in the Congo being enslaved, subjugated, humiliated, tortured, terrified, and deprived of basic human needs and rights by agents of Leopold II, “a state of terrorism” existed there (see Twain 1970: 46).

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke characterized the French Revolution as a form of terrorism because it led to physical damage, destabilized the government, induced social chaos, instilled a state of extreme fear and anxiety, and, indeed, deprived people of their most basic human needs and rights. Common to Burke’s, Twain’s, and Scrivener’s conceptualizations of terrorism is the violation of human rights.

In the aftermath of World War II, these rights were formally enumerated in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights in order to protect all people from persecution, victimization, cruel and inhuman treatment, barbarity, threats to their lives, and plundering of property, as well as to ensure a reasonable quality of life. Conrad’s depiction of the condition of life in an area of central Africa identified with the Belgian Congo<sup>2</sup> suggests that he would have accepted the causal relationship posited in the U.N. Declaration’s Preamble, namely that “disregard and contempt for human rights” result in the commission of “barbarous acts” (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>). Through Marlow, we both learn and see that under Leopold’s rule, people were forced to flee their villages, made to work even though they were starving to death, and died of sicknesses; these images of human rights violations lead to and culminate in the presentation of Kurtz as a government agent who has preached and practiced genocide. This is the situation that *Heart of Darkness* presents, through fictional means, subjectively, impressionistically, and presciently.

Burke presents the spirit unleashed by the French Revolution as a specter – an image that Conrad also uses in *Autocracy and War* (1905) to characterize the state terrorism of Russia vis-à-vis its citizenry. Calling it variously a “specter,” “shade,” “shadow,” and “phantom,” Conrad further pictures Russia as a “yawning chasm” with an endless capacity

<sup>2</sup>The Congo is never mentioned by name in *Heart of Darkness*. However, it is accepted that the source of the setting of the novella is the Belgian Congo.

to swallow every decent human quality — “a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge, every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience” (1949: 100). Yawning and swallowing Russia is presented as a body part — a huge mouth of a voracious cannibal. Through the use of synecdoche and personification, then, Russia's state terrorism is represented as cannibalistic. Terrorism is thus symbolized or identified by the open mouth of the cannibal. Later in this essay, I shall expand upon this connection and on the use of body parts as signs, symbols, or substitutes for a reign of terror.

That the Russophobe Conrad would connect Russia with terror and terrorism and its attendant horrors is not surprising. However, Conrad's stance on terror and terrorism is far from simple. He disassociated himself personally from terrorists who sought to overthrow regimes by violent means. For example, in the 1919 “Author's Note” to *A Personal Record* (1911), he protested against the labeling of his father a “revolutionist” (1923: xi); in the 1920 “Author's Note” to *A Secret Agent* (1911) he inveighed strongly against all forms of terrorist activity, calling it “contemptible” and “exploit[ative]” (1990: 5). Artistically, however, and like many of his contemporary writers on the continent, he thought of his books as verbal dynamite, of his words as able to effect deeds (Najder 297; Fothergill 150). He also linked terror to his personal understanding of the purpose of writing. Thus, in the very same work in which he rejected the description of his father as a revolutionist, he also said it was “our appointed task on this earth” to use the voice we have been gifted with “to bear true testimony to the . . . haunting terror” (1923: 92) of existence, that is, as I understand it, to use the *rhetoric* of terrorism to call attention to *acts* of terrorism. This statement is itself a reprise of what Marlow, Conrad's mouthpiece, says in *Heart of Darkness* about one of his appointed tasks, namely, to speak the truth. “I have a voice, too,” says Marlow, “and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced” (2006: 36). This sentence comes shortly after he describes Africans in overblown language as savage and horrifying, and then testifies to his anxiety by thinking that they are “not inhuman” and that they are kin to oneself.<sup>3</sup>

Though Marlow tries to distance the kinship by a double negative

<sup>3</sup>“Well, you know that was the worst of it — this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (36).

(“not inhuman” rather than “human”), the scientific Darwinism of the period held open the possibility that an evolved European could climb down the evolutionary ladder and degenerate into the more primitive version of the species, the African — a terrifying thought taken for true in the late nineteenth century (see Johnson). However, through Marlow’s rhetoric, Conrad will eventually present a more frightening, because more accurate, view — that European values are themselves the cause of European acts of barbarism. Conrad, thus, presents himself as a counter-terrorist, albeit a literary one, that is, one who, by speaking the truth about the state of terrorism existing in that unnamed African colony, takes it upon himself to blow away the false pretensions and illusions surrounding that exercise of power.

In addition to probing the link between terror and the purpose of writing, Conrad examined the relationship between the writer in the act of writing and the terrorist mentality. In the “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent*, he wrote that he had the mindset of a terrorist when he set about the business of writing the novel. Calling himself “an extreme revolutionist,” he commented that in his commitment, his concentration and dedication, and “self-surrender” to his purpose, he out-terrorized terrorists (1990: 8). I would argue that Conrad possessed this mindset when he wrote *Heart of Darkness* about twenty years earlier, with evidence for this located in the overwrought, extreme, obsessive diction and style of the novella, famously remarked upon by F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*. Conrad’s style marks him as an author with a huge inventory of rhetorical devices in his literary arsenal, devices which he uses like weapons to counter terrorism. These are the strategies of portraying, investigating, labeling or stereotyping, categorizing, comparing, and contrasting (Taussig 1984: 470–71).

*Heart of Darkness* is an example of rhetorical counterterrorism. Conrad’s overwrought and extreme images of “savage” behavior — among both blacks and whites — can be interpreted as a technique for calling attention to what Mark Twain would have called “the real terror” on earth, and fighting, with literary counterterrorism, what the Rev. Scriver called “a state of terrorism.” Conrad does this with so much concentration and dedication that he recognizes, perhaps uneasily, perhaps ironically, his kinship with political terrorists.<sup>4</sup> Aesthetically, he focuses the readers’ attention on scenes and sites of horror, but his purpose is not

<sup>4</sup>I use the word “kinship” to echo the relationship that Marlowe posits between Europeans and Africans in the novella.

merely impressionistic; rather, he presents horrors, whether physical or psychological, as the end result of terror tactics (Brantlinger 259–74). Through his use of horror conventions and stereotypes, Conrad achieves three objectives. First, he enables the reader to locate states of terrorism or terrorist operations. Second, he enables the reader to evaluate them critically. Third, he is able to explore the relationship between terror and horror; his conclusion, as I will demonstrate, is that terror precedes horror, and that horror is the response to terror operations.

For at least two reasons it is all too easy to underestimate the significance of Conrad's contribution to the fight against the state of terrorism existing in the Congo. The first is that using one's "voice in order to bear true testimony to . . . the haunting terror" can be seen as a limited artistic goal that is not in itself a call for radical political change of the status quo. When Roger Casement, whose 1903 report on the horrors being perpetrated in the Congo by Leopold's agents officially affirmed that a state of terrorism existed there, asked Conrad to testify to the atrocities committed in the Congo, Conrad refused (Watts 148–52). Nonetheless, Edmund Morel, the founder of the Congo Reform Association, once said that *Heart of Darkness* was "the most powerful thing ever written on the subject" (quoted in Hawkins 293). His remark implies that even though it did not explicitly touch on some of the worst of the atrocities, namely the large scale cutting off of body parts as a terror tactic to intimidate men into collecting rubber, even though it was a work of fiction and not a historical report such as Casement's, its impact was real enough. The novella played an important role in mobilizing public sentiment against Leopold's personal rule of the Congo and the reign of terror he had unleashed there. Ultimately, the public outcry led to the Congo coming under the control of the Belgian government in 1908. Additionally, if Marlow's very inability to express his meaning precisely, to name exactly what he has seen, represents the response of an individual traumatized by what he has witnessed, then his lack of clarity or perhaps the artifice of some of Conrad's descriptions paradoxically adds to the historical veracity, and, thus, to the political impact of the novella (LaCapra 88–93). Seen in this light, Marlow's manner of bearing "testimony . . . to the haunting terror" is not only a consciousness-raising call to action but also an aesthetically and psychologically justified narrative technique.

The second reason has to do with Conrad's characterization of Africans both as terror-inspiring and as victims of state-sponsored terrorism. I once argued that Conrad's presentation of Africans reduces the novella's contribution in the area of human rights (268–79). This position is

supported powerfully in Birgit and Daniel Maier-Katkin's 2004 article, "At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil." The authors make two points. The first is that Marlow's fascination with Kurtz's psychological descent into evil suggests that the latter's loss of restraint was worse than the actual crimes against humanity perpetrated in the Congo. The second is that "at the beginning of the twenty-first century, moral distinctions between the atrocities of savages and the atrocities of civilizations are impossible to justify" (590). But I would now say that what symbolizes "the haunting terror" is historically relative and culture-specific. I address Conrad's presentation of Kurtz's atrocities in the second part of this essay; at this point, it needs to be stated that in *Heart of Darkness* Africans are viewed through the lens of Victorian anthropology, which represents them as evil, savage, and intellectually inferior. Victorian anthropology also assumed that if whites "went native," they would become evil and savage (see Johnson). Since these ideas were taken for granted by Conrad and his contemporaries, Africans were the unquestioned symbol for "haunting terror." But if we focus on the signified rather than the signifier, on terror rather than Africans, Conrad's oft-repeated general point holds. The task which Conrad undertook was to use his novelistic powers, his "voice," to "bear testimony to the haunting terror." For him, the aesthetic response was a moral one; it also resulted in his focusing on and confronting the horrors that acts of terrorism inflict on both its victims and perpetrators. The imaginatively rendered encounters of the self with the terror-inspiring object, seen up close and personal — those are horrors.

Understood in this context, the representation of Africans as savages in *Heart of Darkness* should be seen as an attempt to render more than the conventional nineteenth century European emotional and psychological response. The violent, extreme, frightening descriptions of the Africans whom Marlow sees suggest not only that he is terrified by them — the conventional and racist response — but that it is through the conventions of language that they are made into terror-inspiring objects in touch with the wellsprings of evil — a view ahead of its times.

Recent events have proved that the more spectacular the coverage of a horrifying deed by the media, the more likely it is that the deed will be perceived as an act of terrorism (see Houen 9–12). The key word here is *perceived*. Though some readers may take the spectacle as truth and perceive Africans as a collective horror or as terror-inspiring objects or find themselves terrified by their potentially contagious behavior, that does not mean that what is being described is the truth about Africa and Af-

ricans. Conrad's handling of Africans is infused with irony. They come across as terror-inspiring, as horrors, only because that is how people from outside their culture perceived them. In the European imagination, they were a conventional sign of "horror," but in *Heart of Darkness*, the terror to which they point does not reside in them. Nowhere does Conrad imply that they themselves possess the (ultimately self-destructive) terrorist mindset, which includes an extreme desire for self-affirmation, a love of death, a lust for destruction, and a craving for absolute power and absolute possession, so fantastic, intense and pure that it endows "reality" with "the endless pliability of desire" (Eagleton 11).

Conrad is very clear on this point. The dancing and howling Africans terrify, that is, their behavior frightens or appears frightening to outsiders, by virtue of the connotations attached to it by outsiders. However, they are never presented as terrorists engaged in carrying out criminally violent actions or forcing outsiders into compliance with their value system. That honor Conrad reserves for the white agents associated with the Company, and with Kurtz. They use violence and tactics of intimidation, cruel and degrading treatment, to control the native population. They are the ones who disregard and have contempt for the human rights of the indigenous peoples of the Congo. Additionally, if we recall the terror-virtue nexus formulated by Robespierre, that virtue rationalizes terror and terror enforces virtue, talking and writing virtue can also signify the presence of terrorism at work. Thus, it is not at all ironic that the most effective agent of terrorism, Kurtz, has belonged to the "gang of virtue" (25). And, by the time Marlow finds him, he is so consumed by his destructive lusts and his cravings that to the extent that he is still recognizably human, he is also deranged, a figure of pure desire that wants to control all. As Marlow remarks, Kurtz's most frequently used word is "my." In the portrait of Kurtz, we see the terrible revenge that terrorism exacts upon its practitioners.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt notes that "the Boers were never able to forget their first horrible fright before a species of men whom human pride . . . could not allow them to accept as fellow men" (192). This inability to see Africans as human enabled these European men to enslave them, develop racist societies, and feel that when they massacred them they did not commit murder. Conrad's adventurers have that mentality, and he presents them as the real agents of terrorism. Even the Manager is forced to recognize Kurtz as a practitioner of the terrorist arts and calls Kurtz's method for collecting ivory "unsound" (62).

“Unsound” indeed. This is understatement and euphemism combined. “Unsound” covers both Kurtz’s posting of the heads of those who opposed him around his bungalow and his degrading demand that village chiefs approach him on all fours.<sup>5</sup> As terror tactics, both these practices had been used in Africa just prior to 1899, when Conrad began to write *Heart of Darkness*. Both had been covered in the *Saturday Review* and the *Illustrated London News*, periodicals that Conrad read (Lindqvist 29; 56–57; Tutein xii). To use a contemporary phrase, Kurtz practiced “a politics of atrocity” (Rapoport 46–47). Knowing that these are criminal actions, governments invariably attempt to suppress evidence about them. The Manager, speaking on behalf of the Company, a government agency, would have liked as little information as possible about Kurtz’s excesses to leak. The wish is denied by Conrad’s text, a fiction that brings factual crimes to wide public knowledge.

In sum, Conrad presents life in a state of terrorism as hell on earth. Indeed, he describes the area where the African workers have come to die as “the gloomy circle of some Inferno,” and the men themselves as lying about “in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair” (16–17). Consciously or unconsciously, Conrad’s description of the dying men seems to echo Milton’s description of Hell itself in *Paradise Lost* (1674) as a “dismal situation waste and wild” (I, 61) where

darkness visible  
 Serv’d only to discover sights of woe,  
 Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
 And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
 That comes to all; but torture without end. (I, 62–66)

He also affirms the existence of a state of terrorism by using words of negation such as “unspeakable,” “impossible,” and “incredible” at key points in the text. It is noteworthy that these words are staples in the Gothic lexicon for describing terror and horror and making them comprehensible. The rhetoric of *Heart of Darkness* has a moral function and political implication. It uses hyperbolic language to point out that real outrages have been committed, and that the Congo is now, to borrow a phrase from Tony Brown, “an abject zone of horrors” (16). Conrad wrote about these crimes against humanity in the discourse that his readership understood (Brown 6–9; Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin 594–601).

<sup>5</sup>The Harlequin reports that “the chiefs came every day to see him [Kurtz]. They would crawl” (58).

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In launching his counter-attacks on terrorist practices, Conrad uses the language of terror, which — as a literary construct — had come into its own with the rise of the Gothic novel in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Horace Walpole stated that terror is “the author’s principal engine” (4) for enabling characters and readers to experience, emotionally, psychologically, and physically, the mysteries and instabilities that lie beneath the phenomenal surfaces of the world. In seeing terror as a mechanism which opened up individuals’ minds to the apprehension of the sublime and sensitized readers to the inexplicable, Walpole was following Edmund Burke, who would later become the harsh critic of the terror unleashed by the French Revolution (Hume 285). But in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke wrote that “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible subjects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (1958: 39). Thus, terror in the arts was seen positively because it enabled the probing of hitherto uncharted areas of psychological experience. Additionally, it allowed writers and readers to explore how an individual’s mind functioned when social restraints were removed and reason’s bounds loosened.

In classic Gothic works such as Mrs. Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1795), and Lewis’ *The Monk* (1795), and in the fiction they spawned, characters are brought into contact with other existential modes, principally in the form of the irrational, the incomprehensible, and the taboo. This experience is often presented as an encounter with some savage or primitive figure or force at the end of a long dark tunnel or journey. Frequently, the only word available to describe the contact between the characters and the terror-inspiring object they can neither escape physically nor control linguistically is “unspeakable” (Punter 4; Sedgwick 4–16). Put another way, at the end of the journey, at the heart of the heart of darkness where terror, no longer a mental phenomenon, takes on concrete, physical form, horror is made visible. In the Gothic novels of the period, horror frequently manifests itself as an entity with teeth: a bloodsucker, a vampire, a cannibal. Teeth are a synecdoche, the part that implies that in the zone of contact between the individual and the horror, the horror has the potential to consume and absorb the individual (Punter 4).

On a psychological level, Gothic fiction rings true because the repressed do return, the abominable is fascinating, and the taboo ignites a dangerous, sometimes fatal curiosity. However, it was not until the parliamentary reports on the working and living conditions of the poor started coming out in the nineteenth century that readers of this genre realized that the extreme situations of Gothic fiction were not just psychologically meaningful. They had parallels in the real contemporary world — in the dehumanizing conditions in which, for example, miners worked — and could be used for apprehending and describing the existing social horrors of the period.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, these government reports were the “real” horror stories of the nineteenth century. So what had started as an imaginative rendering of psychological experience set in the past became, by the end of the nineteenth century, a way to visualize and apprehend nightmarish yet well documented contemporary social conditions. Thus, when late nineteenth-century authors used the Gothic apparatus, they could count on their readers’ ability to see through or beyond its conventional features — the dark landscape, the helpless plight of the characters, the cruel and intimidating, totally immoral figures controlling their lives — to the real horrors in their own time (Tropp 20, 172–219). The real horrors were outside the texts; through the rhetorical strategies associated with describing and labeling, they became visible to the reader. A reader could identify — was encouraged to identify — a particular horror. In England, it could be the inhuman conditions in the mines. Outside England, it could point to such atrocities as enslavement, torture, or cruel punishment.

*Heart of Darkness*, indebted to the traditional Gothic novel, presents victims as “shadows” and “phantoms” (17), whereas the victimizers are hollow men, physically and morally. Marlow implies, for instance, that the Manager might not even be human — he seems to lack substance. “Perhaps there was nothing within him” (22), suggests Marlow, on the basis of the Manager’s cryptic remark on his excellent health: “Men who come out here should have no entrails” (22); this incorporeality links him with a Gothic convention (Punter 4). Then there is Kurtz himself, specter-thin by the time we meet him, a mangled mind in a wasted body. The basis for his characterization as a terror-inspiring figure is the criminally evil and morally degraded protagonist common in Gothic literature. Marlow also compares him to a voracious cannibal, which further identi-

<sup>6</sup> Mine workers faced horror daily as they toiled in the darkness. Children were chained to coal tubs and crouched and crawled through tunnels pulling them (Tropp 59, 84–85). In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow sees laborers chained together. See note 5.

fies him as a Gothic terror-inspiring object. What makes Kurtz different from other Gothic villains, however, is that this terrorist and terrorizing ringleader<sup>7</sup> is granted the self-consciousness to call himself by his Gothic name: “the horror, the horror” (69).<sup>8</sup>

As for Africa itself, the words and phrases<sup>9</sup> used to describe it literally and figuratively recall all those dark Gothic tunnels and secret passageways, all the unexplored places where the incomprehensible, the taboo, the atrocious, and the desired are related to and imaged by the savage or primitive. But at the end of the century, when readers had been trained to see the horrors of human rights violations through the conventions of the Gothic, Conrad's audience was likely to see that the text was pointing to the horrors outside it, to receive the text as an act of aesthetic counter-terrorism, and perhaps to formulate a political response.

Conrad always maintained that when he was in the Congo in 1890, he never saw any evidence to support the charge that the Belgian authorities were cutting off the hands of the local people in order to force them to cut rubber. This is possible: ivory, rather than rubber, was the most important export from the Congo at that time. However, in the ten years between Conrad's stint in the Congo and the writing of *Heart of Darkness*, rubber supplanted ivory; and from the mid-1890s, the terror tactic of mutilation became well known due to reports and photographs sent by missionaries and the literature put out by the Congo Reform Association (Hochschild 185–94; Brantlinger 280–83; Maier-Katkin 591–92). Moreover, in his book *Hernando de Soto* (1903), Conrad's friend the writer and political activist Cunninghame Graham had stated that the “inhuman bringing in of basketfulls of human hands in Belgian Congoland excels the atrocities of any Spaniard in the whole conquest of America” (Watts 150). After Conrad read the book, he wrote Cunninghame Graham a letter in which he both endorsed his view and mentioned that Casement could tell him “things” that he, Conrad, would prefer not to recall (Watts 149). So ap-

<sup>7</sup> Marlow interrogates the Harlequin about Kurtz's ivory-collecting practices. He finds out that Kurtz got a tribe which lived in villages around a lake “to follow him” (56). Cf. Frank McLynn, *Hearts of Darkness: The European Exploration of Africa*, for an analysis of the connection between ivory, a chief's authority, and the growth of “roving bands of warrior traders . . . owing loyalty to a charismatic leader” (182).

<sup>8</sup> In November 2002, Michael Taussig gave a talk entitled “The Horror, The Horror” at the Barbarism Conference held in Graz, Austria. In his presentation, which is partly written in the voice of Kurtz, he points out that Kurtz's contemporary descendants continue his practices and never develop his self-consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> Conrad's heavy dependence on emotive adjectives has been much critiqued since F. R. Leavis first commented on it in *The Great Tradition* (177–80).

parently Conrad knew about the practice — and his decision to suppress or dissociate himself from it or not call it by its proper name suggests that it falls in the category of horrors that are so traumatizing that his *persona* Marlow is unable to speak of them directly. Yet since the novel mentions other human rights violations and terror tactics, it is important to consider why he remained silent about this.

I would argue that Conrad was not so much silent or evading a responsibility to tell the truth as speaking the language of the Gothic, employing updated representations of terror and horror that revamped the concept of the sublime. As part of the vocabulary of the sublime, terror was originally understood as a mental mechanism conducive to the dissolution of one's social and rational identity so that the individual could, in losing particularity, experience an "epiphany of pure selfhood," albeit an epiphany that "tip[ped] over into a sense of omnipotence" (Eagleton 45). The Kurtz whom Marlow is sent out to rescue is at the end stage of this psychological process. However, by focusing on horrors, Conrad reinterprets the "sublime," making it an aesthetic reconstruction of terrible historical truth. Dominick LaCapra's recent study on writing trauma suggests that when survivors of or witnesses to traumatic historical experiences such as the Holocaust relive the past and attempt to testify to the atrocities they witnessed, they may be unable to provide an accurate description of what really happened, and therefore use the "hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime" as a vehicle of communication (88–93). LaCapra's argument is indirectly supported by *Heart of Darkness*, for the story, in all its excess, is narrated by Marlow, a witness to unspeakable events which must nonetheless be articulated. Thus, like more recent witnesses of state-sponsored terrorism who have first-hand knowledge of state-sponsored atrocities and have seen the horrors they produce, Marlow's attempt to narrate these events results in a version of the sublime in which what the mind apprehends is an exercise in displaced horror.

I also believe that if we focus on Conrad's famous comment about Marlow, that he differed from other sailors in that for him "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale" (5), we may be able to clear Conrad of the charge of complicity in eliding the terror tactic of hand-cutting. If we follow Marlow's way of thinking, then we must look outside the text for its meaning. And what is outside the text is precisely the atrocity of hand-cutting. That is, Conrad was writing Gothically, using images from the cannibal inventory — severed heads on poles, in particular — to point to the severed hands, the essential sign of the Belgian rule of terror. Readers used to decod-

ing Gothic conventions should have recognized that he was alluding to this horror; as mentioned above, the fact that Edmund Morel considered *Heart of Darkness* “the most powerful thing ever written on the subject” [of the atrocities being perpetrated in the Congo] suggests that at least one reader saw that the novel dealt with the Belgian rule of terror.

If Burke's treatise on the sublime and the beautiful theorized terror as a positive force for self-understanding, John Aikin's essay, “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror” (1773) divorced terror from morality. Maintaining that people read about terror and horror because it produces pleasurable responses, Aikin's essay provided a rationale for revamping the Gothic in the years to come. After Aikin, Gothic literature would focus on delighting and titillating the reader through producing the arguably positive, stimulating and exciting psychological/physical *thrills-and-chills* feeling known as “terror” and the strongly negative aesthetic response to the terror-inspiring object called “horror.” Books written in this mode share a number of terror-producing, horror-evoking motifs, one of which is the practice of cannibalism.

Aikin's treatise can be seen as the philosophical legitimization for the cannibal stories included in works set in Africa. E. J. Glave's “The Slave Trade in the Congo Basin” (1890), which describes a dance leading up to the cannibal feast, is typical of these accounts of life in Africa:

An unearthly silence succeeds. The executioner wears a cap composed of black cocks' feathers; his face and neck are blackened with charcoal, except the eyes, the lids of which are painted with white chalk. The hands and arms to the elbow, and feet and legs to the knee are also blackened. His legs are adorned profusely with broad metal anklets, and around the waist are strung wild-cat skins. As he performs a wild dance around his victim . . . a murmur of admiration arises from the assembled crowd. He then approaches and makes a thin chalk mark on the neck of the fated man. After two or three passes of the knife . . . he delivers the fatal blow . . . and severs the head from the body. (<http://www.kurtxaxon.com/odds&ends/contents.htm>)

This lush description suggests that the writer is concentrating intensely on the physicality of the cannibal and the soon to be cannibalized in order to present Africa as a real scene and site of horror.

Lurid and detailed writing of this sort disseminated the notion that Africans practice a culture of terror whose chief horror is cannibalism. As for the cannibals themselves, even when they are not engaged in cannibalistic rites, they are always recognizable in these texts: they are the ones with the pointed teeth. Behind the association of cannibals with

pointed teeth is a literary tradition several centuries old. With the discovery of the New World, pictures of “real” cannibal villages complete with toothy residents began to appear regularly in travel accounts. Frequently in these pictures, their houses are shown surrounded by posts topped with human skulls (Boucher 15–16; Lestringant 10–20). By the time Conrad came to write *Heart of Darkness*, Europeans were generally conditioned to believe in the reality of cannibals in places far from European civilization; they were also conditioned to recognize cannibals, primarily by their teeth, but also by the presence of heads posted around their houses, and could accept the idea that those whose cultures included the practice of cannibalism were less than human and could be exterminated (Arens 50; Taussig 495).

Pace Achebe, I would argue that Conrad included cannibals in *Heart of Darkness* because the conventions of the cannibal story set in Africa required him to do so. Readers had been conditioned to expect a terrifying sight in a work set in darkest Africa or be (at the very least) armchair-shocked by the horrors that could be conjured up by simply mentioning the word “cannibal” or its synecdoche, “filed teeth.” However, even though Conrad is indebted to the Aikin tradition, he is making just a perfunctory bow to the tradition of “terror” writing, which required savage, primitive cannibals to be produced for an audience seeking the pleasure that only a close encounter with a conventional terror-making object — a horror — can produce. Indeed, the ultimate ironic point about *Heart of Darkness* is that its actual presentation of cannibals is quite at variance with the amoral tradition theorized by Aikin. According to Aikin, the purpose of terror is to induce delight and titillation. Marlow’s cannibal crew, though they have the filed teeth with which cannibals were identified, are never shown participating in any “unspeakable rite” or orgy. Instead, they are identified with the virtues of diligence and restraint. As to the helmsman’s request for the helmsman’s body, Marlow is almost sympathetic, for he recognizes that the crew are starving. As presented, they are neither terrifying nor horrifying in themselves, nor do they seem to be a source of anxiety for the whites on board the steamer. By not showing Africans participating in the traditional *de rigueur* cannibal feast, by not including this standard site or experience of horror, Conrad is subverting Aikin’s philosophy of terror even as he is recalling it. The challenge that *Heart of Darkness* mounts to the conventional construction of the cannibal forces us to look elsewhere in the African context for cannibals and cannibalism. We need to look for another sign by which a cannibal can be recognized.

As mentioned earlier, literary cannibals were also identifiable be-

cause their houses were surrounded by poles topped with human heads. Though one of Kurtz's historical prototypes, Colonel Leon Rom, had actually put twenty one heads around a flower bed in front of his bungalow (Brantlinger 261; Hochschild 145), Marlow could also be referring to the cannibal tradition when he calls the reader's attention to the human heads on the posts surrounding Kurtz's bungalow. Conrad enhances the suggestion of Kurtz's cannibalism when he writes that his wide-open mouth gave him a "voracious aspect as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (59). This is the real cannibalism, Conrad implies, the kind that involves the consumption and absorption of other people's space — their air, their earth, the people themselves — and it has nothing to do with pointed teeth and literal feasting on flesh. Kurtz's power comes from another source, from the terror that he inspires and uses to control the local populations. Unlike the illegible signature at the end of the note Marlow finds as he wends his way upstream toward Kurtz, the meaning of these heads is perfectly clear: those who are not amenable to control are exterminated. The real cannibal, complete with severed heads on the poles, is the toothless Kurtz, and the heads themselves are, I believe, an example of displacement, a substitute for the severed hands collected by the basketful by Belgian agents. Thus, through Kurtz's toothlessness, we get a portrait of the terrorist that uses but simultaneously challenges the cannibal stereotype or the cannibal-terrorist nexus.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, by translating "hands" into "heads," by using the well known discourse of cannibalism to speak of the Belgian terror tactic, Conrad develops a symbolic language for identifying and countering the "real" terrorism being practiced in the Congo.

Robespierre justified the Reign of Terror on the grounds that virtue without terror is powerless, and that terror was needed to usher in a society of virtue, but as the events of 1793–1794 proved, terror got out of control, and became a juggernaut-like engine of destruction. Like Robespierre, Kurtz was an "extremist" (72) who began by wanting to eradicate vice and establish a society of virtue. To this end, he started to write a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Recalling a time when he was at the Central Station, the Manager tells his nephew that Kurtz used to talk about how "each station

<sup>10</sup> When Conrad wrote his "true classic of terrorism," *The Secret Agent*, he returned to cannibalism to describe the sickening effect of a terrorist bombing on the victim (see Reiss; Meyers). Stevie is a "heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half-concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast" (1990: 70). In that novel, too, the anarchist Yundt is repeatedly described as toothless.

should be like a beacon of light on the road to better things, a center . . . for humanizing, improving, instructing” (32). But Kurtz’s vision of the society of virtue was also replaced by a reign of terror. The famous document for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs ends with an imperative to “exterminate all the brutes” (118). As Michael Greaney has pointed out, Walter Benjamin’s comment that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 248) could have been written with Kurtz’s report in mind (Greaney 71). Marlow himself supports this connection by quoting Kurtz: one of Kurtz’s last sentences begins with “live rightly”; that phrase, however, is followed by the repeated imperative “die, die” (68) before it trails off into nothingness, suggesting that terrorism is a celebration of the death drive (Eagleton 3–4). From practicing a politics of atrocity and the cannibalism known as conquest of other people’s lands, his once brilliant mind has become not just *a* horror, but “the horror, the horror” (68).

\* \* \*

In *Heart of Darkness*, we see a representation of state-sponsored terrorism and political horror being born from the conventions of the literary Gothic. Yet this emergence is also a return. Even as it uses the conventions of the Gothic both to induce a state of terror so as to encourage psychological reflection and to give readers a *frisson* of delicious and slightly salacious pleasure, the novella takes the concept of terror back to its *realpolitik* roots. Since the first recorded appearance of the word “terror” to describe the events of 1793–1794 in France under the Jacobins, many regimes have developed programs of terror that deprive people of their humanity through the institutionalization of a politics of atrocity, a systematic program that includes genocide, torture, cruel treatment and punishment, arbitrary arrest, deliberate starvation, enslavement, and plundering of land and property, to intimidate and enforce compliance. As scholars of terrorism have noted, state terrorism also requires an ideology in order for it to rationalize its denial of human rights to others and legitimate its use of terror tactics (Lopez 66).

The idea that certain people are savages or cannibals — that they do not have human status or are not fully realized human beings — has frequently provided the rationale for the application of terror tactics as a governmental policy against that group. As mentioned earlier, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt points out that imperialism

was predicated on the belief that Africa and Africans were not human. This belief freed the colonial adventurers from thinking about the moral implications of their actions and empowered them to plunder and kill with impunity. However, Arendt does not merely see imperialism as a precursor of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. More importantly, she points out that the totalitarian movements and regimes of the twentieth century, whose *modus operandi* is terrorism, and which have made terrorism *the* keyword of our times, could not have come into being without the kind of authoritarian, repressive imperialism depicted in *Heart of Darkness* (484; see also Friendlander 36).

Thus, adapting the Duke of Wellington's remark about the battle of Waterloo being won on the playing fields of Eton, one could say that totalitarianism was conceived in the elephant and rubber rich jungles of the Congo. Like one of Marlow's tales where the meaning is not inside but outside, *Heart of Darkness* may also be seen as anticipating, not just the horrors perpetrated by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, but also the growth of terrorism into a system in the twenty-first — anticipating this through its complex analysis of terror and the death-dealing, overweening terrorist mentality. However, by making the human rights violations, the terror tactics and horrors of one particular darkness, visible and comprehensible, Conrad also helped to produce an aesthetics of counter-terrorism — in which the unspeakable, the unspoken, is no less effective than the consciousness-raising explicitness about the facts on the ground.

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