

DARKNESS: JOSEPH CONRAD AND HARRIET BEECHER STOWE¹

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Abstract: The article focusses on a multi-aspect comparative analysis of J. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Taking into account the obvious differences between the works, the author analyses the hell of slavery and exploitation of Africa by the colonial states that built systems that created criminals such as Kurtz and Legree. The author presents the genealogy of Conrad's image of tortured Africa, the prefiguration of which is found in Polish romantic messianism. The article also presents a similar reception of both works. First, they gained recognition, then in the postwar period, they were criticized for the forms of racism hidden in them, and finally, in recent decades, they have been rehabilitated by new readings. The perspective presented here shows how women's popular prose covertly influenced Conrad's intertextual tendency, both his poetics and the worldview of his prose.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Harriet Beecher Stowe, colonialism, popular literature, Polish romanticism

Were the *TLS* (or its back-page provocateur) to sponsor a contest for the least likely literary bedfellows, Joseph Conrad and Harriet Beecher Stowe would have a fair shot at the laurels. Their literary differences could hardly be more evident, not least in the two works I want to show consorting, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Heart of Darkness*. They are manifestly at odds, generically, programmatically, and in narrative strategy and its implementation. Generically, Stowe's blockbuster novel is domestic melodrama crossed with sermon and jeremiad. Conrad's novella echoes the traveler's chronicle of adventure and exploration, retelling a challenging odyssey thick with physical hardships and moral perils, all overcome. Stowe's program is overtly forensic and polemical, rhetorical in the sense that it seeks to impress and persuade. Conrad's is stubbornly aesthetic; it conspicuously eschews any overt designs on its readers, and undermines any portable conclusions on the meaning of its reported and recreated experiences. As to narrative means, Stowe speaks to her readers directly in

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an authoritative/authorial voice, regularly breaking into the fictive stream to assert and document its truth with attested fact. Conrad distances himself from the tale by interposing an internal narrator, Marlow, yarning in retrospect whatever it was that he was able to see, experience, conjecture, or gather from biased informants and hearsay. Additionally, Marlow's narrative comes to us at a further remove, mediated through the occasionally reactive but mostly neutral voice of one of his shipboard auditors. Out of this difference proceeds a still deeper divide, epistemological and ultimately metaphysical. By so hedging knowledge through his narrative design, Conrad hedges terminal interpretation. The "meaning" of the tale remains unplumbed, open to endless reflection (some of it Marlow's), since the hold we are offered is neither definitive nor comprehensive, abysmal rather than exhaustive, always laced with conjecture, never complete.

Stowe in contrast is able, if not always willing, to tell all. She withholds, she tells us, some of the worst, hinting only, for example, at the full range of sexual depravity common in the plantation regime, though she leaves no doubt as to its existence. She also bends over backwards to credit the good intentions and humane, civilized character of *some* of the plantation aristocracy which the institution of slavery and the system it supports implacably work to defeat and corrupt. In the upshot, her narrative and her judgment leave no room for ambiguity, moral or metaphysical, on the system and those entangled in it. The meaning of any and every event is made clear, the novel is structured (geographically) to drive home a comprehensive meaning, and never, in contrast to Conrad, is the existence of *meaningfulness* put in doubt.

And yet—setting aside Stowe's likely indignation and Conrad's even likelier horror at the suggestion—there are convergences and commonalities. For one thing, both narratives are engaged in a conscious struggle, against the recalcitrance of language and materials and the inertial resistance of audiences, external and (in *Heart of Darkness*) internal, to satisfy Conrad's famous formulation of his task: "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see."² More narrowly, there are convergences, contextual, mythopoeic, and epitextual. These include some plausible historical links and congruencies, personal and political; a narrative progression structured at least in part as a penetration into the heart of darkness; and significant echoes in reception history. Indeed, on the level of element and episode, there is a basis for recognizing a substantive intertextuality. All these matters I intend to pursue.

But to what end? I will argue—do here argue—that eliciting these convergences and commonalities offers more than an insight into the layered workings of Conrad's imagination. It also furnishes a powerful lens for reading Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the light of its Conradian successor. In the Augustinian tradition of scriptural interpretation, one is enjoined not to read the New Testament in the light of the Old—de-

² Preface to Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), p. xiv. Andrew Delbanco emphasizes the "brilliantly visual presentation of love and martyrdom" in Stowe's novel, while citing from her proposal: "my vocation is simply that of a painter . . . there is no arguing with pictures." In Andrew Delbanco, *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 305-306.

spite the many places in the gospels where the authority of the prophets and the doings of the patriarchs are used to authenticate the messianic and sacrificial nature of Christ's ministry. Rather, one is enjoined to read the Old Testament in the light of the New, a practice that flourished into the nineteenth century under the rubric of "typology," and in a sense that is what I doing here. (For the record, Stowe practices an inverted typology, as in her framing of Tom and his martyrdom as a point-for-point echo of Christ's ministry, and I am happy to follow her lead.) But it is not that I am just taking the liberty to be unhistorical. History is present, but as it were spatialized, active in the continuum of space-time, in a relation of quantum entanglement. Metacritically, allowing Stowe's novel and Conrad's story to be read reciprocally illustrates the convergent nature of two swelling currents of revisionary insight now altering the contours of our critical understanding of the past. These address the scale and diffusion of the colonial enterprise and the appetitive inhumanity it let loose, and the tentacular reach of the slave regime in the Atlantic world with its dehumanizing corruptions, both phenomena manifest in the pervasive impact, economic, political, and not least cultural, of their fatally entangled operations.

A third revolutionary current in the last half century of literary studies brings from periphery to core neglected issues of gender. They here come into play in reflecting on the divergent, yet still meaningfully related histories of reception of the two works, though it is worth remarking that while the capacity of women for heroic action is a salient element in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it is an altogether rarer phenomenon in Conrad's writings, *Heart of Darkness* included. It is with this gender aspect in mind, as it bears on Conrad's views and practices as a reader, that it is most convenient to start.

I

As far as I know, there is no direct evidence of Conrad's having read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or of an interest in any of the writings of Mrs. Stowe, or their immensely popular derivatives in the theater. In fact, almost the only woman novelist Conrad admits to reading (and even relishing) is the widowed, family-connected Marguerite Poradowska, née Gachet, his nurturing partner in an intimate correspondence that bemuses all his biographers.³ In the aesthetic manifesto that served as the Preface to

³ The few exceptions appear mostly in private correspondence. Conrad alludes disparagingly to Marie Corelli in a letter to his cousin, Aniela Zagórska (Christmas, 1898), surveying the contemporary writing scene in Britain; in *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and From Polish Friends*, ed. Zdzisław Najder, trans. Halina Carroll (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 228. Writing to Marguerite Poradowska in 1894, he excoriates Sarah Grand's best-seller, *The Heavenly Twins* ("Imagine stupidity gone mad"); in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume I 1861-1897*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 185. In a letter to Edward Garnett (October 11, 1897), he dismisses the *Risorgimento* romance of E. L. Voinich (Ethel Lillian Boole), *The Gadfly*, as "rubbish ... I don't remember ever reading a book I disliked so much" (*Collected Letters I*, p. 395). But a month earlier, he had written to William Blackwood in response to an article on Mrs. Oliphant ("that serene talent"), that while she wrote too much, "She was a *better artist* than George Elliot, and, at her best *immensely*

The Nigger of the Narcissus, besides discounting the appeal of “persuasion” in a novel, he finds occasion for a gratuitous swipe at—among schools—“the unofficial sentimentalism (which like the poor is exceedingly difficult to get rid of)”—the school of fiction, that is, thought to be written by and for women. Such aversions would seem to place him, in his own mind, at the farthest remove from such as Mrs. Stowe. And yet, there are circumstances, public and private, that make an early exposure to Stowe’s novel exceedingly plausible, even probable; an exposure, I wish to argue, carrying sufficient force and staying power, having struck the sensibility of its young reader, to inform the imaginative narrative that we know with certainty emerged from Conrad’s adult experience in King Albert of Belgium’s Congo fiefdom.

In his account of becoming a writer in *A Personal Record*, Conrad observes, “Since the age of five I have been a great reader,” and by the time he was ten (in 1867), “I had read much of Victor Hugo and other romantics. I had read in Polish and French, history, voyages, novels; I knew ‘Gil Blas’ and ‘Don Quixote’ in abridged editions. I had read in early boyhood Polish poets and some French poets.” Knowing no English, he had not yet read Trollope, but “With men of European reputation, with Dickens, and Walter Scott and Thackeray, it was otherwise,” and he marvels at how convincingly Polish he found Mrs. Nickleby and the Crummles and Squeers tribes when speaking the language of his forefathers. He recalls his first taste of English literature, remembered as occurring in the sad year following his mother Ewa’s death when he was seven, in the manuscript of his father’s translation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. About then, he had read aloud to paternal satisfaction the proofs of his father’s translation of Hugo’s *Toilers of the Sea*.⁴ Elsewhere, he credits James Fenimore Cooper, especially the sea tales, and Captain Marryat, as having “through distances of space and time” shaped his very life.⁵ Forced to relocate frequently, and fragile in health, he recalls the grim winter of 1868-1869, with his father dying and tended by strangers: “I don’t know what would have become of me if I had not been a reading boy. ... There were many books about, lying on consoles, on tables, and even on the floor, for we had not had time to settle down. I read! What did I not read!”⁶

Eighteen sixty-three, the high point of the American Civil War and the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, was also the year of a major insurgency in what had once been the Polish nation. In the period of its clandestine preparation, one of the leading figures of the movement, Apollo Korzeniowski, poet and man of letters, had attracted enough suspicion by 1862 to be sent into exile in northern Russia with his

superior to any living woman novelist I can call to mind” (*Collected Letters* I, p. 379). Finally, in *Under Western Eyes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1924), Conrad’s not altogether reliable narrator—an elderly English teacher of languages—refers, for purposes of contrast, to “the gifted author of *Corinne*,” Madame de Staël (p. 142).

⁴ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), pp. 70-72. He later declares (p. 124) “such an intense and unreasoning affection” for *Bleak House*, dating from childhood, and read “innumerable times, both in Polish and in English.”

⁵ Joseph Conrad, “Tales of the Sea” (1898), in *Notes on Life and Letters* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), p. 56.

⁶ Joseph Conrad, “Poland Revisited” (1915), in *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 168.

wife Ewa and their child, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, so removing them from the scene of the coming action at a crucial juncture. Health destroyed, and some partial reprieves notwithstanding, first Ewa in 1865, and then Apollo, four years later, would die of tuberculosis, leaving the boy to be marshalled into adulthood chiefly by his uncle, Ewa's older brother and head of the family estate, Tadeusz Bobrowski.

In the buildup to the insurgency, and among all those looking to the restoration of an independent Poland, a vexed and divisive issue was something labelled, euphemistically, "the peasant question." Then, as in the earlier November Uprising of 1830, the national feeling found many of its most militant proponents among the hereditary class of land-owning gentry called the *szlachta*, still politically and culturally privileged, but intensely conscious of its former dominance, independence, and ongoing progressive marginalization. Both the Korzeniowskis and the Bobrowskis were of that class, with their Ukrainian estates lying in what once had been greater Poland and now were provinces of mixed population within the Russian Empire. Konrad's Korzeniowski grandfather, however, had forfeited the family estates by virtue of participation in the events of 1830, so that Apollo (like his dispossessed soldier father) attempted for a while to earn his living by renting and managing the estates of others.

The "peasant question" had to do with the status of the peasantry on such landed estates, to which large numbers were bound as serfs, both in Russian-governed "Congress Poland" and the lost Polish territories. Like the land itself, whole villages with their indentured labor force could be rented, bought and sold. Throughout these territories the estate owners were, by and large, Polish (or long-Polonized) gentry, *szlachta*, educated to roles in the military, the judiciary, and local governance, Polish speaking and Roman Catholic. The enserfed peasantry was typically Ruthenian (Ukrainian), non-Polish speaking, largely illiterate, and Orthodox or Uniat. Culturally, socially, linguistically, religiously, they were other. In the buildup to 1863, an insurgency directed principally against Russia, the Polish nationalist leadership had hopes of enlisting the peasantry in the struggle for independence. Complicating the outlook—apart from the non-Polish peasantry's loyalties to religion, community, and Tsar—was the argument over emancipation.

Alexander II had opened up the prospect of emancipation throughout the Empire in 1856, whereupon he invited the formation of provincial commissions to study ways towards its realization. His government proclaimed the emancipation of the serfs on Russian private lands in March, 1861, hedged about by numerous conditions on timing and subsequent land ownership. In notional Poland, conservative nationalists ("the Whites"), in good part representing the *szlachta*, countered pressure for emancipation in a liberated Polish nation by projecting the restoration of an imaginary, once prevalent now lost, harmony of peasant and landowner. But some among a more liberal and egalitarian faction ("the Reds") argued for full and immediate emancipation, along with an entitlement to ownership of allocated farmland. A leading voice within that more radical faction belonged to Apollo Korzeniowski; but even

for him the contradiction between *szlachta* ideals and interests and the revolutionary promise of an emancipated and empowered peasantry was not easily resolved.⁷

In the upshot, the peasantry, especially in the outer reaches of “greater Poland,” proved unresponsive to the emancipatory proclamations of the insurgent leadership, while the Russian authorities countered with generous policies on peasant land ownership and, in March 1864 following the rising, with outright abolition of serfdom in the Polish heartland (not yet fully implemented in Russia), and with other severe and even ruinous penalties aimed specifically at the *szlachta*. In Conrad’s immediate family, his uncle and future father-surrogate, Tadeusz Bobrowski—who deplored the insurgency and Apollo and Ewa’s part in it as romantic folly—had served on the Tsar’s local and regional commissions on serfdom from 1858, and had advocated a middle course of transitional, qualified emancipation.⁸ Closer to Apollo, Ewa and Bobrowski’s younger brother, Stefan—a leader of the insurgency’s Central National Committee—pushed for full and immediate emancipation and an egalitarian state.⁹ From this troubled and divided heritage, Conrad, proud as a boy of his *szlachta* heritage, steeped in the revolutionary patriotism of the great national poets, marked by both the romantic nationalism of his parents and the duty-conscious rationality of his supportive uncle, sought to distance himself, in worlds elsewhere.

By the time the vexed question of “the peasant problem” took on critical importance in Polish revolutionary and land-owning circles, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was well established as an all-time best seller, not only in America, on its book publication there in 1852, but worldwide, mutating virally into a host of popular forms, especially theatrical. Within a year of publication, an estimated million and a half copies of the novel flooded Great Britain and its colonies. Translations appeared in more than twenty languages, with multiple competing versions in French and German. As

⁷ Korzeniowski’s position and underlying vision with respect to the peasant question, often set in a contrast by Conrad scholars with that of his gradualist brother-in-law, Tadeusz Bobrowski (Conrad’s guardian), comes under scrutiny in the work of Addison Bross. He argues, with special attention to the implications of a “Note” in Korzeniowski’s treatise, *Poland and Muscovy* (1864), that Korzeniowski’s “desires for the peasantry stop far short of the demand for sweeping social change that would characterize a radical democrat in his time and place.” Korzeniowski’s “Note” concerns an 1855 event in the Kiev *gubernia* where a peasant agitation was bloodily put down while the Polish *szlachta* landlords stood by. Bross emphasizes the delusional distortions in Korzeniowski’s account, notably those implying a benign mutuality in the relations of Ukrainian serf and Polish landowner and a realistic prospect of joint action against Russian rule. See Addison Bross, “Apollo Korzeniowski’s Mythic Vision: *Poland and Muscovy*, “Note A,”” *The Conradian* 20 (Spring/Autumn 1995), pp. 77-102. On the other hand, Zdzisław Najder, Conrad’s most authoritative biographer with respect to his Polish background, reports Korzeniowski, as a central figure in the “Red” wing of the Polish irredentists in Warsaw, “unequivocally committed to a program of broad social reforms linked to the struggle for independence, wherein the objective was “not only to liberate the peasants but also to give every citizen of a reborn Poland equal civic liberties.” See Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 29, 42.

⁸ See Tadeusz Bobrowski, *A Memoir of My Life*, trans. Addison Bross (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, and Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, 2008), pp. 335-375.

⁹ Ranked high among the martyrs of 1863 in patriotic memory, Stefan was killed in an unequal duel thought to have been provoked by his right-wing opponents. See Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, trans. Halina Najder (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), p. 23.

to Polish, the British Library lists a *Chata Wujka Tomasza* (Lwów 1853) with Franciszek Didacki as probable translator. Another edition appeared in Warsaw in two volumes in 1865 as *Chatka Ojca Toma*.¹⁰ In France, George Sand roundly declared, in her notable review article on *La Case de l'oncle Tom*, “It is no longer permissible for persons who know how to read not to have read it.”¹¹ Her *ukase* could readily have applied throughout Europe, not least in those parts embroiled in arguments over the continued existence of serfdom.

In Russia, including the Ukraine, the book was banned until late in 1857—the year following Alexander’s declaration of intent. But French and German and sometimes even English were spoken and read by the educated elite, print was portable, and “many members of Russia’s literate public of the 1850s read it as an allegorical attack on and description of Russia’s own serfdom-based society.”¹² All the more so in the vestigial Polish heartland, where the book was not banned, and where, along with the Polish and other translations, there was also the theater. Stage adaptations were quick to appear in the wake of the novel through much of Europe, including Poland, where, as one scholar notes, “the black tragedian Ira Aldridge’s Polish performances of the 1850s and 1[8]60s [notably Shakespeare] were counterpointed by stage productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” with white actors in blackface.¹³ Russians were struck by the similarities between the world of the St. Clares and that of the contemporary Russian estate owner, rendered for us in the writings of Turgenev and Goncharov (*Oblomov*, 1859). Of St. Clare, one of Herzen’s correspondents exclaims, “Everything about him is Russian,” and then goes on to parallel other Stowe characters with Russian types.¹⁴

During its century of severest repression, literature had come to serve as the chief vehicle of patriotic sentiment and revolutionary fervor in Poland. Apollo’s vocation, as poet, playwright, editor, essayist and translator, *and* as revolutionary conspirator, was in that heroic tradition. His revolutionary ideals, moreover, kept company with

¹⁰ The librarian of the British Museum made a point of collecting all translations in all languages of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* soon after its publication. (See the “Bibliographical Account” and listings by George Bullen of the British Museum included in many U.S. Houghton, Mifflin editions after 1879.) The 1853 Polish title translates as “The Cottage of Uncle Thomas, or Slave Life in the United States of North America.” Etymologically, the word for “slave” here, *niewolników*, means “unfree,” which could be taken as descriptive of serfdom. The 1865 title is more restrictive: “The Hut of Father Tom, or the Life of Blacks in the Slave States [*stanach niewolniczych*] of North America.”

¹¹ George Sand, *Autour de la Table* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1876), pp. 319-337. Originally in *Presse*, December 1852. “Ce livre est dans toutes les mains, dans tous les journaux. Il aura, il a déjà des éditions dans tous les formats. On le dévore, on le couvre de larmes. Il n’est déjà plus permis aux personnes qui savent lire de ne l’avoir pas lu, et on regrette qu’il y ait tant de gens condamné à ne le lire jamais ...” (p. 319).

¹² John MacKay, *True Songs of Freedom: Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Russian Culture and Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), p. 9.

¹³ Pat M. Ryan, “Some Polish Perspectives on African American History and Culture,” *The Polish Review* 37 (1992), p. 158. Ryan reproduces an undated theater poster for *Chata Wujka Toma* in Poznań, an adaptation from D’Ennery and Dumanoir’s less than faithful French version starring Czesław Knapczyński. He notes performances in Lwów (Lviv) in 1866 with the famous tragedian Jan Królikowski playing Uncle Tom. Aldridge actively supported Polish independence, and died in Łódź in 1867.

¹⁴ MacKay, p. 15.

an equally intense religious belief. It would be most surprising if the Christian evangelical and martyrological fervor of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, its domestic values, its rage against institutionalized injustice and individual oppression, its high melodramatic intensity and its pointed rejection of the politics of accommodation, would not have appealed to Apollo (along with its Dickensian tapestry), as directly bearing on his most passionate preoccupations. These were the evils of subjection in all its demeaning and dehumanizing forms, sustained through the oppressive exercise of autocratic power; and the Christ-like, lingering martyrdom of the Polish people. In the years of Conrad's childhood retreat into omnivorous reading, including Cooper, Marryat, Hugo, Dickens, and Scott, while his grieving, widowed father was translating Hugo, Dickens, and Shakespeare, planning and contracting with literary journals, and writing for the theater, what are the odds that from the piles of books in his father's study or from some other friendly source the boy drew out a copy, in French or Polish, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so celebrated and available, so attractively exotic, and yet so laden with what was applicable to the life and issues at hand?¹⁵

1890. En route to the command (as he thought) of a riverboat on the Congo, Conrad embarked on the arduous journey up from the sea, first by boat where the great river was navigable, then on foot and by caravan where it was not, and then again by riverboat. Eventually he would reach Stanley Falls, more than a thousand miles from the ocean, having steered through much difficult tropical terrain punctuated by disheveled trading stations, bouts of illness, petty company politics and ruinous incompetence, and a voracious extractive trade in ivory. Early in the journey he met and briefly bonded with Roger Casement, who more than a decade later would conduct a crushing investigation into Belgium's Congo operations, exposing its horrors to the civilized world, which Leopold's original *Société Anonyme* claimed to represent. In his major fictional refashioning of his own Congo experience, Conrad characterizes it as a journey into the heart of darkness.¹⁶

Rivers as pathways into the opaque complexities of the land are not uncommon in Conrad's fiction, and would seem to reflect his own maritime and coastal experience. Marlow's initial ruminations in *Heart of Darkness* on the Thames, as once an avenue

¹⁵ In view of this near certainty, as I believe it to be, and for the sake of simplicity, I will eschew the conditional and subjunctive moods, or other cautious qualifications, in subsequent passages that argue Conrad's finding an imaginative resource in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I would be surprised if there were no allusion to the novel to be found in the papers and publications of Korzeniowski, prolific critic, *feuilletoniste*, correspondent, and editor, in the collection of many of his writings and manuscripts in the Jagiellonian Library in Kraków, or in his journalism and periodical publication elsewhere.

¹⁶ See Joseph Conrad, *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces*, ed. Zdzisław Najder (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), p. 7, and Frederick R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives, A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 288-289 and 552-555. Conrad did not join the petitions to spare Casement, the former hero of the *bien pensant*, from execution as a war-time traitor upon his attempt to bring German arms to Irish insurgents in 1916. The historian Maurice N. Hennessy quotes King Leopold's exhortation during the 1876 conference in Brussels that launched his African enterprise. Its philanthropic intent was "to open to civilisation the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the whole population." From *The Congo: A Brief History, 1876-1908* (London, 1961), quoted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), p. 87.

into Britain's own heart of darkness, register Conrad's consciousness of such avenues as having a temporal as well as topographical character, as pathways into the layered past. Their ascent offered both an invitation into the unknown and a ladder of historical regression, reaching as far as "the night of the first ages."¹⁷ "Going up that river," Marlow says, speaking of the Congo,

[...] was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth ... you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert ... till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps (p. 34).

And yet, he adds, there were moments in the journey when one's past came back, if only "in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream." So, I would argue, when Conrad returned to his Congo experience as a writer, transforming experience into art, hauntings from "another existence," somewhere "far away," emerged and fused with the "overwhelming realities" of the thick, sluggish air and sense of a brooding, implacable force. Among them, evoked in recalling the atmosphere of the journey up the Congo with its spectacle of cruelty and systematic exploitation, black misery and white barbarism, coercive violence dressed up as civilizing agency, was another journey up river to a destination whose horrific nightmare character would then also inform Kurtz's remote and isolated trading station: the journey up the Red River in antebellum Louisiana to Simon Legree's isolated plantation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Rivers and river journeys play a large role in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For the slave populations of the border states, where the novel and then Tom's martyr's way begins, there was of course the constant threat of the down-river passage to the slave markets and grinding misery of the cotton kingdom and the rice and cane fields of the deep South. In the chapter called "The Mississippi," Stowe hails the scale and scope of the river's commercial activity, the very embodiment of modern American life. She evokes the moving diorama of its canes and cypresses, the plantation parade of mansions and slave-shack villages as seen from the steamer's bale-laden decks, as backdrop for that bitter, darker cargo the boat also carries, carries south to market (Ch. XIV).¹⁸ Structurally balancing that down-river movement is the Harris family's separate and conjoined flight northward, with the Ohio River in its east-west stretch furnishing the frontier between slave state and free state, and the signature scene of Eliza's perilous crossing on the moving ice. Later, Lake Erie serves as the final crossing point to a freedom beyond the reach of the Fugitive Slave Law and the threat of recapture. And throughout the narrative, in hymn and allusion, flickers the promise of the river Jordan.

¹⁷ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 36.

¹⁸ Compare John Banvard's "Three Mile" painted moving panorama of the Mississippi River, successfully exhibited at home and abroad from the 1840s, reviewed by Charles Dickens, "The American Panorama," *Examiner*, 16 December, 1848, pp. 805-806. Such moving panoramas of the Mississippi were introduced into George Aiken's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the run of its vastly successful New York production, and its competitor at Barnum's Museum. See Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1947), p. 103, and David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 190.

But Tom's further journey, in chains, from the New Orleans slave market to Legree's plantation, takes him *up* river, and into the dark interior, on waters evocative of Acheron and Phlegethon. "The boat moved on,—freighted with its weight of sorrow,—up the red, muddy, turbid current, through the abrupt, tortuous windings of the Red River; and sad eyes gazed wearily on the steep red-clay banks, as they glided by in dreary sameness" (Ch. XXXI, p. 364).¹⁹ Tellingly, the chapter that reports the journey is entitled "The Middle Passage." The next, winding through pine barrens, cypress swamps and "slimy, spongy ground," funereal black moss and rotting stumps, is called "Dark Places" (Ch. XXXII). It carries the epigraph, "The dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty" (*Psalms* 74: 20).

Simon Legree is a brute, coarse and ignorant, and Stowe has him speaking a "low" vernacular; but he is also a man of affairs, "with that air of efficiency that ever characterized him" (Ch. XXXI, p. 359). The once-handsome house and grounds he inhabits are neglected and dilapidated because Legree runs his plantation "as he did everything else, merely as an implement for money making" (Ch. XXXII, p. 366). That instrumental approach applies to the working slave population, whose treatment and life expectancy, as against cost of replacement, are simply part of a cost-benefit calculation, whose object is optimization.²⁰ Legree, "like many other planters, had but one form of ambition,—to have in the heaviest crop of the season," and he has laid bets on it (Ch. XXXVI, p. 402). His cotton is Kurtz's ivory. Thanks to the compressions and elisions of the dramatic adaptations of the novel, and the influence of other works (e.g. Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, 1859), Legree is often remembered as the brutal Yankee overseer on a more genteelly disposed owner's plantation.²¹ He is indeed a Northern transplant, and he does tell Tom, "I don't keep none o' yer cussed overseers; I does my own overseeing" (Ch. XXXI, p. 361). But it is *his* plantation, root and branch; and he manages it with a rivalrous pair of toadying black underseers, Sambo and Quimbo. The net result is that he, the only white person in the isolation of the plantation he possesses and rules, is unconstrained in his power over other human beings. He is its absolute tyrant and autocrat. It is Tom's refusal to act as the instrument of Legree's unfettered will, to bend to Legree's unchallengeable authority, that necessitates, in the logic of absolutism, his destruction. Whatever Legree's natural bent, it is isolation and impunity that empowers him. And it is the dangerous seduc-

¹⁹ Given the countless editions available, citations will indicate chapter numbers for convenience. The accompanying page numbers will refer to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925 and later).

²⁰ "I don't go for savin' niggers. Use up and buy more's, my way; makes you less trouble, and I'm quite sure it comes cheaper in the end" (Ch. XXXI, p. 362). Legree elaborates on coming to this conclusion, and Stowe documents the practice and its rationale in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Salem, N. H.: Ayer Company, Publishers, 1987; reprint of the edition dated 1854), pp. 72-74. Though Legree operates without the neutralizing terminology of rational economics, he has the principles down pat.

²¹ In his admirable study of the struggle, moral and practical, that hardened around the issue of the fugitive slave in the run-up to the Civil War, Andrew Delbanco writes of the antebellum slave narratives: "They were populated by stock types—the decent but weak master, the jealous mistress, the self-hating house slave, the vicious overseer (forerunner of Simon Legree) who knows that he stands in the social hierarchy barely above the slaves he despises." Delbanco, *The War before the War*, pp. 161-162.

tions of power, power limited neither by law nor society, that Stowe consistently invokes. “Is *man* ever a creature to be trusted with wholly irresponsible power?” she asks, in the “Concluding Remarks” appended for the novel’s publication in book form. “And does not the slave system, by denying the slave all legal right of testimony, make every individual owner an irresponsible despot?” (p. 469). As Legree’s quadroon mistress Cassy explains to Tom when she ministers to his grievous wounds,

Here you are, on a lone plantation, ten miles from any other, in the swamps; not a white person here, who could testify if you were burned alive, if you were scalded, cut into inch-pieces, set up for the dogs to tear, or hung up and whipped to death. There’s no law here, of God or man, that can do you, or any one of us, the least good; and, this man! there’s no earthly thing that he’s too good to do (Ch. XXXIV, pp. 382-383).

The chapter’s epigraph reads, “And behold the tears of such as are oppressed; and on the side of their oppressors there was power. Wherefore I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive” (*Ecclesiastes* 4: 1).

Cassy, driven by despair to the brink of madness and murder, is—by virtue of her banked rage and scorn—the only figure on the scene who can give Legree pause. Stowe describes her as tall, slender, with a face that conveys the idea of a “wild, painful, and romantic history,” once beautiful, now with a “fierce pride and defiance in every line,” and in her eye “a deep, settled night of anguish,—an expression so hopeless and unchanging as to contrast fearfully with the scorn and pride expressed by her whole demeanor” (Ch. XXXIII, p. 374). Dissuaded from murder (after a brief turn as Lady Macbeth) by Tom’s impassioned Christian piety, she arrives at a plan to exploit Legree’s superstitious propensities, leading—with Tom’s aid and encouragement—to a brilliantly executed escape along with her intended successor, and eventually to Legree’s haunted dissolution in drunkenness and death. It is that initial striking presence, however, of regal pride mingled with deepest despair, that would reemerge, “tragic” and “superb” as the helmeted woman among the warriors in the tenebrous heart of Kurtz’s kingdom.

When Legree lies dying, prey to alcoholic delirium with its “lurid shadows” and hallucinations, “None could bear the horrors of that sick room, when he raved and screamed, and spoke of sights which almost stopped the blood of those who heard him” (Ch. XLII, p. 449). The horrors in Legree’s mind and the horrors of the slave system, converging in the living nightmare of his plantation, push against the limits of what Stowe finds speakable. She regularly reminds us that her rendering of what slavery means for families and individuals can only say the half of it. Cassy tells the newly purchased Emmeline, “You wouldn’t sleep much, if I should tell you things I’ve seen ... I’ve heard screams here that I haven’t been able to get out of my head for weeks and weeks.” She hints at “a black, blasted tree, and the ground all covered with black ashes” (Ch. XXXVI, p. 399). Threatening Tom, Legree later amplifies, with a hint of abominable rites and practices: “How would you like to be tied to a tree, and have a slow fire lit up around ye?” In her “Concluding Remarks,” Stowe charges her well-disposed Southern readers, in their own secret souls and private conversings, with the knowledge “that there are woes and evils, in

this accursed system, far beyond what are here shadowed, or can be shadowed.” And she asks, of the continuing commerce in human property, “And its heart-break and its horrors, *can* they be told?” She cites mothers who have been driven to save their children by murdering them (Cassy is such a one in the novel, as is Cora Gordon in Stowe’s subsequent novel *Dred*, and Sethe in Toni Morrison’s gothic *Beloved*). She sums up: “Nothing of tragedy can be written, can be spoken, can be conceived, that equals the frightful reality of scenes daily and hourly acting on our shores” (Ch. XLIV, pp. 469-470).²² One senses the frustration, as Stowe speaks of and gestures towards the Unspeakable. It is the very unspeakable that we hear reverberating in Kurtz’s cryptic, haunting, uncharacteristically laconic last words: “The horror! The horror!”

The words “dark” and “darkness” chime obsessively in Marlow’s relation, giving Conrad’s title a resounding iterative resonance. For his early readers, that title would have carried a clichéd familiarity, recalling H. M. Stanley’s best-selling *Through the Dark Continent* (1878), where Stanley apparently invented the geographic phrase, and *In Darkest Africa* (1890). The latter title, much echoed and parodied, was immediately appropriated with ironic force in General William Booth’s *In Darkest England, and the Way Out* (1890), Booth’s Salvationist jeremiad and utopian prescription for *his own* land, home of the dark Satanic mills.²³ Between Stanley’s two blockbusters, he had become chief agent for development, and ultimately principal mouthpiece, for Leopold’s Congo enterprise. And over the same period, Marlow tells us in the novel, what had been for him a blank space on the map, a “white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over... had become a place of darkness” (p. 8).²⁴

Placed side by side, Kurtz the fallen idealist and Legree the appetitive brute would seem to have been conceived at the opposite extremes of a spectrum of character. Where the extremes meet is in the suggestion of something missing in each, in effect a blank space in the soul, which—like that on the map—also turns into a place of profoundest darkness. In both instances, that darkness carries a whiff of sulfur, the blasphemous hubristic claim—and, with Kurtz, even the trappings—of appropriated divinity. Stowe writes of Legree, with an eye to the superstitious dread that seizes him in his final disintegration: “to the man who has dethroned God, the spirit-land is, indeed, in the words of the Hebrew poet [*Job* 10: 21-22], ‘a land of darkness and the

²² Both Stowe in *Dred* and Morrison draw on the notorious 1856 case of Margaret Garner. Stowe’s Cora Gordon declares, in the magistrate’s court, “Do you want to know what I killed them for? Because I loved them!—loved them so well that I was willing to give up my soul to save theirs!” Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1881), Ch. XLIII, p. 462.

²³ Published October, 1890, while Conrad was still in the Congo, and written with the assistance of the crusading journalist, W. T. Stead.

²⁴ In a much-cited passage of autobiography, Conrad recalls, “It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts [more likely ten], that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself... ‘When I grow up I shall go *there*.’” And (after a quarter of a century or so), “Yes. I did go there: *there* being the region of Stanley Falls which in ‘68 was the blankest of blank spaces on the earth’s figured surface.” Conrad, *A Personal Record*, p. 13.

shadow of death,' without any order, where the light is as darkness" (Ch. XXXIX, p. 425). Kurtz, however, is presented as an exceptional man, originally a talented idealist with high aspirations for doing good in the world, while Legree is presented as a man of coarse appetite and impulse, at the bottom of Stowe's scale of humanity in moral intelligence. He is her exemplar of what the system allows: that *such* a man should have unchecked, total power over the lives of others! She puts into the mouth of St. Clare, the most humane of masters, the reflection, first made while travelling through the South, "that every brutal, disgusting, mean, low-lived fellow I met, was allowed by our laws to become absolute despot of as many men, women, and children, as he could cheat, steal, or gamble money enough to buy" (Ch. XIX, p. 240). And that is Legree. For Conrad, however, it is not Kurtz's native brutality, but his very idealism that is problematic, as tending to screen out reality, to produce high-sounding self-delusion, and to lend itself to corrupt and venal employment. It lives in the hypocritical discourse of the Company's civilizing mission. The missing something in Kurtz is identified in Marlow's speculative ruminations, shaped by Marlow's nautical biases on men and the sea and a pessimism earned through experience. It is some inner check, a fund of simple principle that can survive the paucity of external checks (society and the policeman) and the temptations of unimpeded power. Lacking that inner check, Kurtz the idealist has no scruples as to means in the service of both immediate and remote goals; and so he falls prey to delusional fantasies, primitive appetite, and the freedoms of anomic tyranny.

And yet, even as Kurtz is haunted in his last days—with Marlow as his appalled auditor—by the ghost of his original ideals and aspirations, expressed in his final, terrible cry, so Legree is never entirely bereft of the last vestiges of conscience and moral sensibility, and thus is briefly troubled by Tom's outrageous claim to personal uprightness, and finally proves vulnerable to retributive fantasies. In his back story, Legree is even offered, with his crude soul in the balance, a moment charged with sufficient grace to redeem him, in line with Stowe's adamant Christian convictions. But this he rejects, and instead claims, in his hellish kingdom, absolute mastery over other souls, where only *he* determines right and wrong (Ch. XXXIII, p. 380). And so the "superstitious creeping horror" that seems to fill Legree's habitation is able to take firm possession of his "dark inner world" (Ch. XXXIX, p. 425).

With Legree as the bottom term, Stowe creates a spectrum of exempla, to drive home the pernicious character of "THE SYSTEM"—at its worst in the Cotton Kingdom, but profoundly corrupting wherever it spreads its influence. She systematically demonstrates how it annuls the better inclinations and sympathies of such men as Shelby—a weaker vessel, acting in the end (in his sale of Tom and Eliza's four-year old, Harry) under the pressure of debt and financial necessity—and St. Clare, a man of high intelligence and fine sensibility reduced to impotence and self-deprecating cynicism, whose insulating attempts at compromise fail and whose resolve to challenge the system comes too late. St. Clare is paired with a twin brother of Roman character, firm, energetic, and efficient, the very platonic form of a successful planter, a pillar of the System, and therewith racist and oligarchic, and prepared to do what is required to sustain it.

Conrad also provides a range, less systematic, embracing “the pilgrims,” European riffraff driven by greed and destructive impulse, like any undisciplined army let loose in an alien setting; and the on-site Director, a self-serving, politicking, bureaucratic mediocrity, whose one great gift is his imperviousness to disease. But Conrad’s most telling portrait (in two flavors) of *l’homme moyen sensuel* as colonial agent, subject to prolonged isolation like Kurtz, and intolerable boredom, while burdened with power beyond the ability to manage it, comes in his chilling earlier story, “An Outpost of Progress.”²⁵ There, having been entangled with a band of predatory raiders and slavers in an exchange of men for ivory, Conrad’s protagonists fall out and destroy each other and themselves. No more savagely ironic title can be found in the annals of literature.

The business of slavery, which drives every aspect of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, surfaces sporadically in *Heart of Darkness*, but is also a disturbingly poisonous constant in the background. Conrad’s original ascent of the Congo River to Stanley Falls took him into territory overseen (as arranged by Stanley for the Company) by the notorious Zanzibari raider and slaver, Tippu Tib.²⁶ Kurtz’s terrorizing, village-destroying ivory raiders follow a program much like that of the Zanzibaris. The system of contracted, indentured, and forced labor that Marlow encounters, prevailing wherever the Company operated, had many of the characteristics of both slavery and serfdom. Marlow’s 200 mile march between navigable sections of the river takes him through country deserted by the population in the wake of the Company’s heavily armed impressment gangs. Before that, on his arrival at Boma at the end of his sea voyage, one of the first things he sees is “Six black men advanc[ing] in a file, toiling up the path,” under guard and balancing baskets of earth on their heads. “[E]ach had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking” (p. 16). Shortly after, Marlow comes upon a grove of the dying, skeletal black contract labor far from home, worn out, discarded, and perishing. The British and specifically English identity that Conrad so avidly courted had staked a claim to exceptional national virtue on its earlier suppression of the slave trade and abrogation of chattel slavery at home and wherever the British flag gave protection and its maritime power extended its reach. And from Conrad’s past—though one cannot argue complete moral equivalence between the lawless and piratical enterprise of black slavery and Eastern European serfdom—there was “the peasant question” that roiled the national politics weighing so fatally on Conrad’s childhood.

In a chapter entitled “Liberty”—with an epigraph recalling a speech in the Somerset Case of 1772, where Lord Mansfield’s ruling opened the way to British emancipatory doctrine—Stowe distills the central issues in language that bridges between

²⁵ In Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Unrest* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), pp. 86-117. Originally published in *Cosmopolis* (June-July 1897). Many of the motifs and even some of the language resurface in *Heart of Darkness*.

²⁶ See Maya Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), pp. 197, 345n. 30.

the history of America and the national aspirations of Conrad's radical Polish elders.²⁷ With George and Eliza Harris poised for the last leg of their journey out of bondage, Stowe asks her readers, "What is freedom to a nation, but freedom to the individuals in it? ... what is freedom to George Harris? To your fathers, freedom was the right of a nation to be a nation. To him, it is the right of a man to be a man ..." (Ch. XXXVII, p. 408). The logic that links nation and individual makes a further brief appearance in the conversation of St. Clare, in the short time left to him after his conversion to activism in the matter of slavery. Looking for positive encouragement in that historic challenge, he turns east: "The Hungarian nobles set free millions of serfs, at an immense pecuniary loss; and perhaps, among us may be found generous spirits, who do not estimate honor and justice by dollars and cents" (Ch. XXVII, p. 335).²⁸ Stowe also makes allusion to Poland in its unfree state, in a context that would have spoken particularly to those whose revolutionary agenda targeted autocratic rule. St. Clare is giving an account of his father—"My brother was begotten in his image"—as "a born aristocrat" for whom God was "decidedly the head of the upper classes." He was also an "inflexible, driving, punctilious businessman," ruling a large, unruly enterprise by a strict imposition of system, administered and enforced by a brutal overseer, "the absolute despot of the estate." "The fact is, my father showed the exact sort of talent for a statesman. He could have divided Poland as easily as an orange, or trod on Ireland as quietly and systematically as any man living" (Ch. XIX, pp. 242-244). Bracketing divided Poland and captive Ireland, two nations deprived of "the right to be a nation," was not unique to Stowe; and recognizing the continuity between the unfreedom of the nation and the lives of the enslaved/enserfed in society was no great stretch. Tying both deprivations to autocratic despotism follows almost inevitably, and points toward what is possibly a clue to explaining a minor puzzle, a seemingly arbitrary touch, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad needs an informant to help us and Marlow form an adequate picture of Kurtz's regime and influence. Such an informant needn't be fully aware of all that he is telling us, or share in the view he helps create. And in fact Conrad makes him something of a holy innocent, dressed in Harlequin rags and patches and apparently enjoying the charmed life attributed to fools, drunks, and madmen. He is also, to

²⁷ Stowe's epigraph, spoken in court by the Irish lawyer, John Philpot Curran, became a watchword of the emancipation movement. In Stowe's somewhat abridged rendering, it reads: "No matter with what solemnities he may have been devoted upon the altar of slavery, the moment [the enslaved person] touches the sacred soil of Britain, the altar and the God sink together in the dust, and he stands redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled, by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation" (Ch. XXXVII, p. 406).

²⁸ Hungary also appears in a view of the Harris fugitives, besieged by the slave catchers: "If it had been only a Hungarian youth, now, bravely defending, in some mountain fastness, the retreat of fugitives escaping from Austria into America, this would have been sublime heroism; but as it was a youth of African descent, defending the retreat of fugitives through America into Canada, of course we are too well instructed and patriotic to see any heroism in it" (Ch. XVII, p. 213). Stowe goes on to allude indirectly to Kossuth's recent hero's welcome in Britain (and later America). For Stowe's heated defense of Kossuth against journalistic criticism in 1852, see Joan B. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 227-228.

Marlow, an embodiment of the pure, youthful, unselfish spirit of adventure. But why does Conrad make him a Russian?²⁹

Marlow's first contact with the Russian is in clues: a stack of firewood for the hungry stern-wheeler; a note of warning, to approach Kurtz's station cautiously; and a well-thumbed book on seamanship, British in origin, and with penciled notes in a seeming cipher—which turns out to be Cyrillic. When finally encountered at Kurtz's station, their author presents "a boyish, beardless face, very fair," and Marlow gathers "he had run away from school, had gone to sea in a Russian ship; ran away again; served some time in English ships; was now reconciled with the arch-priest," his father (pp. 53-54). In his personal history then, he is *mutatis mutandis* the young Conrad; in his compulsive need to speak, to unburden himself to an auditor, he is the mature Marlow. But why Russian?

One glaring contrast that follows from the antithesis of Stowe's venal brute and Conrad's deformed idealist is in the responses of those they rule. Legree, who rules by terror, division, and the whip is heartily hated and feared. Kurtz, having come down on the interior lake villages with thunder and lightning—"He could be very terrible" (p. 57)—is worshipped, having turned the villagers into his raiders and followers, whose dread of losing him provokes, first their violence, and then "such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth" (p. 47). Their god—whom the corruptions of power remote from countervailing checks had led to preside at "unspeakable rites" offered up to him (p. 51), and to post the shrunken heads of "rebels" who resist his will—was abandoning them.

The mature Conrad's intense repugnance toward the contemporary epitome of the autocratic state with its presiding "Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias" appears at its bluntest in a substantial essay published in the *Fortnightly Review* in the wake of Russia's ignominious defeat by an ascendant Japan. That was in 1905, six years after the writing of *Heart of Darkness*. Titled "Autocracy and War," it is a strange essay, ruminative, associative, part retrospective fulmination, part cold-eyed prophesy. It includes a ferocious diatribe against autocratic Russia as, in effect, Kurtz's Congo station writ large. Conrad sees Russian autocracy as a thing apart, rootless and inexplicable. "What strikes one with a sort of awe is just this something inhuman in its character. It is like a visitation, like a curse from Heaven falling in the darkness of ages upon the immense plains of forest and steppe lying dumbly on the confines of two continents: a true desert harbouring no Spirit either of the East or of the West."

The curse had entered her very soul; autocracy, and nothing else in the world, has moulded her institutions, and with the poison of slavery drugged the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism. It seems to have gone into the blood, tainting every mental activity in its source by a half-mystical, insensate, fascinating assertion of purity and holiness. The Government of Holy Russia, arrogating to itself the supreme power to torment and slaughter the bodies

²⁹ Josef Škvorecký formulates the question as "Why the Harlequin? On Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" and offers a similar explanation using Conrad's "Russian" novel, *Under Western Eyes*, to support his conclusions. See *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, no. 3 (1984), pp. 259-264.

of its subjects like a God-sent scourge, has been most cruel to those whom it allowed to live under the shadow of its dispensations.³⁰

In *Heart of Darkness*, the Russian is to Kurtz as a worshipful acolyte. He believes in Kurtz as transcending mere mortality, despite all that is erratic and arbitrary in his actions, including seizing the Russian's own small cache of ivory because Kurtz "had a fancy for it, and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased" (p. 57). But Kurtz "can't be judged as you would an ordinary man," says the Russian. And his devotion, fed by Kurtz's gift for grandiose eloquence, was not reasoned Marlow says, or in any way meditated. It was religious. "It came to him, and he accepted it with a kind of eager fatalism" (p. 56)—the fatalistic, unquestioning devotion, in short, of a believing Russian (and even Ruthenian) peasant for his Tsar.

Marlowe tells us a short third of the way into his narration that the thing he hates, detests, can't bear above everything is a lie (p. 27). It is then a most mordant irony that, moved in spite of himself by Kurtz's Intended's desperate need for "something—something—to—to live with," Marlow produces his reluctant lie: that the last word Kurtz pronounced was—not "The horror!"—but "your name" (p. 79). He so leaves intact, at least for the Intended, "that great and saving illusion" of a noble Kurtz and a noble unsullied love, in place of the monstrous truth, the unspeakable reality. And yet, before coming to this pass, Marlow has talked himself into the convoluted insight that somehow, through his unsparing self surrender in his solitary venture into the heart of darkness, Kurtz had attained a kind of martyred greatness, requiring a kind of loyalty. That his cry, "The horror!" was in fact an "affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (p. 72). Kurtz had at the last faced, with the courage of his extremity and despair, unbearable personal and metaphysical truths. Such paradoxical figuration of a *via negativa* marked by extremism, by a heroic rejection of lukewarm virtue and the safety of moderation, has considerable redemptive efficacy in Christian thought. It challenges a more conventional, straightforward view of martyrdom as a deposit in the bank of salvation. In pushing Marlow to the brink of these speculative quicksands, Conrad is putting a twist on a martyrology that is salient in the national mythography of the Poland he left behind, and also in the narrative typology of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where it may be presumed that its deployment found responsive resonances among

³⁰ Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 98. In this same essay of 1905, "Autocracy and War," Conrad takes up Bismarck's characterization of Russia as "*Le Néant*." Rather, he says, she is a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up all hope and aspiration, towards personal dignity, freedom, knowledge, conscience; not a *Néant*, but "simply the negation of everything worth living for" (p. 100). His view of what is likely to come of it all reflects his characteristic pessimism, and—however class-inflected—is not without prescience. He notes that war has been put on a new, all-out footing, on an unprecedented scale. He sees intensified territorial competition, with a greedy, arrogant, expansive Prussia as the successor menace. He is skeptical of recent expectations of positive revolution: "In whatever form of upheaval Autocratic Russia is to find her end, it can never be a revolution fruitful of moral consequences to mankind. It cannot be anything else but a rising of slaves." Given a people kept in ignorance of justice, truth, themselves and the world, "who had known nothing outside the capricious will of its irresponsible masters," he can only wish that it finds for leadership, not the wisdom of a Lycurgus or Solon, "but at least the force of energy and desperation in some as yet unknown Spartacus" (p. 102).

early Polish readers. The entanglement of the two martyrdoms—Poland’s and diaspora Africa’s—is not so easily discerned in Conrad’s thought and feeling, but the prevalence and power of the trope of Poland as the crucified Christ in the world of Conrad’s youth—and its congruence with Stowe’s parable—cannot be gainsaid.

When Conrad tells us that in his early boyhood he had read the Polish poets, these included the greatest of Poland’s Romantic national poets, his father’s model and hero, Adam Mickiewicz. Mickiewicz had given the trope of Poland, crucified by the Nations and yet their potential Savior, some of its strongest expression, above all in his multi-part verse drama, *Forefather’s Eve* (*Dziady*, the name of a traditional Slavic Feast of the Dead). Mickiewicz dedicates its climactic Third Part (1832) “To the Holy Memory” of his martyred fellow students, themselves inspired by the suffering and endurance—unparalleled, he suggests, since the time of the early Christians—of the Polish people. In the initial scenes, set in a prisoners’ cell, the blood of the students, who are being hauled off to exile, is compared to the blood of Christ, sacrificed for Man’s salvation. It is there that the poet-protagonist sheds his former romantic libertinism and re-baptizes himself as the poet-patriot Konrad (after the hero of Mickiewicz’s earlier *Konrad Wallenrod*).

In the third scene, Konrad goes through his own despairing Promethean/Luciferian moment, a dark night of the soul from which he is rescued by Father Piotr, who drives out that devil, interrogates, and banishes it. Later, in his monk’s cell, Father Piotr is the vehicle of an apocalyptic vision of a martyred and redeemed Poland wherein first “A tyrant has arisen, Herod! Lord, the youth of Poland / Is all delivered into Herod’s hands.” Here it is the white roads running north, “as rivers flow,” that constitute the road to Calvary, carrying their burden of captive humanity into penal exile and oblivion. Poland is then crucified on a cross with arms that shadow all of Europe, a cross “Made of three withered peoples, like dead trees.” Given vinegar and bile to drink, pierced and bleeding, forsaken and despairing, the nation expires while “Mother Freedom stands below and weeps.” But the nation overcomes its bloody martyrdom, despair, and death; ascends in Messianic triumph; and while its earthly agent is set above all kings and peoples (“Upon three crowns he stands, himself uncrowned”), it wraps in its redemptive, spreading garment “all the world.”³¹

The crucial scene in Poland’s historical martyrdom was a *sparagmos*, the progressive three-way partition by its neighbors, Russia, Prussia and Austria, that ended its unity and autonomy and opened an unending cycle of oppression, displacement, reckless revolt, and savage repression. Apollo Korzeniowski’s 1857 poem on his son Konrad’s christening, “Born in the 85th year of the Muscovite Oppression,” catches the dark mood:

Baby son, tell yourself
 You are without land, without love,
 Without country, without people,
 While *Poland—your Mother* is entombed.

³¹ Adam Mickiewicz, “Forefather’s Eve, Part III,” in *Polish Romantic Drama: Three Plays in English Translation*, ed. Harold B. Segel (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 74-77, 124-127. See also Clark S. Kraszewski’s complete translation (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2016).

Two years earlier, Korzeniowski deploys the imagery of Calvary to characterize a peasant agitation (also invoked in his treatise, *Poland and Muscovy*) where the insurgents (Ukrainian), unsupported by the *szlachta*, were brutally cut down:

Serfs back to work, back to factory!
Peasant rising: noble and clean,
Crucified by lords infamous and mean,
The Tsar laughs like a demon ...³²

In the ambient gloom, the scourge (knout), the bloody crown of thorns, the crushing weight of the Cross, massacres of the Innocents, Calvary itself, and the torment and mutilation of the saints, so vivid in Catholic and Orthodox imagery, all found ready application in the drama of the people's and the divided nation's suffering.

Stowe's figuration of Christian martyrdom and of Christ crucified compasses, not only Tom, the individual, but the whole of the nation's slave community and the African continent itself. It is elaborated in Tom's story almost from the beginning, where, despite his pass for travel, he declines the opportunity to run away from his impending sale, and declares, "If I must be sold, or all the people on the place, and everything go to rack, why, let me be sold" (Ch. V, p. 46). He then carries through his sacrificial ministry at waystations signposted by a temptation in the wilderness, a Gethsemane moment of "soul crisis," a brutal flagellation, and ultimate martyrdom in a Place of Skulls. When God is silent and Tom falls prey to "tossings of soul and despondent darkness," so that even his Bible offers no comfort, Legree comes out of the night: "You see the Lord an't going to help you: if He had been, he wouldn't have let *me* get you! ... Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, and can do something!" Though rejecting this tempter's injunction to "heave that ar old pack of trash in the fire, and join my church!," Tom is left at a spiritual nadir, until he is afforded a vision of Christ, buffeted and bleeding, crowned with thorns which mutate into rays of light, and is enjoined to overcome "even as I also overcame" (Ch. XXVIII, pp. 413-415).³³

Stowe opens the chapter (XL, "The Martyr") that represents Tom's Calvary with a recapitulation of his long walk through "the valley of slavery," and into that dark night of the soul. His final martyrdom follows upon his heroic refusal to betray the escapees, and Stowe again finds herself speaking of the unspeakable. "What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul! And yet, oh my country! these things are done under the shadow of thy laws! Oh Christ! Thy church sees them, almost in silence!" (Ch. XL, p. 438). From *Nation and Church*, Stowe returns to Tom, and hammers home the message of Christ re-crucified.

³² Najder, *Joseph Conrad*, pp. 13, 10. On *Poland and Muscovy*, see note 6.

³³ Stowe contrasts the charged rush of the moment of martyrdom with the sustained "heart-martyrdom" of subjection in terms that would elicit immediate recognition from the nationalists of Apollo and Ewa's generation, and that echo in Conrad's diatribes on autocracy. She writes, "But to live, —to wear on, day after day, of mean, bitter, low, harassing servitude, every nerve dampened and depressed, every power of feeling gradually smothered—this long and wasting heart-martyrdom, this slow, daily bleeding away of the inward life, drop by drop, hour after hour, —this is the true searching test of what there may be in man or woman" (Ch. XXXVIII, pp. 412-413).

We hear that standing beside him in the torture was “ONE,—seen by him alone,” while also beside him stood Legree, “[t]he tempter ... blinded by furious, despotic will.” Before losing consciousness, Tom forgives Legree “with all my soul!”; and when his executioners, Sambo and Quimbo, “took him down, and, in their ignorance, sought to call him back to life,” he forgives them too, and in a last effort of the spirit brings them the gospel message, winning, we are told, both their souls, and so—between two thieves—scoring one better than Jesus (pp. 438-440).

Earlier, when urging the gospel of Love upon a bitter, vengeful Cassy (Cassy: “Love!... love *such* enemies. It isn’t in flesh and blood”), Tom explains that being able to love and pray over all and through all, “that’s the *victory*.” Stowe then enlarges the view to embrace both race and continent: “And this, oh, Africa! latest called of nations,—called to the crown of thorns, the scourge, the bloody sweat, the cross of agony,—this is to be *thy* victory ...” (Ch. XXXVIII, p. 421). But Africa’s Christ-like redemptive agency in the world as Tom’s creator imagined it, like Poland’s imagined messianic liberation of the nations of despot-ridden Europe, was not soon in arriving. On the brink of a feverish new era of exploitative occupation, partition, and suffering when Stowe wrote, Africa as Conrad found it, like the Poland he had left, had plenty of the scourge, the sweat, and the cross in its nostrils, but—for at least three more generations and two world wars—not much of a scent of victory.

II

Nothing in the early reception of *Heart of Darkness* resembles the domestic impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or its phenomenal eruption into global ubiquity and acclaim. Both writings began in the modest circumstances of serial publication to limited attention, but then their courses diverged, with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* achieving swift celebrity, and *Heart of Darkness* ascending only gradually into literary canonicity as a powerful critique of the colonial and imperial enterprise and a modernist narrative masterpiece in the form of a voyage of existential discovery.³⁴ But in the post-World War II era of civil rights struggle and colonial emancipation, their critical fortunes took a similar turn. After stretches wherein the moral and political bearings of the two works were reductively conventionalized in the case of Stowe, and conscientiously subordinated to, first formal, and then psycho-symbolic readings in the case of Conrad, both came under attack on literary and political grounds. In each case the challenge produced controversy, defensive argument, and, happily, fresh currents of interpretive understanding.

Stowe’s early reception in America was by no means universally welcoming. In the slave-holding South and in the party-press, anti-abolitionist sectors of the North, her novel evoked many abusive critiques, especially of its claims to a truthful repre-

³⁴ See John G. Peters’ *Joseph Conrad’s Critical Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for a heroically comprehensive account, roughly periodized and adroitly summarized and distilled, of the vast body and tangled course of Conrad commentary.

sensation of slavery as an institution, with its unconscionable legal scaffolding, deleterious domestic norms, and abusive, often horrific plantation discipline. In response, Stowe compiled *A Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*, her weighty "illustration" and defense of the novel's factual grounding.³⁵ In subsequent years, though never out of print, the novel was effectively displaced in popular consciousness by dramatic versions and the long-lasting "Tom shows," where Topsy's hijinks, Eva's angelic pathos, Liza's sensational perils, and Tom's submissive devotion, choked out the thematic centrality of institutional depravity, racial injustice, and the eponymous protagonist's moral heroism. Uncle Tom declined, post Reconstruction, from a figure of exemplary strength and integrity to a byword for sycophantic accommodation.

Though *Heart of Darkness*, as it ascended into academic canonicity, found recognition as a seminal work—as *the* seminal work—of literary anti-colonialism, other critical perspectives tended to dominate the conversation before Conrad's tale encountered the deconstructive challenges to liberal assumptions in the climate of disintegrating colonial empires, indigenous liberation movements, Black Power, Civil Rights, post-colonial theory, and Viet Nam. Conrad's own perspectives on the heterogeneous imperial enterprise, and the justice of his representations of race, gender, and politics, came under fresh scrutiny, inviting conceptual reframing and extensive critical argument.

It is certainly worth noting that the two most arresting challenges to the settled pieties on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Heart of Darkness* in the post-war era came, not from literary scholars, but from novelists, also men of letters, who were or would soon prove to be of the first rank. Early in his writing career, in an essay called "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin challenged any claim to literary value for Stowe's century-old work. First published in the socially engaged organ of "the New York Intellectuals," *The Partisan Review* (1949), Baldwin's was an all-out attack on the Novel with a Purpose, as inherently hobbled and confined, its advocacy entailing categorization and generalization, precluding any deeper engagement with the unclassifiable and the particular in the living human being.³⁶ Baldwin's standard is an art that never compromises the irreducible individuality of the person or the relationship, whether by race or status or (presumably) gender, or by any other scheme of social categorization—the many hierarchies of otherness. In the novel's attempt to link truth to a cause, the human being is made less human. "In overlooking, denying, evading, his complexity,—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish ..." (p. 580). In the instance of his prime example, Stowe, he writes, "was not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer" (p. 579). Moreover, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*" (pp. 578-579).

³⁵ *A Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin"; Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1854).

³⁶ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Partisan Review* 16 (June 1949), pp. 578-585; reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 11-23. Citations here are to the *PR* article.

Baldwin goes on to spell out what he means by “sentimentality,” and it is in that, rather than in the association with Louisa May Alcott, that he is at odds with later readers like Tompkins, who outed a male establishment bias behind such disdainful fastidiousness, and recovered the contemporary contexts, generic, discursive, and affective, that underpinned Stowe’s impact and achievement.³⁷ To Baldwin, writing in the shadow of the literary stoicism and nervous constraint on expressed emotion common to the era, “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel ... [and thus] the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (p. 579). Baldwin illustrates the dishonesty masked by the spurious emotion in observing that, apart from a set of “stock” figures, Stowe “has only three other Negroes in the book ... and two of them [Eliza and George] may be dismissed immediately, since we have only the author’s word that they are Negro and they are, in all other respects, as white as she can make them” (p. 580). In her “virtuous rage” and moral panic over blackness, he writes, “She must cover their intimidating nakedness, robe them in white, the garments of salvation.” Consequently, Tom, “her only black man, has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded” (p. 581). The humanity of her black characters is thus wholly reduced or evaded, as Baldwin sees it, with a cast that is, variously, mere mechanical automata, bleached practically white, or finally metaphysically sanitized.³⁸ Baldwin strays into Achebe territory in anticipation, when he likens the good intentions of the protest novel—as exemplified in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—to “something very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery” (p. 583). Achebe’s charge against Conrad is on the face of it quite opposite—that he takes part in *parading* the supposed nakedness of the savages, their primitive, sub-human nature. In both cases, however, the charge is against an authorial effacement of the full humanity of the abused race.

Chinua Achebe delivered his indictment of *Heart of Darkness* in a Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a quarter century later.³⁹ To

³⁷ See Jane P. Tompkins on the genre affinities, literary character and achievement of Stowe’s novel, and the suppressed value of the traditions it represents: “Sentimental Power: ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ and the Politics of Literary History,” *Glyph* 8 (1981), pp. 79-102.

³⁸ “Why did you paint me like Jesus, instead of painting me like a man ... a whole man?” Tom asks that question—in the direct line of Baldwin’s challenge—in Robert Alexander’s rich, humane, and insightful play, *I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle*, “(1992), whose premises include the trial of Harriet Beecher Stowe by the characters of her novel, and the characters redoing her novel as a play with new dialogue, and “scenes YOU left out!” In *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays*, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Robert Alexander (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1996, pp. 21-90. Stowe is allowed a vigorous voice and viewpoint of her own.

³⁹ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness,’” reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 1-20, the text here quoted. The collection ends with a “Postscript: James Baldwin (1924-1987),” the generous address Achebe presented at Baldwin’s memorial service, also at U. Mass, Amherst, telling of Achebe’s momentous encounters with Baldwin’s writing, and then with Baldwin himself.

bring home his challenge to the *bona fides* of this sacred, “anti-colonial” text, Achebe calls attention to Conrad’s almost complete withholding of speech from his Black Africans, endowing them instead with a cacophony of uncouth grunts and cries, and so annulling individuality and inwardness in an access of primitive animality. He fixes on *Heart of Darkness* as exemplary of Western failures to engage the reality of Africa, provoked, not just by the novel’s canonical ubiquity in educational curricula, but because, “better than any other work that I know,” it displays “the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar ...” (p. 3). As for Marlow’s brooding implication of a kinship between the Congo and the Thames as he winds into his tale, Achebe finds the story itself makes of the Congo “the very antithesis if the Thames,” and Marlow’s reminder of the Thames’s history as “one of the dark places of the earth” meant as a warning that, having *conquered* its darkness, the Thames would do well to keep its distance and avoid the risk of “an avenging recrudescence” through exposure to its still primordial relative (p. 4). He sees in Marlow/Conrad’s appalled reportage, as at the scene of the dying, abandoned workers, “bleeding-heart sentiments,” the kind of liberalism that sidesteps ultimate questions of equality. He urges that what cannot be got round in Conrad’s text is “the dehumanization of Africa and Africans,” and he memorably concludes (after anticipating and demolishing the defense that Conrad, or Marlow, merely spoke the language of their time), “that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist” (pp. 10-12).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Achebe argues that it is a *communal* need that this “offensive and deplorable book” (p. 14) serves. He finds a brilliant literary analogy for how that works: “Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate” (p. 17).

Achebe was not the first to aim a deflationary barb at *Heart of Darkness*. He cites F. R. Leavis’s irritation with the verbal mystifications in Conrad’s reiterated appeals to the inexpressible, the inconceivable, the inchoate, serving merely to pump up “a ‘significance.’”⁴¹ Irving Howe amplified, asking whether, in its “straining for some unavailable significance,” the novel wasn’t “a kind of parable about Conrad the writer, a marvellously colored and dramatized quest for something ‘unspeakable,’ which proves to be merely unspecified?”⁴² Ironically, it was that charged intimation of unspeakable depths, most notably in the readings of Albert J. Guerard, that set the

⁴⁰ So expressed in Achebe’s *Hopes and Impediments*, where a note reads, “This is an amended version of the second Chancellor’s Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 1975; later published in the *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, winter 1977, Amherst.” Various sources report, as Achebe’s original phrase, the more plausible ejaculation, “bloody racist.” It is headlined in Cedric Watts’ defense, “A Bloody Racist: About Achebe’s View of Conrad,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 13 (1983), 196-209. At one point—by happy coincidence—Watts dismisses Achebe’s reasoning on Conrad’s novel by offering, as a reduction to critical absurdity, “that by the criterion of patently humane recommendations, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is superior to *Madame Bovary*” (p. 206).

⁴¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1954), pp. 218-221.

⁴² Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992; original edition 1957), p. 82.

default interpretive approach in the midcentury academy.⁴³ Nevertheless, a number of influential critics on the left in the post war, cold war period identified Conrad's abiding stature with his political penetration, and notably with his anatomy of imperialism and colonialism.⁴⁴ On that plane, Marlow's reductive dismissal in *Heart of Darkness* of the civilizing and heroic-progressive rationales for Western ground-level imperialism is not to be ignored. Stripped of those furbelows, "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale . . . The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (p. 7). Achebe's essentially humanist argument did not in itself void these anti-imperial credentials—though Conrad's evasion of any general challenge to *British* imperialism did not escape notice. Achebe's driving idea—remarkably like Baldwin's—is as stated in a later essay: "Africans . . . ask for one thing alone—to be seen for what they are: human beings."⁴⁵ And yet, Achebe's exposure of a latent racism rooted in a psycho-social compulsion, manifest even in so canonical an example of anti-imperial revulsion as *Heart of Darkness*, laid down a marker for the momentous repositioning in literary studies that brought forward suppressed voices and alternative histories, unspoken assumptions and covert agendas, issues of race and gender, and the fundamental role of colonialism, imperialism, and the transatlantic slave trade in the shaping of the West. Against that background, Conrad's admirers—among them, Patrick Brantlinger, Fredric Jameson, Maya Jasanoff, Edward Said, Ian Watt, an equivocal V. S. Naipaul, an unflappable W. G. Sebald—managed to develop a more nuanced view of his complex entanglements with all these issues, not least in Marlow's retelling of his Congo River journey into the heart of its darkness.⁴⁶

Among the revisionist views given impetus by the new amplitude of subject and inquiry were those concerning Conrad and gender. Conrad's entrenched profile had long been that of a writer of stories in a distinctly masculine vein, with masculine subject matter and masculine appeal for a male audience (like that of Marlow's shipboard listeners in *Heart of Darkness*). The early preponderance in his fiction of

⁴³ See especially Guerard's Introduction to the paperback edition, *Heart of Darkness & The Secret Sharer* (New York: Signet Classics, 1950), and his *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

⁴⁴ For example, Arnold Kettle, in "The Greatness of Joseph Conrad," *Modern Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (Summer, 1948), pp. 63-81; and George Orwell, responding to questions from a Polish literary weekly in 1949, reprinted as "Conrad's Place and Rank in English Letters," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), vol. 4, pp. 488-490.

⁴⁵ Chinua Achebe, "Africa's Tarnished Name," dated 1998, collected in *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 89.

⁴⁶ Patrick Brantlinger, "'Heart of Darkness': Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?" *Criticism* 27 (1985), pp. 363-385; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Jasanoff, *The Dawn Watch*; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 19-31; V. S. Naipaul, "Conrad's Darkness," *New York Review of Books* (17 Oct. 1974), and "A New King for the Congo," *New York Review of Books* (26 June 1975); W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998), pp. 100-134.

shipboard communities and loner's intrusions in exotic places; the association with narratives of adventure and exploration and with Marryat and Cooper's nautical romances; the paucity of women, or their peripheral and subordinate presence, earned such gendering characterization an easy acceptance. Certainly nothing in *Heart of Darkness* called it into question, neither the magnificent and enigmatic spectacle of Kurtz's grieving black mistress, nor the pale apparition of the Intended, Kurtz's votary, whom Marlow protects from knowledge of the monstrous truth. In a challenging essay from 1987, "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Nina Pelikan Straus takes up these very elements—and confirms the masculinist identification. She anatomizes the dynamics whereby the chivalrous "protective" exclusion of the Intended, given such heavy emphasis, signposts the exclusion of the woman reader in so far as she is unwilling to unsex herself and abandon that aspect of who she is.⁴⁷ A counter argument of comparable force had to wait for Ruth Nadelhaft's *Joseph Conrad*, where—disentangling Conrad from his narrators—she gives granular attention to the far from negligible body of Conrad's women characters and their situations; and for Susan Jones's *Conrad and Women*, where the author makes her case, not so much by disputing Straus on *Heart of Darkness*, but by invoking such tangible influences as Conrad's intimate correspondent Marguerite Poradowska, and bringing into focus vivid and complex female figures in Conrad's other fiction.⁴⁸ These include the Haldin women and Sophia Antonovna in *Under Western Eyes*, Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, and others; but Jones's principal study is of Flora de Barral in *Chance*, whose story is the spine of the novel (Conrad's first popular and lucrative success). In Flora de Barral, Conrad offers an acute portrait of a psychologically battered young woman who cannot trust being loved, as conveyed and partly construed by Marlow. But in Jones's cogent discussion, it goes oddly unremarked that Flora, like the Intended, is in the end forever shielded from the truth, in Flora's case about her poisonous, parasitic father, a would-be murderer and a suicide. Though Conrad, as I have noted, was chary of even acknowledging familiarity with fiction in the popular vein favored and often written by women, that didn't prevent its giving shape and character to aspects of his writing. Such appropriation, or at least engagement, is most keenly pursued by Susan Jones in *Conrad and Women*. Jones writes (p. 192):

Critics of Conrad have supplied us with an extensive record of his literary sources, showing us the traditions, both philosophical and narratological, that sustained his fiction. We have learned that he drew on sources ranging from Schopenhauer, Darwin, Pater, French realism, impressionism, Dickens, Henry James, the male adventure tradition, and the detective novel. What has gone unnoticed, however, is Conrad's intriguing engagement with women's writing.

Jones has in mind, in particular, "The female novel of sensation, pioneered by such writers as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood," whose conventions and narrative strategies proved useful, she argues, when Conrad reached out to a fe-

⁴⁷ Nina Pelikan Straus, "The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Novel* 20, no. 2 (1987), 123-137.

⁴⁸ Ruth L. Nadelhaft, *Joseph Conrad* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1991); Susan Jones, *Conrad and Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

male readership, particularly in his later work. Jones finds external support for Conrad's absorption of these writers in Ford Madox Ford's memoir of his collaborative friendship with Conrad. Ford dwells most plausibly on Conrad's shipboard reading in the long days and nights of his maritime service, when he was also acquiring the language in which he would eventually write. Ford reports:

It was Conrad's great good luck to be spared the usual literature that attends on the upbringing of the British writer. He read such dog-eared books as are found in the professional quarters of ships' crews. He read Mrs. Henry Wood, Miss Braddon—above all Miss Braddon! ... Normally he would express the deepest gratitude to the writers of the *Family Herald*—a compilation of monthly novelettes, the grammar of which was very efficiently censored by its sub-editors—and above all to Miss Braddon.⁴⁹

Ford compromises his testimony by attributing a later novel that he claims Conrad read to Miss Braddon, though it was in fact written by Walter Besant. But Jones's case is convincingly made for Conrad's absorption of the strategies and motifs of such best-selling literature as Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), and his ambivalent, narrator-filtered, but venturesome engagement with their more challenging implications concerning identity, gender, and sexuality. A writer whose undoubted originality rested on a bed of intertextuality, conscious and unconscious, Conrad never willingly conceded his dialogic engagements and affinities, especially with popular, commercially successful styles and genres. Nevertheless, such work—even when written by women—clearly enough persisted in his imagination and affected its creations. To come back to my initial claims, one such work, encountered early when mind and imagination are most susceptible, and in circumstances that gave it exceptional staying power, was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The rehabilitation of Stowe's standing as a literary artist may have begun with Edmund Wilson's comments in *Patriotic Gore* (1962), his plunge into the literature of the Civil War, where he announces his surprise over the vitality of Stowe's characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her critical intelligence, the controlled drama of manners, morals, and argument, and the relative paucity of crude melodrama and outright sentimentality.⁵⁰ But the decisive critical turn came two decades later, notably with

⁴⁹ Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1924), pp. 95-97.

⁵⁰ Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962). Somewhat perversely, Wilson adopts the Secessionist-friendly view that the Civil War was an episode in post-Revolutionary America's overweening expansionist imperialism ("The North's determination to preserve the Union was simply the form that the power drive now took"), and that the matter of slavery "supplied the militant Union North with the rabble-rousing moral issue which is necessary in every modern war to make the conflict appear as a melodrama" (p. xvi). Wilson's underlying principle here is uncompromising opposition to war; but it puts him in very bad company, and it stakes out a position diametrically opposite to Stowe's understanding of the land hunger of "the Slave Power," and the long-running, westward drive and imperialist mindset of the Southern political establishment, in Washington and elsewhere (witness the history of Florida, Louisiana, Andrew Jackson's Native-American displacements, the move into Texas, the Mexican War and its spoils, the maneuvers to acquire Cuba, the undoing of the Missouri Compromise). See also Stowe's depiction of the Slave Power's geopolitical

Jane P. Tompkins' essay delineating the novel's academic maltreatment and articulating its embeddedness with contemporary tropes, genres, values and institutions that were of particular interest to women. The excellent critical biography by Joan Hedrick (1994),⁵¹ classroom editions with contextual and critical supplements, and a whole new Stowe industry mined the complexity of the novel, and also called attention to Stowe's powerful *riposte* to hostile criticism, *A Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin"*, and to Stowe's next novel, *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), whose initial welcome, in England for example, was nearly as sensational as *Uncle Tom's Cabin's*. Drawing on the historical figures of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, and a pair of notorious legal cases (reported in *A Key*) that let slip the mask of benevolence promoted by the defenders of slavery as an institution, *Dred* offered a far more militant representation of resistance, and a stark warning of an apocalyptic reckoning in the making.

At the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the major characters whose perils and detours in their bid for freedom we have been sharing, decide to seek freedom in final form in Liberia. This response to an unresolved experience of displacement and alienation in the novel is offered less as symbolic recursion to a lost African home, than as a bold venture into something pioneering, constructive, *dignified*, and potentially politically potent—and of course implicated in the mounting Western enterprise in African colonization. Stowe has George Harris—now equipped with a university education and in position to lead his extended and reconstituted family—write to his friends on the thinking that leads him to this decision:

[...] you will tell me, our race have equal rights to mingle in the American republic as the Irishman, the German, the Swede. Granted, they have. We *ought* to be free to meet and mingle,—to rise by our individual worth, without any consideration of caste or color; and they who deny us this right are false to their own professed principles of human equality. We ought, in particular, to be allowed *here*. We have *more* than the rights of common men;—we have the claim of an injured race for reparation. But, then, *I do not want it*; I want a country, a nation, of my own (pp. 459-460).

Stowe's evident embrace of such an answer to the momentous question, divisive among the abolitionists, of what must be done if and when abolition is achieved to create the enabling circumstances of a decent life for the freed population, has been called in evidence in making the case for her underlying racism and racialism. That such colonization schemes, many of dubious provenance, were derided at the time by

strategy, put in the mouth of a cynically vocal member and critic of the planter class in *Dred*, Frank Russel, in debate with his idealistic friend Clayton. "They are going to annex Cuba and the Sandwich Islands, and the Lord knows what, and have a great and splendid slave-holding empire. And the north is going to be what Greece was to Rome. We shall govern it, and it will attend to the arts of life for us. The south understands governing. We are trained to rule from the cradle. We have leisure to rule" (Ch. XLVI, pp. 495-496). "From the very day that they began to open new territories to slavery, the value of this kind of property mounted up, so as to make emancipation a moral impossibility. It *is*, as they told you, a *finality*; and don't you see how they make everything in the Union bend to it? ... The mouth of the north is stuffed with cotton, and will be kept full as long as it suits us" (Ch. LV, p. 567).

⁵¹ Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*.

black abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney is certainly to the point.⁵² But the vigorous later revival of the idea by Marcus Garvey and others, and its variants in the separation program of the Nation of Islam and the language of Black Nationalism, are also to the point. As is the fact that Stowe herself, in the voice of George, claims the rights and raises the doubts that challenge the notion of discharging the nation's debts and responsibilities by offshoring. In any case, making African colonization—even as a kind of repatriation—part of the denouement of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers one more link to Conrad's portrait of an Africa devastated by colonial exploitation, makes one more filament of association between the outraged American woman's imaginative creation and that of the expatriate Pole, marked by a history of national yearning and liberating ideals, whose cost to him had been parental loss and an ache requiring an extraordinary personal reinvention. Like George Harris, Apollo and Ewa Korzeniowski and their abandoned, impressionable Conrad wanted "a country, a nation of my own," and paid a heavy price.

Rising to the surface in the wake of Conrad's near-fatal Congo river journey and during its subsequent shaping into Marlow's narrative, Stowe's representation of the penetrative journey to the heart of slavery proved an imaginative resource for Conrad, deepening the affective, historical, moral, and mythical resonances of his tale. Thus, an extended episode in Stowe's abolitionist novel, depicting Americans of mingled African and European descent living in the racially and economically divided antebellum South, migrated back over the Atlantic divide to echo in Conrad's powerful evocation of colonial Africa at the turn of the next century. There, its rendering of the fatal corruption of absolute authority over the bodies and souls of others at its most extreme and most obscene came once more to the fore, and—inflected perhaps by his knowing and suffering the costs of an exigent idealism—it lived again in Conrad's indelible vision of the nightmare darkness at the predatory heart of the imperial enterprise. But, to my mind no less important, and perhaps even more unexpectedly, an attentive juxtaposition of these two works demonstrates "how different Stowe's novel appears when read in the light of Conrad's novella."⁵³ Conrad's imaginative rendering of the profound corruptions of race-based colonial exploitation, global in its reach and soul-destroying in its essence, washes back over Stowe's populated world built on and sustained through a primal injustice. To read her work, so thoroughly and habitually identified with the abomination on our doorstep, through the lens of Conrad's exotic adventure, both illuminates her art and achievement and sets it in the global frame of that frenzy of predation that blighted so many lives over so wide a space over so many centuries. Taking the two together is to learn that, like their dark subjects, they make up a vibrant whole.

⁵² Delaney changed his mind, reacting like Stowe to the effects of the Fugitive Slave law. Andrew Delbanco writes, "Martin Delaney, in his 1852 treatise, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, wrote that the situation of blacks in America had become so bad that 'emigration is absolutely necessary to their political elevation.'" Delbanco, *The War before the War*, p. 230.

⁵³ Anonymous report for BRANCH, 31 May 2022, to whose discerning author I am grateful for insight into what this essay does, and prompting for how to make it manifest.

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