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REVIEW OF: *CONRAD'S* HEART OF DARKNESS. *A CRITICAL AND CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION* BY CEDRIC WATTS (SERIES: CONRAD STUDIES, VOL. VII. GEN. EDS. ALLAN H. SIMONS AND J.H. STAPE). AMSTERDAM AND NEW YORK: RODOPI, 2012, PP. 153. PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

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Virgil, Ch. Baudelaire, F. Kafka, T.S. Eliot, G. Greene, A. Camus, J.P. Sartre (all lauded as master poets or novelists – the landmarks of literature), King Leopold II, the war in Vietnam, Nazi concentration camps – a strange conglomerate of writers, historical figures and facts; a suffocating labyrinth and the deadly 'tentacular' grip of modern civilization. One may wonder who or what connects them all. The answer may astound you: Cedric Watts' study of *Heart of Darkness* – or, to be more precise, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* Watts expertly demonstrates how the tale encompasses all the major preoccupations of modern literature and, like a proleptic mirror, reflects all the atrocities of twentieth-century civilization.

First things first. This is a second edition of Watts' 1977 monograph published by Mursia International of Milan and acclaimed by reviewers as "criticism of the highest order" and "an important book" (Watts xi). It has been republished in the outstanding series of "Conrad Studies" overseen by Allan H. Simmons and J.H. Stape and published by Rodopi. We have already had the pleasure of poring over such excellent scholarly studies as Richard Hand's *Conrad's Victory. The Play and Reviews* (2009) or *Under Western Eyes. Centennial Essays* edited by Allan H. Simmons and Jeremy Hawthorn. This volume is the seventh to appear.

In a new preface written for this re-edition, Watts openly admits that the book has its shortcomings. Certain themes are not discussed – in particular allusions or issues connected with ethnicity, racism and gender that were later raised by Chinua Achebe, Elaine Showalter and Terry Eaglton (Watts x). However, the plethora of intertextual references that are meticulously analysed – together with the book's wealth of contextual information – is indeed very impressive. We must also bear in mind that the book was written in 1971, when critical views such as those of Achebe and Showalter were only just beginning to make themselves heard.

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Why yet another book on *Heart of Darkness?* Are there not already at least a dozen studies of note devoted to that novella? Harold Bloom's *J. Conrad's Heart of Darkness,* Ross C. Murfin's *J. Conrad's Heart of Darkness. a Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* or Gene M. Moore's *J. Conrad's Heart of Darkness. A Casebook* – to mention but a few. The greatest strength of Watts' monograph is that it places *Heart of Darkness* in a historical context, whereas other books as often as not either anthologize various essays or analyse the story through the prism of one particular theory (such as gender or postcolonialism). Watts' book offers a broad critical and contextual discussion (as is indicated in the subtitle). Since "words change their meanings in the course of time" – Watts explains – "one of our initial responses to a literary work is to note or estimate its date; and we do so in order to locate the text within the appropriate semantic, cultural and historical settings, thus permitting apt comprehension and evaluation." (Watts x)

The study is divided into informatively entitled chapters and sections devoted to crucial narrative and interpretative problems of *Heart of Darkness*, e.g. 'The Tale's Opening', 'Literary Allusions', 'The Harlequin', 'The Return and the Character of Kurtz', 'The Evolutionary Theme' and 'The "Night Journey" Theory'. In the 'Introduction' Watts comes up with a captivating metaphor by depicting the novella's nature as being "tentacular", which certainly gives us food for thought. What is the significance of the w o r d and its connotations? We might recall Conrad's reflections on the meanings of words: "Half of the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit." (Watts 7)

Watts elucidates how he understands the adjective "tentacular" and why he uses it throughout the book: "I have used the word 'tentacular' because interpreting the tale is in some ways like wrestling with an octopus; we extricate ourselves from one entanglement only to be re-entangled in our new position: so there are curious parallels between events within the fictional realm and events in the realm of reader-response." (Watts 2) Indeed, reading *Heart of Darkness* is like grappling with a monster octopus. The first symptom is an inability to put the book down and an overwhelming need to re-read the story, which in fact turns out to be a never-ending process. Each reading, like the grip of another tentacle, brings new sensations and illuminations. This is an essential point that Watts makes many times: we need to re-read the book in order to discover its various levels and – what is more – our responses at a first, second or third reading may well be at variance with each other. (Watts 37, 40, 71)

As the subtitle indicates, the novella is placed in various contexts, the first of which is the historical context. Discussing various shades of the meaning of the key concept of "heart of darkness", Watts outlines late nineteenth-century fears and predictions concerning the death of the solar system and the nightmare of eternal night enveloping our planet. In this connection he makes references to H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* and *Outline of History,* Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham, Bertrand Russell's "The Free Man's Worship", Alfred R. Wallace's *Man's Place in the Universe* and finally Lord Kelvin's thermodynamic principle. Another aspect of the historical context analysed by Watts is the history of the Congo Free State and its open critique

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by Roger Casement and E.D. Morel. Watts contrasts Conrad's fictional presentation of the Belgian colonies with the Victorian work ethic propagated by Carlyle and skilfully disseminated by Tory politicians and laissez-faire capitalism. (Watts 52-3) Typical nineteenth-century moral counsels were, among others: "Attain salvation by work, for work brings Grace, and heroic labour brings man close to God." By using the rhetoric of 'pilgrims' and 'apostles', 'emissary of light' and 'mission', Conrad therefore cocks a snook at contemporary propaganda about the civilizing work that was being done in Africa. Indeed, "Carlyle – as is now notorious – went some distance towards anticipating fascism by his growing contempt for democratic procedures […]." (Watts 54) This discrepancy between word and fact – to which Conrad constantly alerts us – brings to mind the slogan "Arbeit macht frei", which was placed over the gate of the Auschwitz concentration camp, or the insidious Nazi term *Endlösung*. Watts mentions his own associations: "During the American involvement in Vietnam […] murdered civilians were, officially, 'wasted' merely; the poisoning of the land was 'interdiction' and 'defoliation'; and the war was just a series of 'protective measures' […]. History plagiarises Conrad's Orwellian intuitions." (Watts 112)

Another contextual backdrop against which *Heart of Darkness* is continually portrayed is that of literary criticism. Watts treats the responses of previous critics as provocative spears which prod him to react. He discusses the interpretations offered by F.R. Leavis, Albert Guerard and J. Hillis Miller and continually offers his own reading. In response to Jocelyn Baines' doubts as to whether "Conrad was always clear as to his intention, and whether one is justified in trying to unravel the story to the extent of imparting a coherent meaning to it", Watts puts forward the concept of Conrad's imaginative co-ordination. Persuasively, he argues that "the full extent of that co-ordination is something of which Conrad may not consciously have been aware; but his imagination knew what it was doing" (Watts 40) and meticulously traces subtle threads that interweave various and not-infrequently apparently disconnected fragments of the narrative texture (e.g. bones, cannibalism, voice and eloquence).

The broadest and most engrossing contextual area, however, is that of literature itself. This is swampy ground, whose depth is unfathomable – and yet Watts has his unswerving compass. We are led back in time in order to jump forwards. The path is far from chronological. Watts classifies Conrad as a modern writer and step by step reveals how he foreshadowed major twentieth-century preoccupations undertaken later by F. Kafka, S. Beckett, A. Camus and G. Greene. One such preoccupation is ambiguity. As Watts observes: "The frustrations of K. in seeking to gain access to the elusive Castle are paralleled by the frustrations of the reader in seeking to define the meaning of 'the Castle'; and the meaning of 'Godot' tantalizes the expectant reader as Godot tantalizes Estragon and Vladimir. […] Both writers seduce us into attempting to allocate specific meanings to the Castle and Godot; and they thwart us by finally permitting only the general meaning […]. Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* anticipates *The Castle* and *Waiting for Godot* not simply by his pervasive evocation of futile or inherently frustrating activity, but particularly by tempting us to give a specific definition of Kurtz's nature […]." (Watts 2) The issue of ambiguity is con-

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nected with the structure of the tale: its openness – a distinctive Modernist feature which was later developed by T.S. Eliot, Kafka and Beckett.

Another area probed by Conrad and further explored by E. Pound, T.S. Eliot, J. Joyce and V. Woolf is the problem of reflecting the chaotic and incoherent nature of life in fiction. As Virginia Woolf aptly noted in 1921: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of a novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display […]?"[1] The crux of the matter was how to convey this sensation of disordered reality by means of a seemingly coherent work of fiction. One solution was "the mythical method", to borrow Eliot's term: "By evoking the epics through echo, quotation, or less specific allusion, the writer imports a co-ordinating 'sub-structure' into his work. […]." Watts argues that the mythical method was not a novelty that Eliot claimed as his own – for this technique was quietly being developed by Conrad in 1899 (Watts 47) – and systematically traces minute details which 'rivet' a narrative that – at a first reading – might seem chaotic. An excellent example of such a tiny, yet crucial rivet is the bone / bones motif that binds apparently unconnected passages concerning Fresleven's murder in Africa with the sinister atmosphere of Brussels. As Watts observes: "The subliminal effect of this echo is to erode the contrast between jungle and city by suggesting a faint but uncanny connection between that macabre corpse and this urban routine." (Watts 47) This unexpected connection makes us think of the striking and inexplicable images of corpses that crop up in the *Waste Land*.

One more literary reference that binds the seemingly chaotic narrative is Virgil's *Aeneid*. While analysing the pregnant theme of the journey, Watts takes us back to the classical epic not only of the travels of Aeneas, but also of Dante's peregrination through Hell. Watts meticulously draws tangents between the classics and Conrad's narrative, but without going to extremes: "Conrad, no doubt, did not work with *Aeneid* Book 6 at his elbow but his tale reverberates constantly in the imagination and strikes strange and often discordant echoes from the recesses of memory, and it is an important part of the total effect that occasionally some fleeting echoes should be struck from distant memories of *The Aeneid*." (Watts 49) He briefly refers to other allusions from Dante's *Inferno*. Following his guidance, we begin to perceive *Heart of Darkness* as a palimpsest whose layers can only be revealed by careful and reflective (re)reading. Although Watts admits that "to talk of the 'levels' of *Heart of Darkness* might damage the reader's sense of the work's unity", he simultaneously points to the fact that the "vitality of the imaginative dimension is largely sustained by the fluctuating – and not a static – range of allusiveness." (Watts 50) This seems to fall in line with Conrad's vision: "A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character." (Watts 51)

[1] V. Woolf, *Modern Fiction*. [In:] *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*. Ed. A. McNeille. London: The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 160-1.

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The greatest merit of the book lies in a close reading of selected passages, which are then transposed onto a broad literary plane. Watts possesses a rare ability to detect the interplay between immediate and remote literary perspectives. There is no point in summarizing his line of interpretation, as the fine details which are essential for drawing parallels would be lost. And, as we all know, the devil is in the detail – talking of which, let us just glance at a brilliant analysis of the "white devils" in Africa: the "flabby devil" and the "papier-maché Mephistopheles" in the gloomy Inferno. One of them is the Accountant: "this sire of our century's concentration-camp bureaucrats" (Watts 66) who keeps books in apple-pie order and records "perfectly correct transactions". He wants Marlow to tell Kurtz that everything at his station is "satisfactory". At the same time, Marlow recalls the nearby "grove of death", where the natives are dying because of exploitation, hunger and disease. Once again, one cannot help thinking of Walter Genewein, the Nazi chief accountant in the ghetto of Lodz, who boosted productivity and painstakingly recorded his "achievements" in ledgers and photographs. Indeed, such associations are prompted by Watts' own reading of Kurtz as a "proto-Hitlerian" type (Watts 115), whose gift of the gab mesmerized people (Harlequin, Marlow, the Intended).

Professor Watts begins his study with the powerful metaphor of an octopus with which we grapple while reading the novella over and over again. I would like to finish this review with another image: that of a labyrinth with different points of entry (historical, literary, cultural). Re-reading the tale allows us to enter the maze by a different fissure and follow a diverse, often contradictory interpretative path. The good news is that Professor Watts' instructive book is similar to Ariadne's thread, which helps us to find our way in the textual labyrinth – only apparently, however: the bad news is that there is no longer just one thread, but that there are hundreds of them.

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