



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago  
Loyola eCommons

---

English: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by  
Department

---

Spring 2012

## Writing About Violence in a Secular Age: Conrad's Solution

Joyce Wexler

*Loyola University Chicago*, [jwexler@luc.edu](mailto:jwexler@luc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/english\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/english_facpubs)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wexler, J. "Writing About Violence in a Secular Age: Conrad's Solution." *College Literature* 39(2), 2012.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
© 2012 John Hopkins University Press and West Chester University.

## Writing About Violence in a Secular Age: Conrad's Solution

Joyce Wexler

*Joyce Wexler is Professor and  
Chair of English at Loyola  
University Chicago. She is the  
author of Laura Riding's  
Pursuit of Truth (Ohio  
University Press, 1979) and  
Who Paid for Modernism?  
Art, Money, and the Fiction  
of Conrad, Joyce, and  
Lawrence (University of  
Arkansas Press, 1997).*

**T**wentieth-century writers have repeatedly claimed that the violent events of their time were not only unimaginable but inexpressible. At the turn of the century, Joseph Conrad introduced the trope of the indescribable “nightmare” in *Heart of Darkness* to convey Marlow’s experience of colonialism in Africa (Conrad 2006, 69). James Joyce used the same metaphor in *Ulysses* for Stephen’s refusal to accept a role in Ireland’s ongoing religious and nationalist conflicts: “History. . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce 1986, 28). After the First World War, T. S. Eliot blamed the difficulty of “making the modern world possible for art” on “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 1975, 178, 177). A generation later, Theodor Adorno declared that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric (Adorno 1967, 34). Although these expressions of rhetorical impotence

imply that recent events were worse than any in the past, the historical record of heinous acts is long and vicious. Atrocities were not new, but never before had they threatened to reduce witnesses to silence. Twentieth-century political violence was unprecedented not because it was worse but because it occurred in a secular culture. In the past, communal beliefs had justified or condemned the most horrific acts, but the late nineteenth-century crisis of belief made any consensus about the meaning of violence unattainable.

This situation produced an aesthetic dilemma, because to represent violence is to give it a meaning. A dead body does not explain itself, and the narrative of the suicide bomber is not the story of the child killed in the blast. Derek Walcott conveys the scope of this problem in his 1962 poem “A Far Cry from Africa”:

Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:  
 “Waste no compassion on these separate dead!”  
 Statistics justify and scholars seize  
 The salients of colonial policy.  
 What is that to the white child hacked in bed?  
 To savages, expendable as Jews? (Walcott 1986, 17)

The speaker expresses his ethical stance negatively: only a worm could be indifferent to the “separate dead,” whether the victim is white or black, African or European. Yet this conviction conflicts with the most basic attempt to represent violence by counting the dead: “Statistics justify.” If even raw numbers insert victims into a tendentious discourse, how can violence be made known?

One answer for modernists was symbolism, and *Heart of Darkness* became a prototype for writing about atrocities. Conrad represents Marlow’s “nightmare” by attaching symbolic meanings to realistic accounts of historical events. This solution, however, has become the target of scathing ethical and political protests, notably those of Chinua Achebe and Fredric Jameson. Turning to Roman Jakobson’s structural definition of symbolism, we can begin to understand why so many twentieth-century writers found symbolism useful, as well as the reasons that so many critics have objected to it. Jakobson graphs language on a horizontal axis of syntax and a vertical axis of semantics (Jakobson and Halle 1956, 60). He compares syntax to the figure of metonymy because both are based on contiguity, and he associates semantics with metaphor because both depend on substitution in a given position (78). Extending this model to literary forms, Jakobson argues that realism, which refers to observable reality, is metonymic, and symbolism, which can evoke referents beyond sensory experience, is metaphoric.<sup>1</sup> Just as every sentence operates on both the syntactic axis and the semantic axis, every text has realistic and symbolic significance.

Jakobson's linguistic model clarifies the relation between realism and symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*. The specificity of realism represents acts of colonial violence, and the multiple meanings of symbolism frustrate attempts to explain it. Marlow's first words illustrate how symbolism constructs meaning by making the incomprehensible events of the present part of a pattern: "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth" (2006, 5). He adds, "I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago. . . ." (5). To make sense of his extraordinary experiences, he seeks familiar parallels, comparing the European presence in Africa to the Roman occupation of Britain: "But darkness was here yesterday" (6). He spells out the correspondence: the "savagery," the "wilderness," and the "hearts of wild men" were "here" (6). The analogy makes the symbolic relationship explicit.

In addition to historical parallels, Conrad provides rhetorical signals of symbolism by embedding recognizable or historically plausible events in overlapping patterns and discourses. For example, as Marlow recalls his voyage upstream, he speaks with the precision of an official report: "It was just two months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz's station" (2006, 33). These coordinates of time and place are empirical details that establish the verisimilitude of realism. In the next sentence, however, Marlow expresses a completely different kind of meaning: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (33). The animistic metaphors suggest an imagined world that is primordial, prehistoric, primitive, mythic. This oscillation between the empirical referent and non-empirical associations connects historically recognizable events to multiple patterns of symbolic meaning.

The most provocative source of symbolism in Conrad's novel is extremity. An extreme event may seem unique because it is shocking, but if it is utterly unlike anything else, it is incomprehensible.<sup>2</sup> Realistic descriptions of an extreme event fail to convey its impact, yet symbolic representations seem to evade or mitigate its gravity. Marlow's solution is to use both strategies to express his astonishment when he sees Kurtz's house:

"These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky; but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. . . . They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house." (Conrad 2006, 57)

Marlow's reaction demonstrates how objects become symbols. His initial impression projects an empirical referent, "knobs," but the extremity of what

these objects really are causes them to accumulate additional meanings that are both empirical and non-empirical. The shock of realizing that he is looking at human skulls transforms them from the “ornamental” to the “symbolic.” The “knobs” become “expressive,” “puzzling,” “striking,” “disturbing”—they are “food for thought” as well as for vultures and ants. This multiplicity, the capacity of the empirical object to be itself and also carry other meanings, is the strength and weakness of symbolism.

When *Heart of Darkness* appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, the proliferation of symbolic meanings was considered a strength, because it satisfied the urgent need for secular sources of meaning. Arthur Symons defends the value of symbolism in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which appeared that same year. He praises the movement for fighting “against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition” (Symons 1919, 9). Symbolists created “a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream” (4). Writing before dreams turned into nightmares, Symons extols the power of Symbolism to offer access to immaterial sources of meaning. The “conscious” construction of symbols (3), he explains, performs a spiritual function: “in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, [literature] becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual” (9). Taking the demise of faith for granted, Symons expresses the turn-of-the-century *Zeitgeist*.

Charles Taylor traces the long path to this moment in *A Secular Age*. He describes the gradual transition “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (Taylor 2007, 3). Taylor defines secularism not as the absence of belief but as a surplus of beliefs. Secularism leads to a “mutual fragilization of all the different views,” a new sense of “the fragility of any particular formula or solution, whether believing or unbelieving” (304). More than religious faith was lost: all beliefs seemed contingent. This instability changed the function of symbolism:

Where before the languages of theology and metaphysics confidently mapped out the domain of the deeper, the “invisible,” now the thought is that these domains can only be made indirectly accessible through a language of “symbols.” (Taylor 2007, 357)

While the languages of theology and metaphysics also employ symbolism, the meaning of their symbols is constrained by foundational ideas and beliefs.

In a secular culture, however, meanings proliferate without limit. Taylor describes this change: “where formerly poetic language could rely on certain publicly available orders of meaning, it now has to consist in a language of articulated sensibility” (2007, 353). Symbolism and Expressionism cultivated

such a language to convey feelings, ideas, and beliefs. Taylor observes that after the First World War, the ambiguity of private symbols began to count as a liability. The war drained symbolism of its spiritual exuberance, because “the trauma could create a sense of uncertainty, of disbelief and even cynicism. The idea could be accredited that there is no morally credible publicly established order, the diametrical opposite of the previously established synthesis” (408). *Heart of Darkness* portrays the same effects of trauma much earlier.

Conrad’s competing explanations of the European presence in Africa illustrate Taylor’s point. Marlow tells his audience that as a child he was captivated by the idea of going to Africa because it was “one of the blank spaces on the earth,” though by the time he arrived “it was not a blank space any more” (Conrad 2006, 8). His anecdote conveys a boy’s naïve wish for an adventure that would leave a mark on the world. Others have different motives. The Company’s doctor, for example, confides that he has a scientific interest in colonialism: “I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency.” Marlow’s aunt speaks of “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,” though Marlow considers her conception of colonialism “humbug,” and he ventures “to hint that the Company was run for profit” (12). The Eldorado Exploring Expedition comes to Africa for its riches. Although the expedition’s name echoes Marlow’s boyhood wish, these Europeans are nothing more than “sordid buccaneers,” no better than “burglars breaking into a safe” (30). The variety of reasons for being in Africa—adventure, knowledge, westernization, fortune—dramatizes the splintering of common social purpose.

But personal motives are inadequate when they lead to violence. Witnessing the casual and opportunistic cruelty of colonialism, Marlow claims that a transcendent belief, an idea, is necessary to justify it:

“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. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . .” (Conrad 2006, 7)

The indeterminacy of Marlow’s commitment to “an idea” reflects Europeans’ uncertainty about the ideas that might deserve “unselfish belief.” Unwilling to impose his own ideas on others, he is also unable to resist individuals like Kurtz who exploit secularization. Kurtz expounds most of the big ideas circulating in Europe at the time. He is reputed to be a journalist,

a politician of indeterminate convictions, a scientist, a painter, and a musician. He speaks of love to the young Russian and promises profits to the Company. But by the time Marlow describes him as a “universal genius” (72), the words ironically suggest something more like a con man. In Africa, neither external sanctions nor internal convictions restrain Kurtz from installing himself in place of any idea. He becomes the object of worship: “unspeakable rites” are “offered up to him” (50). Nor is he an isolated case: “All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (49). Kurtz’s successive identities, culminating in self-deification, show the danger of replacing communal beliefs with personal ones.

In his encounter with Kurtz, Marlow confronts the social impact of actions based on merely personal beliefs: “I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation” (Conrad 2006, 66). The parallel between setting up an idea and setting up oneself as something to “bow down before” demonstrates how easy it is to conflate grand ideas and selfish desires. The two men have no shared beliefs to ground the meaning of their words. Their impasse is not uncommon, and Marlow calls attention to other examples of the malleability of language. In the colonial vocabulary, natives are “enemies” (14), and indentured African laborers are “criminals” (16). Told that Kurtz’s victims were rebels, Marlow exclaims, “Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels” (58). This instability of meaning gives his conversations with Kurtz “the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares” (66).

The most memorable of the nightmarish phrases are Kurtz’s last words: “The horror! The horror!” (Conrad 2006, 69). Spoken in a state of “extremity” (70), these words evoke many possible meanings. Marlow ponders them at length. By the time he visits Kurtz’s Intended, the possibilities even include her name: “The last word he pronounced was—your name” (77). This ambiguity troubles critics. Patrick Brantlinger, for example, cites the diversity of interpretations of Kurtz’s utterance as evidence that the symbolism in the text cancels “external referents” (Brantlinger 2006, 389): “Conrad overlays the political and moral content of his novella with symbolic and mythic patterns that divert attention from Kurtz and the Congo to misty halos and moonshine” (387).

In contrast to Brantlinger’s uneasiness with multiple meanings, Marlow accepts uncertainty. He interprets Kurtz’s cry symbolically, that is, as the foundation of a structure that allows all these possibilities: “I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair” (Conrad 2006, 69). Whatever Kurtz

means by “The horror!” the word constitutes a judgment. And for Marlow, the judgment itself is less important than Kurtz’s willingness to judge. In the absence of moral principles, ““He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man”” (70). In a secular period, this passes as an achievement: ““After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate”” (70). Although Kurtz’s last words affirm no particular meaning, Marlow concludes that their possible meanings are profound.

Ian Watt suggests that this indeterminacy is a weakness in the narrative. *Heart of Darkness*, he writes, “belongs to a specifically symbolic tradition of fiction, and it is the only one of Conrad’s novels which does” (Watt 1979, 188). Watt recognizes that Conrad’s symbolism is a response to “the intellectual crisis of the late nineteenth century, a crisis by now most familiar to literary history in its twin manifestations of the death of God and the disappearance of the omniscient author” (181). Like Taylor, Watt notes that the relation between particular objects or events and “some larger, nonliteral meaning” was not controversial when “everything in the outside world was widely agreed to constitute a fixed order, in which each item had its appropriate religious, moral, or social role” (181). Once this order disappeared, personal meanings made symbolism more ambiguous, and Watt questions the value of this change: “There is some doubt, however, whether either impressionism or symbolism stand for meanings which are sufficiently clear to be worth using” (181). This doubt is the negative side of symbolic indeterminacy, and it is the basis of many objections to *Heart of Darkness*.

Perhaps the most influential objection is Chinua Achebe’s incendiary charge that *Heart of Darkness* is a racist text. His argument is based on Conrad’s mixture of symbolism and historical realism. Achebe cites specific passages that are clearly racist, but he does not rely on this evidence, because it “might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad’s but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism” (Achebe 2006, 342). Instead, Achebe targets the symbolic elements of a text that refers to recognizable events, people, and places. He attacks the rhetoric that signals symbolic meanings by repeating F. R. Leavis’s objections to Conrad’s ““adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery”” in sentences such as, “It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (Achebe 2006, 338).<sup>3</sup> Achebe considers this kind of discourse irresponsible:

When a writer, while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers



through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. (Achebe 2006, 338)

Distrusting a style that reaches for more than empirical experience, Achebe advocates realism. Almost a century into the secular age, the multiple meanings of symbolism continue to register as a form of “trickery.” Achebe reverses Arthur Symons’s assessment of visible and invisible realities and indicts Conrad for writing about Africa symbolically:

Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? (Achebe 2006, 343–44)

Using Africa as a “metaphysical battlefield,” Conrad dehumanizes and “depersonalizes” Africans (344).

Conrad, however, was more interested in actual violence than the “metaphysical” kind. Africa is not “setting and backdrop” for “the break-up of one petty European mind”; Africa is Conrad’s subject. He shows Europeans the “human factor” in Africa because he intended *Heart of Darkness* as a protest against Belgian atrocities. In 1898 he wrote to his publisher:

The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea. The subject is of our time distinct[t]ly—though not topically treated. It is a story as much as my *Outpost of Progress* was but, so to speak ‘takes in’ more—is a little wider—is less concentrated upon individuals. (Conrad 1986, 139–40)

In rhetorical terms, Achebe regards European angst as the tenor of the metaphor and myths about Africa as its vehicle. In contrast, I am arguing that Conrad regards events in Africa as the tenor, and the allusions to myth, psychology, politics, and art are its vehicles. The violence in the text is not a symbol of a European crisis but a brutal historical fact that Conrad represents through a combination of empirical description and symbolic patterns, including parallels to other times and places. The suffering of Africans was all too obvious to him, if not to all Europeans, so he focuses on the victimizers, asking a question that recurred throughout the century: how could ‘civilized’ people do such things?

The alternative Achebe proposes reveals the full extent of his indictment. He wants Africans to be portrayed realistically as complex individuals whose existence is independent of their meaning for Western readers. Achebe compares Conrad to Marco Polo, chastising both for representing an historical population from the perspective of an outsider: “Indeed, travellers can be blind” (Achebe 2006, 347). The West should “look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of

people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people” (348). Advocating realistic narratives, preferably by native authors, Achebe sacrifices too much. Without symbolism, there is no way out of the aesthetic dilemma that secularism had created in Western culture.

The consequences of adhering to Achebe’s strictures are evident in Fredric Jameson’s 2009 essay “War and Representation.” This essay is the culmination of his longstanding opposition to modernist symbolism. As he proclaimed in “*Ulysses in History*” in 1982, “I believe that today, whatever our own aesthetic faults or blinkers, we have learned this particular lesson fairly well: and that for us, any art which practices symbolism is already discredited and worthless before the fact” (Jameson 1993, 148). Jameson condemns the “practice of symbolism itself, which involves the illicit transformation of existing things into so many visible or tangible meanings” (148). It seems odd to consider symbolic meanings as “visible or tangible”—Symons exalts them as the opposite of empirical experience. Jameson, however, implies that symbolism replaces material things with other “things” called “meanings.” Like Achebe, Jameson wants things to be just things, not a “facile affirmation that the existent also means, that things are also symbols” (148). Symbolism is a phenomenon to be studied but not valued: “Genuine interpretation . . . involves the radical historicisation of the form itself: what is to be interpreted is then the historical necessity for this very peculiar and complex textual structure or reading operation in the first place” (147).

Yet when Jameson himself historicizes modernist symbolism, he demonstrates not its worthlessness but its value. A psychoanalytic concept of symbolism guides his readings in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). Just as Freud interprets the manifest content of the patient’s statements to discover latent thoughts, Jameson probes the narrative surface to uncover ideology. Analyzing *Lord Jim*, for example, Jameson contrasts the “ostensible or manifest ‘theme’ of the novel” with its underlying meaning, arguing that the repeated references to honor “must mean *something else*” (Jameson 1981, 217; emphasis in original). The search for “*something else*” is the essence of symbolism. In this case, the narrative theme stands for an ideological meaning. Since Jameson is operating within Marxist and Freudian systems of belief, he limits the indeterminacy that Taylor and Watt associate with secularism. Positing a specific symbolic meaning, Jameson argues that “modernism was itself an ideological expression of capitalism” (236) and that it “can at one and the same time be read as a Utopian compensation for everything reification brings with it” (236).

In his interpretation of “Conrad’s ‘will to style’ as a socially symbolic act” (1981, 225), Jameson focuses on narrative point of view. He approaches the epistemological question of perspective through the term “scene,” because

there is an “obsessive repetition” of theatrical terms such as “scene, spectacle, and tableau” in nineteenth-century fiction (230). Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, he argues, conceive of “scene” as a principle of unity: “the structural corollary of the point of view of the spectator is the unity of organization of the theatrical space and the theatrical scene” (231). In contrast, Conrad “undermines the unity of the theatrical metaphor” and “displaces” it “by transforming it into a matter of sense perception” (232). Whether the narrative point of view is singular or multiple, however, Jameson emphasizes that it depends on empirical observation.

The term “scene” is not only central to Jameson’s symbolic reading of Conrad’s style in *The Political Unconscious*, but it is also the fulcrum of his argument in “War and Representation.” No longer associated with empirical perspectives, “scene” now marks the annihilation of all perspectives. Jameson introduces Kenneth Burke’s “dramatistic pentad,” which comprises the elements of “act, agent, agency, purpose, and scene,” only to reject all elements except “scene” (Jameson 2009, 1533–34). Atrocities, he explains, are “something that happens, not so much to individuals, to characters as such, as to the landscape, which fades in and out of nightmare, its mingled dialects now intelligible, now the gibberish of aliens” (1538). Invoking the trope of the indescribable nightmare, Jameson claims that the repetition of the “same scenes of carnage and flight over and over again” is “beyond history, beyond narrative” (1538). Therefore, he argues, war cannot be represented as specific acts conducted by and towards human beings. Only the devastation of “scene,” not the experience of combatants or victims, can be described.

To illustrate the futility of attributing agency to individuals, Jameson cites two accounts of the Thirty Years War. The first is *Der abenteuerliche Simplicissimus* by Hans Jakob von Christoffel Grimmelshausen and dates back to 1668. The second example is *Wallenstein*, the historical novel that Alfred Döblin wrote during the First World War. Noting that Döblin imitates Grimmelshausen’s innumerable points of view and excess of detail, Jameson comments:

Still, we may wonder what forms the representation of agents and agency can take under the regime of the scene, in this interminable narrative of events and sequence of grotesque nightmarish figures, more human in their caricaturality than any of the genuine human beings of realism or of our acquaintance. (Jameson 2009, 1540)

Only geographical coordinates have the stability to survive this chaos: “Scene, however, remains unnamed at this level of narrative complexity, becoming concrete in the course of the representation” (1534). “Nightmarish figures” are beyond the scope of realism; the “scene” of violence can be represented, but not named.

Jameson's narrative despair shows the cost of renouncing symbolism. Confronting the dilemma that earlier writers faced, he confesses to "the suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable" (2009, 1533). Having repudiated symbolism, Jameson upholds the ethic of incommensurability that Achebe and others promulgate. But if an event really is unique, it is meaningless. Meaning requires a pattern, a relationship between one thing and another. While it may be true that in the maelstrom of war an individual's acts are futile, narrative connects one person's experience to another's. The individual's story loses its singularity, but it gains meaning in relation to other stories. Walcott's poem warns that the process of connecting any victim's experience to narrative is tendentious, and as Taylor recounts, in a secular culture there is no consensus of belief to limit the number or nature of connections. By multiplying the narrative patterns surrounding historical events, symbolism preserves the structure of meaning without imposing any single meaning.

Standing at the confluence of nineteenth-century realism and turn-of-the-century symbolism, *Heart of Darkness* combines these two modes to represent unimaginable political violence in a secular period. Compared to the Symbolist ideal of dispensing with the visible world, *Heart of Darkness* is full of empirical detail. Notwithstanding subsequent interpretations of symbolism as an evasion of reality, Conrad achieved his political purpose. In 1909 Edmond Morel, founder of the Congo Reform Association, called *Heart of Darkness* "the most powerful thing ever written on the subject" (Simmons 2006, 192). In colonial Africa, neither law nor conscience restrained well-armed Europeans far from home. As the Manager of one of the stations tells Marlow, "Anything—anything can be done in this country" (Conrad 2006, 32). Later in the century it was not necessary for Europeans to leave home to escape sanctions. The unimaginable acts committed in Africa proved to be portents of the atrocities of two World Wars and their aftermath. While Achebe and Jameson object to the practice of attaching symbolic meanings to realistic accounts of historical situations, this strategy served a secular age by representing violence without presuming to explain it.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Lodge (1977) extends Jakobson's remarks in a detailed comparison of realism and symbolism.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault considers transgression, which is a particular kind of extremity, inherently symbolic. In *The History of Sexuality*, he discusses the impact of breaking taboos about sexual discourse and claims that transgression generates meanings beyond those of the act itself: "Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual

oppression. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reactivated therein” (Foucault 1978, 7).

<sup>3</sup> See Leavis 1948, 177. Despite this critique of Conrad’s style, Leavis includes Conrad in his canon of serious moral novelists.

#### Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. 2006. “An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*.” In *Heart of Darkness*. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: Norton.
- Adorno, Theodor. 1967. “An Essay on Cultural Criticism and Society.” In *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. 2006. [“Imperialism, Impressionism, and the Politics of Style”]. In *Heart of Darkness*, edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: Norton.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1986. *Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 2. Edited by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006. *Heart of Darkness*. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: Norton.
- Eliot, T. S. 1975. “*Ulysses*, Order and Myth.” In *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. I. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.
- Jakobson, Roman and Morris Halle. 1956. *Fundamentals of Language*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Jameson, Fredric R. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- . (1982) 1993. “*Ulysses* in History.” In *James Joyce: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Mary T. Reynolds. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- . 2009. “War and Representation.” *PMLA* 124.5: 1532–47.
- Joyce, James. 1986. *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler. New York: Vintage Books.
- Leavis, F. R. 1948. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Lodge, David. 1977. *The Modes of Modern Writing*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Simmons, Alan. 2006. “Conrad, Casement, and the Congo Atrocities.” In *Heart of Darkness*, Fourth Edition. Edited by Paul B. Armstrong. New York: Norton.
- Symons, Arthur. 1919. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: Dutton.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press.
- Walcott, Derek. 1986. *Collected Poems, 1948-84*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Watt, Ian. 1979. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.