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How to cite:

Griffiths, Andrew (2018). Seeking the Sources of Heart of Darkness: the African Narratives of late-Victorian Explorers and Journalists. *Continents manuscripts*(11)

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4000/coma.2694>

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/coma/2694>

DOI: 10.4000/coma.2694

ISSN: 2275-1742

Publisher

Institut des textes & manuscrits modernes (ITEM)

Electronic reference

Andrew Griffiths, « Seeking the Sources of *Heart of Darkness*: the African Narratives of late-Victorian Explorers and Journalists », *Continents manuscripts* [Online], 11 | 2018, Online since 15 October 2018, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/coma/2694> ; DOI : 10.4000/coma.2694

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.



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Seeking the Sources of *Heart of Darkness*: the African Narratives of late-Victorian Explorers and Journalists

Andrew Griffiths

- 1 Interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* have presented the text as a racist outrage, a carefully coded critique of imperialist logic and values, a philosophical abstraction, a direct product of Conrad's own experience and as an exposition of a certain type of psychology. Aaron Eastley notes that "the pitch and duration of historicist fervor that has surrounded *Heart of Darkness* is extraordinary".¹ This essay nonetheless places itself within the historicist critical tradition, building on foundations laid long ago by scholars including Norman Sherry and Ian Watt. In order to shed fresh light on Conrad's text and its sources, it is essential to precisely articulate the text's relationship to the discourse from which and into which it emerged. That relationship is at least as vexed as Marlow's relationship to the river he navigates in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow recalls:

I had to keep guessing at the channel, I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out when I shaved by a fluke some infernally sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tinpot steamboat.²

Like Marlow, Conrad ensured that his text navigated the snags, sunken stones and hidden banks. For Conrad, however, those took the form of existing texts and ideas about Africa that he sought variously to corroborate, to omit, to obscure, to efface and, on occasion, to rewrite.

- 2 The twin processes of effacement and rewriting are noteworthy, for *Heart of Darkness* can be read as a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a document written onto a previously used surface that has been scraped clean. The resulting artefact is a composite, with the new text overlaying the ineradicable traces of previous inscriptions. *Heart of Darkness* dramatises various acts of writing or representation that are later effaced and overwritten or rewritten; by doing so it continually gestures toward source material that

has been effaced and rewritten. Like the snags in the river, those sources periodically break the surface, causing a warning ripple and shaping the way in which the reader navigates the text. Peter Brooks has argued that *Heart of Darkness* is “a tale about transmission” and it is true that at the heart of the text lie nagging questions about communication and interpretation—about the success of acts of transmission.³ Those acts are rarely simple, however. Comprehension is frequently deferred and communication obstructed. Slippage occurs between experience and representation, the latter never satisfactorily mapping onto the former.

- 3 That slippage is magnified and multiplied by the narrative structure, in which Kurtz’s story is told by Marlow and retold by the anonymous narrator whose personal tone co-opts the reader into the system:

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other’s yarns—and even convictions.⁴

Willingly or not, the reader is enlisted into the brotherhood of the sea and acceptance of the tale is implicitly commanded. The reader is invited to participate in acts of effacement and rewriting that stretch out beyond the text. This essay resists that invitation, however, proposing instead to move in the opposite direction, critically probing the snags and slippages – the aporia – in search of the obstacles lurking below the surface.

- 4 This approach to *Heart of Darkness* entails a critical questioning of the boundaries Conrad has established around his writing. Like Kurtz, Conrad has ‘kicked himself loose of the earth’.⁵ His letters are revealing on this point. *Heart of Darkness* is described as “of our time distinc[t]ly—though not topically treated”.⁶ Conrad identifies its similarity to his 1897 short story “An Outpost of Progress” but notes that it is “less concentrated upon individuals”.⁷ This insistence on generality was not unique to *Heart of Darkness*; *Almayer’s Folly* – the manuscript of which had travelled with Conrad to the Congo – receives similar treatment in an 1894 letter:

I regret to see my own stupid finger pointing for ever to the spot on the map. After all, river and people have nothing true about them—in the vulgar sense—but the names. Any criticism that would look for real descriptions of places and events would be disastrous with that particle of the universe, which is nobody and nothing in the world but myself.⁸

- 5 That commitment to the individuality of experience – to impressions over topicality – seems to head off attempts to identify the text’s sources. Yet the structure and content of *Heart of Darkness* undermine Conrad’s efforts to maintain a boundary between his fiction and its context. The undermining of that boundary is one source of the impulse to historicise that has been such a feature of the critical response to *Heart of Darkness*.
- 6 The narrative exploitation of a porous text-world boundary is apparent elsewhere in Conrad’s writing, with his 1897 short story “Karain: A Memory” offering one of the clearest examples. In the opening paragraph, the narrator guides readers through the text of a newspaper article to the experience it partially communicates:

Sunshine gleams between the lines of those short paragraphs – sunshine and the glitter of the sea. A strange name wakes up memories; the printed words scent the smoky atmosphere of today faintly, with the subtle and penetrating perfume as of land breezes breathing through the starlight of bygone nights.⁹

- 7 Here, the boundary between the printed text and the world of experience is clearly figured as permeable: the narrator’s text provides access first to a deeper layer of text

(the newsprint) and then through that to a recalled experience. The interposition of the newsprint implies the reality and immediacy both of the narrator's words and of the experience legible between the lines of the text. In *Heart of Darkness*, the distinctive structure of stories told within stories has the same effect, apparently authorising readers to probe ever deeper in search of evidence of the world beyond the text – the glimmers of sunlight, the memories and the scent of the real. However, *Heart of Darkness* resists the pursuit of a single, original experience, instead leaving the reader amongst a web of traces of other texts and fragments of Conrad's experience which can only be disentangled with the greatest care.

- 8 Reading *Heart of Darkness* in this way demands an outright rejection of positions adopted by two of the most eminent critics of the work. The layers of narrative are not Conrad's attempt to "draw a *cordon sanitaire* between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator" as Chinua Achebe argues.¹⁰ This is incompatible with the notion of *Heart of Darkness* as palimpsest and it is also difficult to reconcile with the presence of traces of Conrad's source material within the text. Those traces offer valuable evidence of the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* (and Conrad) emerged from and fitted into late-Victorian discourse and society. Reading the text as a palimpsest also dictates that one must also reject Edward Said's argument that "The circularity, the perfect closure of the whole thing is not only aesthetically, but also mentally unassailable".¹¹ On the contrary, close reading indicates that the text might productively be interpreted not as circular but as layered, with meaning conveyed in the acts of transmission by which stories are communicated and by the traces of other texts apparent within *Heart of Darkness*. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that novelistic discourse is characterised by "stylistic three-dimensionality" and the realisation of a "multi-linguaged consciousness", all the while existing in "the zone of maximal contact with the present [...] in all its openendedness".¹² Reading the text as perfectly circular, or as sealed behind a *cordon sanitaire*, shuts down opportunities to understand the nature of the text's contact with either the present moment of writing or the present moment in which it is read.
- 9 An approach that carefully explores the multiple discourses at play within the text, highlighting the connections to discourses beyond the text, has the potential to provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between the text and the wider discourse within which it is situated. As Fredric Jameson points out in *The Political Unconscious*,
- we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness, as a thing in itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions.¹³
- 10 Marlow's story in *Heart of Darkness* is but one of several layers of narrative within the text. Those layers also extend beyond Conrad's text and have continued to accumulate since its publication. The text continually gestures outwards, beyond itself. This essay seeks to excavate those strata, revealing sources that are visible only in trace form on the surface of the text.¹⁴ Consequently, the second section of the essay explores the deceptively calm surface of *Heart of Darkness*, identifying snags, ripples and undercurrents. It outlines the evidence informing a reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a palimpsest, with tantalising traces of deeper sources partly obscured within the text. The third section explores the most obvious sources and their relation to *Heart of Darkness*, with a particular focus on Henry Morton Stanley.¹⁵ The fourth and final section identifies sources in the periodical press of the 1890s, and in Conrad's wider reading about imperialism.

Conrad's Palimpsest

11 The second paragraph of *Heart of Darkness* begins with a meditation on connectedness and the indistinctness of boundaries: “The sea reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint”.¹⁶ This is a narrative in which there are no clear horizons and in which boundaries are not clearly demarcated – or if they appear solid it is only to highlight the observer’s ignorance of what lies beyond. The framing narrative within which Marlow tells his tale on the deck of the *Nellie* takes place in a liminal zone neither ashore nor at sea, where the tide is between flood and ebb, where day turns to dusk, and land and sea merge “in vanishing flatness”.¹⁷ The narrative structure, with stories retold within stories, calls into question where the tale begins and ends, too. Is the anonymous narrator’s introduction the beginning, or does the narrative move back towards its beginning when Marlow begins to speak? Is Kurtz’s story actually the beginning? Does the narrative end with Marlow’s failure to communicate Kurtz’s last words to his intended, or does it end with the turn of the tide in the Thames? The trajectory of the narrative from origin to conclusion is called into question. The title, *Heart of Darkness*, implies a spatial logic, whereby the text should lead progressively towards a putative heart of darkness. The narrative structure confounds that logic too, paralleling Brussels (Conrad’s “sepulchral city”) with the Congo Free State and also implicating London for good measure. Navigating the text is no easy matter, with those enmeshed stories distorting time and space and leaving an uncertain frontier between the text and the world from which (and into which) it emerged.

12 Episodes in the novella repeatedly underscore the significance of transmission and authority, depicting acts of writing and rewriting. When Marlow reflects on his youthful fascination with maps, both cartographic representation and geographic reality are transformed into palimpsest:

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth.¹⁸

13 The seduction of the unwritten is lost, however; “The glamour’s off”, Marlow says. Marlow’s imaginings have been effaced and the blank spaces overwritten by the cartographers and explorers of Europe:

It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a place of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness.¹⁹

Marlow’s critical attitude to the contributions of explorers is significant and hints at one of the snags that his narrative navigates its way around.

14 Conrad wrote of his own interest in cartography in *Geography and Some Explorers*. There he describes his youthful addiction to “map-gazing”, which “brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and directing contact with sane curiosity” – and so also into an arena where they may be written and re-written.²⁰ The notion of effacement in the process of the superimposition of new layers of text is expressed strongly in this essay. Africa, Conrad writes, “got cleared of the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages, which were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper. Regions unknown!”

²¹ The initial text is effaced, cleared of its symbols and characters, in order to permit new

inscriptions. The idea of Africa as terra incognita available for imaginative engagement has been a source of major criticisms of *Heart of Darkness*. It also has a historical referent. From the inception of the Congo Free State in 1885, “vacant land” was legally considered the property of the state; from 1891 the Belgian King Leopold began to take swathes of the territory into his personal ownership, once again basing his claim on the legal notion of “terra nullius”.²² Conrad presents mapping as a form of palimpsest, providing a tantalising analogy to the history of the Congo basin in the process.

- 15 Further acts of effacement and reinscription are dramatised in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, when Marlow happens upon an annotated seamanship manual he seizes on it as a source of simple, workmanlike signification, offering rare clarity. The annotations on the text, however, undermine this apparent stability:

Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher.²³

The book ceases to signify as a sailor's manual and becomes “an extravagant mystery”.²⁴ The mystery is revealed when Marlow discovers that the notes are not in code but in Russian.²⁵ In a move characteristic of *Heart of Darkness*, the original signification of the manual is effaced and, imbued with mystic value, it becomes something akin to a fetish. Nevertheless, the incident resonates with Conrad's biography. His early experiences of political exile in the Russian empire – an exile during which his mother died and by which his Polish nationalist father's death was hastened – cannot have been far from his mind when ruminating on his experiences of Belgian imperialism in the 1890s. It is scarcely surprising to find a coded reference to Russia close to the heart of Conrad's imperial nightmare: the Cyrillic annotations are another ripple in the text, hinting at a presence beneath the surface.

- 16 More than through any other character, it is through Kurtz – who we learn is a journalist – that Conrad examines the power of language and interpretation. It is arguable that Kurtz is first empowered and then undone by the gulf that opens up between his words and his experiences. Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, “vibrating with eloquence”, is the subject of another significant act of annotation. On one page Kurtz has scrawled, “Exterminate all the brutes!” The line stands out “like a flash of lightning in a serene sky” but does not illuminate the text that has gone before; rather this re-inscription effaces that text, showing the impossibility of the sentiments which it describes in the context of more recent experience.²⁶ The brutal statement superimposes Kurtz's experience of the Congo onto the elegant prose of the report. Before allowing a journalist to take the report for publication, Marlow tears off the annotation.²⁷ By then, however, that annotation has been succeeded by another superimposed statement. Kurtz's last words, “The horror! The horror!”, echo through the final pages, transforming the meaning of Kurtz's report. The process of repeated effacement and overwriting is once again apparent.

- 17 For Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, “*Heart of Darkness* is a narrative of failure, the belated testimony of a witness haunted by his own failure to testify”.²⁸ In *Heart of Darkness*, all the accumulated failures to communicate – for reading a palimpsest entails the repeated failure of communication – are distilled into Marlow's failure to honestly report Kurtz's last words to his Intended. In itself the lie is just one of many failures to communicate in the narrative. More significant is the admission Marlow makes to his listeners:

I was on the point of crying at her, “Don’t you hear them.” The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. “The horror! The horror!”²⁹

- 18 Truth and lie are commingled in a flickering presence and absence, each accessible to different participants in the narrative. Time and again in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad exposes the compromised acts of communication, each new utterance complicated by the traces of previous utterances. As Conrad wrote in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, words are “worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage”.³⁰
- 19 The anonymous narrator of *Heart of Darkness* forewarns readers that for Marlow, “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine”.³¹ Meaning is ephemeral and evanescent, existing around and beyond rather than within language. This image of meaning as an exterior phenomenon could – should – be read as a clear sign that the text gestures beyond itself, with meaning located not within the text but outside it, generated by the relationship of the text to the discourse(s) within which it was formed and into which it was born.

Stanley’s Dark Continent

- 20 Jasanoff argues that *Heart of Darkness* presents a vision of the Congo as it was in 1890, not in 1898 as Conrad began to write the novella.³² This is partly accurate but distracts from the contribution of Conrad’s reading. Conrad’s *Congo Diary & Up-river Book*, both products of his brief period in the Congo, were certainly important sources – the *Congo Diary* provided a number of specific incidents included in the text, while the *Up-river Book* (often neglected by scholars) shows us Conrad’s own attempts to read and interpret the riverine features of the Congo as a supernumerary crewman learning the river prior to taking command of his own vessel. Conrad was not simply responding to his own experiences, however. As Patrick Brantlinger points out,

much of the horror either depicted or suggested in *Heart of Darkness* represents not what he saw but rather his reading of the literature that exposed Leopold’s bloody system between Conrad’s return to England and his composition of the novella in 1898-1899.³³

Conrad’s letters contain some tantalising clues about his reading, and the traces of his sources can be detected in *Heart of Darkness*; the remainder of this essay pursues those traces and clues.

- 21 One body of source material is immediately apparent. Henry Morton Stanley’s writing on Africa formed a major cultural reference point in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, Stanley’s omission from the essay ‘Geography and Some Explorers’ indicates his significance to Conrad. The essay engages with a range of explorers, including Cortes, Pizarro, Cook, Mungo Park and Livingstone. Given the reference to Livingstone, Stanley’s omission cannot have been an oversight. Without Stanley’s particular genius for self-promotion & publicity Livingstone might never have achieved “his exalted place among the blessed of militant geography”.³⁴ Stanley’s role in the exploration of the Congo is alluded to in the essay, when Conrad recalls reaching Stanley Falls. There Conrad laments that his boyhood dreams of exploration have been obscured ‘by the unholy recollection of a newspaper “stunt” and the distasteful

knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'.³⁵ It is plain that Stanley loomed large in Conrad's imagination.

- 22 Three works in particular stand out: *How I Found Livingstone, Through the Dark Continent* and *In Darkest Africa*. The former presents a narrative of detection similar to Marlow's narrative of seeking Kurtz, recounting Stanley's expedition in search of Livingstone in 1871-1872. The second charts Stanley's traverse of the continent from East to West, charting the course of the Congo on the way, from 1874-1877. The latter describes the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition of 1886-1889. Once again this expedition travelled along the Congo, this time from West to East. All three texts met with considerable commercial success and sparked public controversy that Conrad cannot have avoided.
- 23 *How I Found Livingstone* (1872) narrates Stanley's journey to Africa in search of the missionary and explorer David Livingstone. Stanley's book offers a narrative model for *Heart of Darkness*, a precursor to Marlow's journey in search of Kurtz. Just as significantly, *How I Found Livingstone* added two new ingredients to the established travelogue format. First, Stanley travelled as a journalist and opens the volume by telling how James Gordon Bennett Junior, editor of the *New York Herald*, commissioned him to go in search of Livingstone. This was not a journey in the service of God and geography, as Livingstone's journeys notionally were. Stanley's expedition was designed to produce the raw materials of a saleable narrative, adopting a noble-sounding pretext to excuse a newspaper stunt (to borrow Conrad's phrase). Clare Pettitt has suggested that the meeting between Stanley and Livingstone "was the first sensational news story to break simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic".³⁶ Secondly, Stanley's narrative showed how truth could be constructed and manipulated: Livingstone was presented as an idealist selflessly promoting the welfare of the Africans amongst whom he travelled and working tirelessly to suppress the slave trade. Stanley records that "With every foot of new ground he travelled over he forged a chain of sympathy which should hereafter bind the Christian nations in bonds of love and charity to the Heathens of the African tropics". Elsewhere Livingstone is "the Apostle of Africa".³⁷ It is worth reflecting that as a missionary Livingstone was not a success: he made a single African convert, who later lapsed. Nor was his career as an explorer unblemished. An attempt to settle the Zambezi River was undone by Livingstone's miscalculations and mismanagement.³⁸ Stanley's account of his expedition to find Livingstone and his time with the explorer showed what a gulf there could be between representation and reality. Indeed, Stanley's account quickly passed into popular culture, with his greeting to Livingstone, "Dr Livingstone, I presume?" resurfacing in music hall pastiche, popular songs and advertising.³⁹
- 24 *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) also brought new features to the writing of African exploration. The title is significant, making darkness a headline feature. The text – running to two volumes and around a thousand pages – was a multimedia production. It included maps, illustrations, portrait photographs and "a cornucopia of diagrams show [ing] everything from the lineages of African kings to the shapes of different canoe paddles".⁴⁰ Stanley's approach to narrative authority differed from Conrad's, too. Where Conrad distances himself from his narrative by means of the frame, making Marlow the apparent source of authority in *Heart of Darkness*, Stanley places himself front and centre in his own narrative and relinquishes authority to no one. *Through the Dark Continent* is also distinguished by Stanley's honesty about the level of violence employed in suppressing opposition to his journey. His journal records the destruction of "28 large

towns and three or four score villages".⁴¹ As Jasanoff summarises, "The book established an image of central Africa in Western minds as an area of "darkness," populated by savages and cannibals, "human beasts of prey," to be subdued by force".⁴²

25 The third and most significant source was Stanley's *In Darkest Africa*, his 1890 account of the expedition to relieve Emin Pasha, the governor of a remote southern province of Sudan. Under Stanley's leadership the expedition began its journey from the west coast to Equatoria in March 1887 and would not reach the east coast of Africa with Emin until the end of 1889. In the meantime, over half of the 389 men in Stanley's advance party had died. The expedition's rear column had fared even worse, its commander Major Edmund Barttelot having been shot dead while many of the porters and soldiers starved or deserted. Stanley finally reached London in May 1890 while Conrad arrived in the Congo on 12 June – the same month that *In Darkest Africa* was published. By the Autumn of that year, the acclaim with which Stanley had been greeted on his return had soured into recrimination as news of violent atrocities, madness and starvation filtered into print. On 4 December, Conrad left the Congo sick and disillusioned. He returned to London at a time when it would have been difficult to avoid competing accounts of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. The London illustrated newspaper *The Graphic* described *In Darkest Africa* as 'the Book of the Season', praising its style for having 'the vigour of an explorer and a leader of men'.⁴³ Like *Through the Dark Continent*, *In Darkest Africa* was heavily illustrated, including first-hand accounts, letters, telegrams, maps and more. The content ranged from sensational encounters to mundane details. Nevertheless, *In Darkest Africa* bears striking similarities to parts of *Heart of Darkness*.

26 As I have argued elsewhere, there are significant similarities between the texts.⁴⁴ Two examples will suffice to give a sense of these. In both texts the expected steamboats are found to be sunk in the river on the narrator's arrival. In Stanley's text we read that "the fool of a captain ran her on shore instead of waiting for a pilot".⁴⁵ In Conrad's we read:

They had started two days before in a sudden hurry up the river with the Manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been out three hours they tore the bottom out of her on stones and she sank near the south bank.⁴⁶

While Conrad is more discursive, the key details are the same. Conrad followed Stanley's route up river not long after the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition had passed through but it also suggests that Conrad may well have been aware of details from Stanley's text. Secondly, there are places where Conrad appears to consciously rewrite Stanley's text. With his expedition suffering severely from hunger, Stanley decries the reduced purchasing power of the brass rods carried as currency. He professes astonishment

that only three ears of Indian corn were given on this day for a brass rod twenty-eight inches in length, of the thickness of telegraph wire. At Bangala such a brass rod would have purchased five days' provisions per man in my days.⁴⁷

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow comments on the African crew's weekly salary of "three pieces of brass wire each about nine inches long". Pointing out that there was little for the crew to spend their wages on and few opportunities to leave the vessel, Marlow remarks "unless they swallowed the wire itself or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them".⁴⁸ Conrad is plainly satirising the system that Stanley describes. It would have been possible to fill a whole paper with similar parallels; these have been treated in more detail elsewhere in my work and by other scholars.⁴⁹ To return to that notion of the novella as a palimpsest, it is plain that at some level, *Heart of Darkness* effaces and rewrites the earlier text, retaining traces of Stanley's discourse. Conrad navigates around Stanley's writing just as Marlow

navigates around snags in the river. Never directly acknowledging Stanley's works, Conrad's narrative is nevertheless shaped and defined by them.

Conrad's Reading

- 27 By the time Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, an increasingly jingoistic strain of writing about empire was apparent both in the popular press and in the quality periodicals that formed an important part of Conrad's literary world in the 1890s. Conrad read the *Saturday Review* (Hochschild and others have plausibly suggested that a *Saturday Review* article was the source for Kurtz's heads on stakes) and professed to be a regular reader of *Blackwood's Magazine*, calling it "the only monthly I care to read".⁵⁰ In Eastley's judgement, even *The Times* was "a repository of late-Victorian news and views of the Congo", with "a classic Orientalist outlook". He notes how well "*Heart of Darkness* meshes with that metanarrative".⁵¹ However, Matthew Connolly has charted the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* "simultaneously subverted and reinforced the imperial ethos of *Blackwood's* in 1899".⁵² Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress", published in *Cosmopolis* in July 1897, paints an unflattering picture both of colonial enterprise in central Africa and of imperial rhetoric. It also sparked a friendship with the radical writer R.B. Cunninghame Graham. Graham produced a number of essays, short stories and books critical of imperialism, including "Bloody Niggers" (*Social Democrat*, April 1897), "Bristol Fashion" (*Saturday Review*, February 1898), "Higginson's Dream" (*Saturday Review*, October 1898) and "A Pakeha" (*Westminster Review*, January 1899). All these were mentioned in correspondence between the two men; all appeared shortly before or during the writing of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's writing emerged from this mixed discourse on imperialism.
- 28 In a *Blackwood's* article of January 1898 *Daily Mail* special correspondent George Warrington Steevens condemned the humanitarianism that "is throttling patriotism and common-sense and virility of individual character".⁵³ "If civilisation is a conspiracy for the preservation of puny life, lowering the physical standard of the race", he argues, "then civilisation may be no blessing, but a curse".⁵⁴ In the article he writes that "The naked principle of our rule is that our way is the way that shall be walked in, let it cost what pain it may".⁵⁵ This rhetoric is not so very far from Kurtz's 'Exterminate all the brutes', scrawled in the margin of his own article. Indeed, *Heart of Darkness* explicitly aligns Kurtz with this type of journalistic discourse: Kurtz was a journalist and his report on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs' is rejected by his company but accepted for publication by a journalist. Steevens, moreover, elucidates a problem that Conrad grapples with in *Heart of Darkness*:
- Either we may go on, as now, conducting our Empire by force, and pretend that we do so by charity and meekness; or we may cease to conduct it by force, and try to do so by charity and meekness. In the first case we shall finally entrain hypocrisy as the dominant trait of our national character; in the second we shall very soon have no national character or national self-esteem or national existence to lose.⁵⁶
- 29 This is close to the truth that Kurtz has discovered in the Congo: a fatal gulf yawns between the rhetoric of imperial idealists and the brutal practicalities of colonial dominance. Steevens is commendably honest, even in his espousal of unputting social Darwinism. Such rhetoric was no longer unusual enough to be remarkable by the late 1890s; an article on the Jubilee events of 1897 which argued that they marked the

acceptance of imperialism as central to British identity appeared in the same issue of *Cosmopolis* as “An Outpost of Progress”.⁵⁷

30 The anti-imperial writings of men like Graham bolstered Conrad’s expression of a more critical view, however. Graham’s essay “Bloody Niggers” offers bracing satire of late-century attitudes to race that Conrad described as “very telling”.⁵⁸ Of Graham’s story “Bristol Fashion”, Conrad enthused that “The [...] business is excellently well put. [...] The skipper of the barque is ‘pris sur le vif’. I’ve known the type”.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the story depicts the master of a trading vessel, Tom Bilson, selling three Africans “to a chief of one of them cannibal set-outs of niggers down Congo way” in retribution after they deserted his ship, echoing the plot of Conrad’s “An Outpost of Progress” which had appeared some six months earlier. It seems clear that the two men and their work were in dialogue, Graham’s attitudes helping to crystallise Conrad’s ideas. Cedric Watts described the relationship between Conrad and Graham as “an exploding paradox”, citing their apparently incompatible politics.⁶⁰ If Graham’s anti-establishment and socialist sentiments were at odds with Conrad’s own deeply-held views, the two men did share a distaste for the notion of a civilising mission and all that it concealed. It is reasonable to surmise that Graham, who wrote that Conrad “almost needed a Caesarian operation of the soul before he was delivered of his masterpieces”, provided Conrad with the radical impulse required to publish his own critiques of imperialism.⁶¹

31 Graham’s work may well be a source for elements in *Heart of Darkness*. Graham’s “Higginson’s Dream”, published just a couple of months before Conrad began *Heart of Darkness*, seems to have particular significance. Conrad read the story and commented on it in letters.⁶² The story narrates Higginson’s slow realisation that his work opening up a group of islands has been almost wholly destructive to the indigenous population among whom he grew up:

It needs nothing but the presence of the conquering white man, decked in his shoddy clothes, armed with his gas-pipe gun, his Bible in his hand [...], his merchandise (that is, his whisky, gin and cotton cloths) securely stored in his corrugated iron-roofed sheds, and he himself active and persevering as a beaver or red ant, to bring about a sickness which, like the ‘modorra’, exterminated the people whom he came to benefit.⁶³

32 “Opening up” new territory to commerce and civilisation kills as surely as pestilence in the story. It is hard not to see in Graham’s “conquering white man” a model for characters in *Heart of Darkness*. It is also tempting to link the business of extermination to Kurtz’s annotation on his report on the Suppression of Savage Customs. More significantly, this also suggests another potential reading of key passages of Conrad’s text. In this reading, the language of closure which has troubled readers – the “mysterious stillness” and the “implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” – has less to do with rendering Africa passive and more to do with the continent’s resistance to those who would open it up.⁶⁴ The text thus resists the logic of enlightenment and modernity.

33 One further letter from Conrad to Graham offers a final tantalising clue to another potential source for the anti-imperial tone of *Heart of Darkness*. In December 1903, in the midst of writing *Nostromo*, Conrad wrote to Graham, recommending Roger Casement to him and enclosing letters from Casement.⁶⁵ Conrad had first met Casement in the Congo in 1890 and Casement had recently attempted to enlist Conrad in his campaign for reform there. In the letter Conrad remarks of Casement that “I have always thought that some

particle of Las Casas' soul had found refuge in his indefatigable body". Bartholomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest best known for his 1542 polemic *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, was an outspoken critic of Spanish imperial excesses – excesses which have at least as much in common with the actions of Mr. Kurtz as anything Conrad personally witnessed in the Congo. Conrad's reference to Las Casas is logical: Graham had mentioned him in a recent book. Conrad's phrasing implies prior acquaintance with Las Casas, however, and given his friendship with Graham, who had travelled widely in Latin America, it is likely that he knew of Las Casas. *Heart of Darkness* is rooted firmly in the twin discourses of imperialism and anti-imperialism; those roots are traceable all the way back to the Renaissance.

Blank Spaces

- 34 Just as enticing blanks remained to be filled on the map of Africa in Conrad's childhood, enticing gaps remain in this sketch of Conrad's sources. Filling those gaps is a task that goes beyond the scope of this essay but it is right to end this discussion by gesturing toward unexplored territory. Conrad's letters offer only fragmentary glimpses of his reading, making it difficult to know for certain how far he engaged with the writing on West Africa available in the 1890s. A number of important texts from the late-eighteenth century to the late-nineteenth are potential sources. Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799), details his journeys to and along the Niger. In it Park emphasises his role in "opening to [fellow Britons'] ambition and industry new sources of wealth and new channels of commerce".⁶⁶ British explorers, including Burton, Grant and Speke had achieved considerable renown as travellers and as writers on Africa; Conrad had certainly read Burton, to whose work he compared Graham's *Mogreb-el-Acksa*.⁶⁷ Mary Louise Pratt has identified Burton and the British explorers who sought the source of the Nile in the 1860s as the prime exponents of the "monarch-of all-I-survey scene" which served "to produce for the home audience the peak moments at which geographical 'discoveries' were 'won' for England".⁶⁸ In the context of this discourse based on the implicit assertion of ownership, the inscrutability of the forest Marlow describes in *Heart of Darkness* gains fresh meaning. Marlow's descriptions offer a set of scenes in which the white observer is disquieted because too much remains unseen or beyond his understanding. In Conrad's narrative the European traveller in Africa cannot be the monarch of all he surveys.
- 35 More texts merit discussion. Several works by the French-American Paul du Chaillu, including his *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* (1861), were well-publicised and widely discussed in both francophone and anglophone worlds during Conrad's childhood and youth. The writings and journeys of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, Stanley's rival in the exploration of the Congo, were widely celebrated in France in the years after the Berlin conference. Those texts maintained the dominant vision "of a dark, uncivilized Africa".⁶⁹ Mary Kingsley had published *Travels in West Africa* in 1897, a year before Conrad began *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad refers to Kingsley's book in a letter of February 1899, the same month that the first part of *Heart of Darkness* appeared in print.⁷⁰ Kingsley's approach is radically different to Conrad's, adopting an anthropological methodology. Kingsley explains her approach in her preface:

I have written only things I know from personal experience and very careful observation. I have never accepted an explanation of a native custom from one person alone, nor have I set down things as being prevalent from having seen a single instance. I have endeavoured to give you an honest account of the general

state and manner of life in Lower Guinea and some description of the various types of country there. In reading the section you must make allowances for my love of this sort of country [...] and for my ability to be more comfortable there than in England.⁷¹

- 36 In short, Kingsley opens up the continent that Conrad, with his keenly developed cynicism about progress and civilisation, sought to close off. *Heart of Darkness* emerges from a discursive context dominated by powerful opposing impulses – closing off/opening up; imperialism/anti-imperialism – and navigates a route through them. If the surface of the text appears as inscrutable in relation to its sources as the Congo’s forests and waters seemed to Marlow, a close examination reveals clues to depths and layers in which those opposing impulses swirl in powerful undercurrents, often reproducing but also revising dominant cultural narratives.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper begins by briefly outlining the argument that *Heart of Darkness* should be read as something like a palimpsest – a palimpsest is, of course, a medieval document scribed onto parchment that has previously been inscribed with other texts and still bears their traces. It argues that *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes various acts of writing or representation that are later effaced and overwritten or rewritten. In doing this, the novella continually gestures beyond itself to source material that too has been effaced and rewritten. The paper then takes an archaeological approach, exploring just what that source material might be and how its traces are legible in *Heart of Darkness*. Henry Morton Stanley's exploration narratives are identified as significant sources, which Conrad seeks to efface and overwrite. The paper further argues that debates running in British journalism through the 1890s, which Conrad discussed in correspondence with R.B. Cunninghame Graham, shaped the tone and atmosphere of the text. Finally, the paper outlines the possible relationship of *Heart of Darkness* to the wider field of writing on African travel and exploration.

Cet article commence en arguant brièvement qu'il conviendrait de lire *Au Cœur des ténèbres* comme une sorte de palimpseste (un parchemin médiéval sur lequel d'autres textes ont préalablement été écrits, et qui en porte encore la trace). Il postule qu'*Au Cœur des ténèbres* met en œuvre différents actes d'écriture ou de représentation qui sont par la suite effacés, réécrits, ou recouverts d'autres écritures. Ce faisant, la *novella* renvoie continuellement au-delà d'elle-même vers les sources qui ont été effacées et réécrites. L'article opte alors pour une approche archéologique en explorant les sources pour découvrir ce qu'elles pourraient bien être et déterminer la façon dont leurs traces sont lisibles dans *Au Cœur des ténèbres*. Les récits

d'exploration d'Henry Morton Stanley sont identifiés comme des sources significatives, que Conrad cherche à effacer, en écrivant par-dessus. L'article défend ensuite l'idée que les débats qui animèrent le journalisme britannique au cours des années 1890 – dont Conrad s'est entretenu dans sa correspondance avec R.B. Cunninghame Graham – ont façonné la tonalité et l'atmosphère du texte. Enfin, il expose la façon dont *Au Cœur des ténèbres* s'inscrit dans un champ plus large des écrits de voyage et d'exploration en Afrique.

INDEX

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Henry Morton Stanley, R.B. Cunninghame Graham, Exploration, Empire, Imperialism, Congo, Palimpsest, Heart of Darkness, Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, David Livingstone, Mary Kingsley

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