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“You Knew Him Well”: The Galsworthy Letters and Trauma in *Heart of Darkness*

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IN COMMENTING ON Conrad’s multiple lifetimes before reinventing

himself as a British novelist, Henry James notes in a 1904 letter “[n]o one has known — for intellectual use — the things that you know, and that you have, as the artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached” (James 4.419). Indeed, during much of his early life, from following his father as an exiled member of the Polish *szlachta* to “spend[ing] money extravagantly [and] smuggling guns into Spain” (Meyer 37) during his early sailing days in France, Conrad was, by any definition of the term, a cosmopolitan. The records of Conrad’s ventures come in the form of letters he wrote in the early years to his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski and, later, to his aunt Marguerite Poradowska,¹ though they were often short, beginning and ending, as a letter to Poradowska on 6 December 1893 did, as “[j]ust a line to tell [her he] is in France. [Fellow sailors] expect to leave Saturday for La Rochelle...drop me a line at La Rochelle” (Conrad *Poradowska* 55)² with a hastily-scribbled address tacked as an addendum.

¹ The daughter of a member of the Belgian royal court, Marguerite would get Conrad his job as captain of the *Roi De Belges* in the Belgian Congo.

² Hereafter works written by Conrad will be cited by a key word from the title and page number. References to Jessie Conrad’s *Conrad as I Knew Him* will be cited by last name and page number, to avoid confusion.

Maya Jasanoff, within *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World* (2017), is the first scholar to turn to Conrad’s correspondence as a means of understanding these early years in earnest since Said first proposed the autobiographical reading of Conradian fiction in *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966). Though she begrudges the *Collected Letters* for how “a mere 200 pages cover the period from Conrad’s birth...until he publishes his first novel...just 4 percent to document more than 50 percent of his life” (Jasanoff 10), her application of these letters presents a compelling thesis. Jasanoff’s understanding of Conrad’s fictions as “ethical injunctions... meditate[ing] on how to behave in a globalized world, where old rulebooks are becoming obsolete, but nobody’s written new ones” (11) and that “Conrad wouldn’t have known the word ‘globalization,’ but with his journey from...imperial Russia across the high seas to the British home counties, he embodied it” (7) reinvigorate the debate about the salience of reading Conrad’s life into his works in the context of globalization.

As such, looking at epistles in relation to Conrad requires one to understand them both as an object operating in the real-world context of Empire and as a literary device, functioning to drive the plot forward in much the same way as a physical letter compelled Conrad’s personal needs and interests. Concerning the former, the emergence of the letter within Empire develops slowly, as letter writing becomes more universal and as composition manuals promulgate through the 18th C. Eve Tavor Bannet, a trans-Atlantic literature scholar and author of *Empire of Letters* (2005) notes “the classical idea of correspondence as ‘written conversation’ was adapted to an Enlightenment ideology particularly conducive to empire [since letters] were quintessentially the language of man as a social being who was dependent on others for all his needs and wants” (Bannet 51). In the globalized world of the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian eras, the letter became a necessary mode of expressing needs across continents, as “[l]etters were the means by which Society could subsist in absentia and be maintained among people separated by geographical distance” (52). As the empire grew, letters became vital as the only means to communicate the needs of the colony to the leadership, holding together the entire system, as men who may never meet could now help each other in the mutual goal of colonial domination.

This development of the letter as a tool to foster continuity despite distance led to a fascinating development in the theory of composition,

which spread beyond the political and economic spheres. The in absentia understanding of letter writing established “the idea that handwritten letter exchanges were ‘written conversations’ that enabled Society to subsist among men without their physical presence, [making] it possible for written correspondences to construct imaginary publics and ‘imaginary societies’ with real-world effects” (52). That style guides and manuals of the imperial age suggested this blended approach to actual letters creates an odd dynamic, as “letter manuals signaled and naturalized the collusion of the imaginary with the real that was inseparable from written conversation and epistolary commerce, whether in manuscript or in print. Letter-writing had political, social, domestic, cultural and economic consequences, *because* it had fictional force even in its most ‘real’ or utilitarian manifestations” (52-3). Such a blending approach creates a unique dynamic in Conrad’s surviving letters, with correspondence often having both a conversational and prosaic tone. This can be seen in an April 1920 letter to Jane Colvin, where he notes, “I had formed a plan to run up to-day but got a swollen foot during the night and apart from being dead lame, dare not trust myself away from home” (*Colvin*). Note Conrad’s use of the idiomatic and conversational “dead lame” along with the more formalized “I had formed a plan.” Such examples of this odd blend of epistolary form which Bannet identifies suggests the author was constructing fictional abstractions of his interlocutors years before crafting his fictions and highlights an odd dynamic in these artifacts when considering his writing style was designed to have an authentic, conversational air.

This insertion of fictional abstractions into physical letters further suggests the letter can exist within the modernist novel as more than a plot device. The suggestion of the implied and imagined audience makes a letter, already conscious of its conjured interlocutor, within a work which itself imagines the audience reading it, creates a metafictional quality. Bolton, in probing this question within *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*, finds the letter within fiction creates a space to question and rebuff social norms. He highlights “the dramatic space generated by and in these letters in which the social hierarchy becomes fluid...[as] Shakespeare's letters provide opportunities for characters to destabilize social authority, and, at times, allow them to co-opt this authority for themselves” (Bolton). This ability for letters to act on the dynamics of characters can be seen at numerous points within Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; the Aunt’s letter allows an inversion of conventional

gender roles with the woman being “put to work,” as Marlow notes, and the powerlessness of unanswered letters in the rivets episode further highlighting the implied power of letters on social dynamics which Bolton identifies.

This precedent of authors employing the letter to manipulate the conventions of epistolary form would imply the theory could easily apply to the modernist novel — where letters maintain a practical importance in communicating across the empire — which looks to deconstruct societal norms and cultural identities whenever possible. *HD* is a work filled with dozens of letters and which seeks to disrupt conventional views of Empire by forcing the reader to see the stark realities of colonial exploitation. Yet, these letters take on even more significance when one looks at their striking similarity to how Conrad writes to his friends and family, as these pieces, with their imagined interlocutor, subvert the form in much the same way the letter in *HD* subverts the expectations of Empire. The surviving artifacts of Conrad’s friendship with Nobel Laureate John Galsworthy present a unique and vital insight into this phenomenon.

The vast majority of the Galsworthy letters stand as exceptionally utilitarian in form. These tend to conform with the vast majority of *HD* letters. Yet, the few moments of true emotion one can find in the Galsworthy collection emerge as the result of moments of trauma, and they wholly defy social convention, as Conrad disregards the formal boundaries of epistolary form in periods of catharsis. These such letters coincide with the rare emotional letters of the novel — that sent from the Aunt and the handing over of Kurtz’s correspondence to the Intended — in stark defiance of social convention in moments wherein characters try to process trauma. Although the Galsworthy collection revolves around friendship and the mutual frustrations of two writers, and *HD*’s letters concern family, romance and colonialism, the physical artifacts of Conrad’s closest friendship highlight his response to traumatic events, paralleling such responses in *HD*. Conrad’s experience and reaction to trauma, both in reality and in his fiction harken to a level of intimacy which results from, and can only form around, moments of intense emotional anguish, as the letter and its imagined interlocutor allows for intimacy to occur even across the vast distances of the empire.

The letters to close male friends of Conrad help illuminate how, even in an intimate relationship, an emotional distance exists. While Conrad

wrote to a number of pillars of early modernism, John Galsworthy seems to stand apart in how close a relationship he and Conrad formed. Jessie recalls his years of amity by introducing him in Conrad as I Knew Him as “Mr. John Galsworthy, to whose unfailing friendship we both owe more than can be expressed in words, who used to run down often for a day or two days’ visit” (Conrad 47). Moreover, a contemporary review of Jean-Aubry’s *Life and Letters* in the *Daily Chronicle* notes “[a]mong the letters which Conrad wrote to literary men of his day, those to Mr. John Galsworthy are the most intimate, and perhaps the most interesting” (*Daily Chronicle*). He is often seen in biographical accounts as one of Conrad’s earliest literary friends, along with Edward Garnett, and, while he was close with Ford and James as well, the Galsworthy friendship was Conrad’s most valued by consensus opinion.

Given the ways Galsworthy is painted in the relationship, his receipt of predominantly clinical letters is peculiar. The first letter to the Nobel laureate in *Collected Letters* is from 1898, yet, as a note mentions, “his friendship with Conrad went back to a voyage on the *Torrens* in 1893” (Karl 2.11n), implying by ‘98 their relationship was well established. In what would become an occasional theme throughout his correspondence, in the first sentence Conrad omits the copular verb, saying only “[t]he last line *excellent*” (*Collected Letters* 2:11) in reviewing Galsworthy’s *Jocelyn*. Such an omission immediately creates a sense either of urgency or distance, as if Conrad is either writing too quickly to bother with inserting the verb to be or else trying to create a metaphorical lacuna between himself and the recipient in not granting them full, grammatically correct clauses. Any explanation to this quandary only muddies what is known of the Galsworthy/Conrad friendship. This rushed tone in the introduction, akin to a chance hallway encounter as both hurry to their destinations, comes off as authentically Conradian, as he is so often seen in biographies, from Jessie Conrad and Jean-Aubry through to Meyers and Jasanoff, as brief and unwillingly to reveal much if any emotion to those around him. This reserved tone conceals the space the writer places between himself and the imagined interlocutor, as Galsworthy is deprived eloquent, exhaustive prose. Moreover, this January letter only gives the emphasized “*excellent*” in praise of Galsworthy’s second novel. Conrad spends the rest of the letter granting advice on navigating publishers, noting Galsworthy should “[t]ry for higher

terms than You³ are disposed to accept. [Unwin] will never give you what the book is worth — nobody would of course; but he won't even give you what the book should fetch. Generosity on Your part would be misplaced” (*Collected Letters* 2:11). This refusal to extol or even outline his thoughts on the novel itself to any useful degree for Galsworthy, suggests that, even with close friends, Conrad was guarded, hiding his emotions behind epistolary convention and an intentional distance on the page.

In concluding the letter, Conrad again grants praise, though more muted than at the outset, only saying of *Jocelyn* “I believe it will be appreciated. I do. I don't despair for mankind. The best of luck to you and your story” (2:12). These sentences, as short as they are, one of them only containing a subject and a verb, sans a direct object, again harken to the coolness at the beginning and illuminate the dynamics of the relationship. Moreover, in finishing his remarks on *Jocelyn*, Conrad lowers his opinion from a work that is “*excellent*” to one he merely believes will be appreciated, suggesting he may not “appreciate” it himself, though others might. The “despair for mankind” comment appears out of place, but, assumedly it is again only faint praise referring to the middle of the letter wherein he notes “[n]ot everybody's writing and not everybody's reading either” (2:11), and, as Galsworthy is picking up the pen, it comforts Conrad that someone is writing other than himself, Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. This bold proclamation, in context, becomes mundane as Conrad quickly ends his decreasing praise for the manuscript.

A majority of the correspondence Conrad sent to Galsworthy, however, lacks even such faint praise. A 9 April 1902 letter is far more consistent with the norm, wherein he implores Galsworthy to “come along, and bring all the MS. I am very impatient to see Your work” (2:405). Perhaps deeper emotions were saved for when Galsworthy was visiting in person, hence why Conrad was so eager for him to “write to us day and train” (2:405) to their Pent Farm home with manuscripts in hand to be poured over and further abate Conrad's despair for mankind. However, if Bannet's logic is applied, one would assume Conrad's letters should read much like any conversation to Galsworthy, in person or otherwise. The

³ Conrad often used the formal, capitalized “You” when writing, regardless of the recipient. Moore assumes it is an extension of his education in French, as he tends to use the second-person plural in his French letters.

utilitarian nature of most Galsworthy letters implies a distant relationship, Conrad trying to present a stereotypical reserved, guarded masculinity, even to his most intimate correspondents. The rest of the April letter requests Galsworthy go rumor hunting, asking to “find out for me whether Meldrum is up and doing...it is rather important for me to know and I do not want to write to the office direct” (2.405). Such letters, wherein Galsworthy seems an intermediary to pass news from London to Conrad, or to inform him of Ada’s health, seem to rebuke the general understanding of Galsworthy as an intimate and cherished interlocutor. If the letter was understood to be a tool to continue natural conversation, one can see, most often, the Conrad/Galsworthy conversation, though amicable, rarely displayed sincere emotion and tended more towards the traditional, reserved masculinity of the modern age.

There are only two letters of the over 250 within *Collected Letters* which suggest an intimacy between the two, both borne of moments of intense trauma. The first letter, dated 1 November 1910, appears to hold a rare moment of catharsis stemming directly from the continual poor sales of *The Secret Agent* and broadly from a poor public reception generally of his works at this point in the middle of his career. In the epistle, Conrad inveighs:

A public is not to be found in a class, caste, clique or type. The public is (or are?) individuals. *Le public introuvable* is only *introuvable* simply because it is all humanity. And no artist can give it what it wants because humanity doesn’t know what it wants. But it will swallow everything. It will swallow Hall Caine and John Galsworthy, Victor Hugo and Martin Tupper. It is an ostrich, a clown, a giant, a bottomless sack. It is sublime. It has apparently no eyes and no entrails, like a slug, and yet it can weep and suffer.
(4.385)

The outburst is striking for how it harangues the public with which Conrad struggled the whole of his literary career. Despite employing simile to lower the public to a mindless mollusk, Conrad takes great pains to avoid personalizing what is clearly a private torment. Strikingly, the masses may swallow Galsworthy, but they will not swallow Conrad, in this instance at least. He has turned to one of the few people in his life who would understand and empathize with Conrad’s struggles to be recognized for his literary achievements, yet the anger on the page is retroactive. He is trying to

understand a long string of disappointments as a distant past. There is no imagined interlocutor; Conrad is monologuing, knowing Galsworthy will understand, but assuming no reply will come. Noting him by name as a victim of *le public introuvable* suggests Conrad forgets Galsworthy is the recipient. He projects the trauma of repeated public rejection onto any nearby victim, rather than internalizing the grief in a healthy way.

The only other letter to show such raw emotion was sent 1 August 1914, at the very start of the Great War, when Conrad and his family were visiting Poland and trapped between German and Russian forces. The way in which Conrad opens this letter explains the frantic state he finds himself in, worried as he does not “know when this letter will reach You — or even if it will reach you, but I must tell you what is happening to us” (5:408). This is not a normal letter to Galsworthy exchanging pleasantries, this is a last will and testament as Conrad assesses the likely collision of the Russian and Austrian forces he is caught between. He is not entirely sure if his family will live, the trauma very clear on the page as his homeland is again torn apart by war. His fear is clear as Conrad notes, “I simply dare not venture on the horrors of a war-exodus” (5:408), as Jessie’s knee was in terrible shape before they left and had not improved in the slightest since.⁴ Fully aware of the teetering dominos of European alliances at this juncture, Conrad lays out a plan to extract his family, “if England finds herself at war with Austria I entreat you my dear fellow to try to open communications with me through the Foreign Office and through such ambassador or envoy of some neutral power who will be charged with the interests of such Bsh subjects as may be left in Austria” (5:409). The fear shouts from the page, and the outset of war likely explains why Conrad is so upset. In this moment of desperation, he needs a close friend to entrust his affairs to, and, in this letter, we see true friendship emerge, brought on by the trauma of geopolitical circumstance. When last war broke out in Poland, he was yet to be born, only hearing tales from his father. Now, on returning to a his homeland, Conrad is forced to see the horror of war again come to his country in person.

Yet, even as this letter shows emotion due to trauma, Jessie paints a far different, and bleaker, picture when outlining their first night in a nation

⁴ From her own accounts of their trip: “at last we were off, tired out completely, and with the feeling of having only just escaped a terrible tragedy...[and in] vain I assured him that a little rest and quiet was all I needed, and that in the morning I would be ready to move wherever he might want to go” (Conrad 64-5).

at war. While Conrad wrote from Zakopane,⁵ and discussed the war as a far-off thing, he neglects to mention, in the first hours, it had come to his very hotel, with “the manager, a good-looking man, with a fine head of thick black hair [that morning...] rushed hurriedly forward, his head shaven close, and announcing in shrill tones, ‘I expect to sleep in barracks tonight’” (Conrad 72). More importantly, he neglects to inform Galsworthy how the wife of their traveling partner had crossed the Russian border earlier, and the daring rescue of her. Jessie notes “[t]hen came the appeal which I had feared. He [their traveling partner] asked us to allow...Borys, a youth of sixteen, to accompany him. I remember feeling dismay, yet at the same time it was impossible to refuse. [She and Conrad] stood at the door watching them enter a car; [her] heart rose in [her] mouth when the manager handed a revolver to each” (73). In an attempt at stoicism — whether conscious or not — Conrad neglects to tell Galsworthy the true depth of the trauma his family experienced. The exclusion of such frightful details of the days trapped in Austrian Poland again creates a distance between them, even as Conrad places his fate in Galsworthy’s hands through this epistolary manifesto. Even in moments of intense personal trauma, Conrad must create distance, be it refusing to acknowledge the imagined recipient as with the April letter, or by selectively removing more traumatic details in this August letter. Such qualified intimacy borne from traumatic experiences will prove a vital means of understanding the moments of emotion in the letters of *Heart of Darkness*.

The power and importance of epistles within *HD* is far less obvious than when analyzing Conrad’s personal life; however, Owen Knowles, when discussing Conrad’s literary influences in constructing his adventure tales, notes that “excluding the convention of ‘thrills’, ‘charm’ and obvious ‘catastrophe’, [*The Nigger* and *HD*] develop an alternative method that he and Ford termed ‘*progression d’effet*’. The phrase is full of implication: it suggests the scrupulous attention to the ‘small’, whether it be a fleeting glimpse, an image or an observed detail,” (Knowles 36). Letters as a genre, as seen above, give increased attention to the small, the minutia of rhetorical form which have a profound impact on the tone and implication of the author. This, in turn, helps one to understand *Heart of Darkness*, as when letters

⁵ Then part of the Austrian partition of Poland, on the border with present-day Slovakia.

appear, while Conrad rarely gives the reader a direct view of their contents,⁶ the formal rhetorical choices Marlow makes when discussing the correspondence he interacts with have a profound impact on how one interprets the obscured contents. One would assume, from the Galsworthy lesson, letters in *HD* are similar to Conrad’s personal letters: short, clinical, and devoid of emotion, with minor rhetorical differences heightening the distance and callousness of the author. While a majority comport with this assumption, in moments of intense emotion — i.e. during the appearance of the Aunt and the exchange of Kurtz’s ephemera to the Intended — catharsis and legitimate feelings can be found as Marlow processes his traumatic experiences in the depths of the Congo.

The first letter of business within *HD* is the verbal-letter the Accountant asks Marlow to deliver to Kurtz, so called as he only asks Marlow to bring the message by mouth due to a fear a physical letter will be opened and read by rivals; in all other aspects, this is stereotypical business correspondence. The artifact both comports with the clinical trope from before, and highlights early on the force of the letter in the narrative. In the episode, Marlow describes the sounds around him growing to a crescendo as the Accountant discusses Kurtz. Initially, he only notes “the sick man [nearby] was too ill to groan. The flies buzzed in a great peace” (*HD* 60), as if these are cursory sounds. The man is silent, and the flies create a form of white noise. Yet, once the caravan arrives, noise becomes far more pronounced, as “[s]uddenly there was a growing murmur of voices and a great tramping of feet... a violent babble of uncouth sounds burst out on the other side of the planks” (60), marking the arrival of news and supplies. While the sheer number of words given to the description of noises around the camp would suggest one focus on this sound which comes with the caravan, Conrad’s silencing of the outside noise implores the reader to focus instead on the coming letter, though downplayed in the moment. Marlow himself gives little attention to the caravan other than to establish the chaos before the Accountant shuts the window, as, “when one has to make the correct entries one comes to hate these savages” (60-1), further drawing attention to the importance of the letter. Such a reaction is striking, with the

⁶ This author counts only two instances of a letter’s contents being made know to the reader — the verbal-letter the Accountant asks Marlow to pass on to Kurtz and a singular one of the rivet letters sent by the brickmaker.

Company man more interested in his business than the sounds of anarchy and death outside, annoyed such noise interrupts his focus. The ease with which a character is able to wholly shut out sound, and turn to writing — both his accounting and the soon-to-come letter — forces the reader to shift their focus as well, with the general sounds of empire shut out at times to address the clinical messages which push the Empire forward, and how they recast the novella.

In this moment, with the Accountant’s utterances become the focus over the sounds of the arriving caravan, the Company man giving Marlow a delicate task; knowing the terminus of Marlow’s route into the jungle, he asks that, “when you see Mr. Kurtz...tell him from me that everything here...is very satisfactory. I don’t like to write him — with those messengers of ours you never know who may get a hold of your letter — at that Central Station” (61). In effect, this task from the Accountant merges the oral and the written into a singular device — out of necessity, driven by fear of other Company men taking retribution on Kurtz — which compels Marlow towards the Inner Station, making manifest the metaphorical concept of letter writing Bannet found in *Empire of Letters*. Simultaneously, this creation of an intimate intermediary, the courier, by necessity, needing to know the contents of the letter they carry, disrupts the very social structure the Accountant seeks to avoid. The fear is that wandering eyes will read the letter to Kurtz and attempt to undermine his progress within the Company, yet, in doing so, the Accountant has forced a stranger to know an intimate “secret.” By trying to save Kurtz, the Accountant performs the very action he fears. Conrad’s melding here of the verbal and the written assumes a level of intimacy between writer and reader, an intimacy too important to risk being seen by a nefarious third party, and yet this intimacy is as distinct as that which exists between Marlow and the Accountant conversing alone about the realities of Empire. In this moment, Marlow becomes a quasi-letter himself, bearer of this message to Kurtz; the imagined interlocutor of Bannet is very real, physically in the room receiving the letter from its writer. However, despite the added intimacy of this being a verbal message entrusted to Marlow for delivery, rather than a material object, the communication only involves business, with Kurtz’s accounts seeming in fine order. There is no hidden knowledge or intimacy to see within this message. Much like how Conrad writes most often to Galsworthy, despite what appears outwardly to be an intimate transaction with the trust placed in

Marlow, this letter is, essentially, a distant piece, written in short-hand much like the *Jocelyn* letter and without much emotion to dissect or subtle hidden meaning to be deciphered.

Such clinical letters dominate the first half of the narrative. These early letters are vital to the function of colonialism, carrying instructions to steer the Empire. Yet, they also implicitly carry directions from Conrad on how to read the work. Strictly within the narrative, these letters of business allow the various cogs in the imperial machine to move, and, with them, bring Marlow deeper into the heart of darkness at the end of the Congo river. Yet, to harken back to Bannet, “[l]etter-writing had political, social, domestic, cultural and economic consequences because it had fictional force even in its most ‘real’ or utilitarian manifestations” (Bannet 53). The clinical nature of the early letters suggest a distance which always exists within the imperial context, even as lives rest on the demands made within letters sent from colony to capital. One can look to the letters Marlow has sent by the brickmaker concerning his need for rivets to see an example of this theory. The reader is never given a finite number of how many demands are sent, but it is assumed at least a dozen calls for rivets leave the Station. These letters, and their lack of reply, bring the motion of the novel to a grinding halt.

The stasis of Marlow, overwhelmed and helpless before the boring reality of waiting on bureaucracy to process a request for a bucket of rivets, allows for another moment to focus on the role of the letter within the narrative. While these correspondences pass on to their recipient to no avail, by forcing the reader to move through pages of frustration and obsession over rivets, Conrad has disrupted the flow of his novel to bring attention to the necessity of a letter to move the narrative forward. Yet, of vital note is that, for the only time in the novel, neither Marlow nor the brickmaker knows their interlocutor; he only writes “my dear sir...I demanded rivets” (*HD* 71). This inability to construct an imagined interlocutor, as Conrad can do in with Galsworthy, and as any other letter writing character can within the work, sets the letters up to fail. Their rhetorical power collapses without the ability to imagine a conversation with the recipient and thus leads to Marlow’s excessive angst.

After using the great name of Kurtz to compel action, Marlow notes “[n]ow letters went to the coast every week...‘I write from dictation.’ I demanded rivets” (71). The dictation is notable: while Marlow never writes a

letter himself, it would appear the brickmaker is copying the words of the tired and frustrated captain, further muddying the imagined recipient between the man dictating and the man writing the letter. While time in this section becomes convoluted, the remark that letters were sent “every week” indicates just how futile this measure was. For the first, and only, time in the novel letters fail to have any impact. Neither speech nor writing can bring rivets in a timely manner, this lack of control over outcomes mirroring Marlow’s lack of control over the readers of *HD* or the listeners of his tale upon the *Nellie*. Moreover, his next observation is telling, as, after this frantic dictation, he notes how the brickmaker changes, as he “became very cold and suddenly began to talk about a hippopotamus” (71). In classic form for Company men, the brickmaker turns on a dime to other, less pressing, matters, creating a distance akin to that seen in the Galsworthy letters, the clinicalness of imperial business coming to full effect. Despite the letter serving as an intimate form of address, the male-dominated correspondence of Empire forces a created distance between writer and interlocutor — either in substance or in refusing to imagine the interlocutor proper when making demands of the colonial machine — to remove emotion from a situation, making exploitation easier to rationalize and justify in the moment. Marlow’s refusal to give letters a convention of intimacy comports with the known writings of Conrad to Galsworthy.

Yet, the first of two times epistolary emotion appears in the novel comes with the first actual letter to appear in the narrative, that of the Aunt to secure Marlow his job in the Congo. This epistle sets in motion the whole tragic story Marlow bears witness to, and, as the first sin of the novella, the emotional release which corresponds with trauma for Conrad appears beneath the surface. The Aunt is the catalyst for the Congo affair only due to her “know[ing] the wife of a very high personage in the Administration” (49). Despite her being “a dear enthusiastic soul...[who] was determined to make no end of fuss to get [Charlie] appointed skipper of a river steam-boat” (49), there is a darker undertone to how Marlow describes the situation. As opposed to the rivets diatribes, this letter is markedly different in a contextually-dramatic manner: Marlow offers retroactive commentary on the attitudes of his aunt. Indeed, Allan Simmons notes “Marlow is brutal about the great cost, perceiving in his aunt’s designation of him as an ‘exceptional and gifted creature’... an echo of the ‘rot let loose in print and talk just about that time’” (Simmons 114). The

Aunt, as a tangential member of the imperial machine, shows the classic Conradian trope of “Europeans whom Conrad brought to Africa [which] are foolishly inspired by the propaganda they’ve ingested from their newspapers” (114) *de facto* transforming into a fictional *le public introuvable* with which Marlow is battling. The implication newspapers present only propaganda contrasts them with the authenticity and incorruptibility of the letter as a presentation of fact. Despite the natural existence of fiction in letter writing, Marlow, in this instance, seems to suggest letters from the colony are more valid than reports in the news, as letters lack the public propaganda newspapers injected to create a narrative supportive of the state’s colonial exploits. A letter has no need to ignore the chain gangs and dead bodies of the first station Marlow encounters, whereas the “ingestible propaganda” would seemingly refuse to report such barbarism. The Aunt is but a member of the foolish and easily-misled public, much like the public which refused to buy Conrad’s fictions and thus serves as a proxy for Marlow’s own anger and disillusionment post-Congo. Certainly, Conrad is more explicit when writing to Galsworthy, but the *progression d’effet* does not allow such blatant hatred.

In comparing Marlow to “[s]omething of an emissary of light,” the Aunt’s lack of understanding of colonial reality causes his bombastic remark of “how out of touch with truth women are” (*HD* 53). This naïveté with which Marlow casts the Aunt brings to the surface the anger hidden in the commentary of the newspapers; her blind belief in what she reads reminds the boat captain of why society writ large has allowed the horrors he witnessed to continue uninterrupted for so long. Marlow rejects the idea of himself as an emissary of light, at least in this reflective state in which he tells the story, tarnished by the traumas of the Congo which are only now coming to the surface. Marlow’s realization he “had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary as an exceptional and gifted creature — a piece of good fortune for the Company — a man you don’t get hold of every day” (53) is equally tinged with ire. Just as Conrad placed the blame for his lack of economic success through literature on the public, Marlow places the blame for the pain, both physical and emotional, which he has endured since returning to the Congo on his Aunt, the woman who wrote the letter which got him his job. For doing what she thought to be in his best interest, the Aunt is granted the blame, for overselling his abilities, for getting him a skipper’ship, for sending him down the river, for seeing Kurtz’s atrocities, for

letting Kurtz die. In this first moment of intense trauma, Marlow, much like Conrad in the April letter, cannot process the emotions boiling over on the page, and though the letter is the mode of agency, he strips the form to keep himself from having to face traumatic realities. Conrad refused to acknowledge Galsworthy as the interlocutor, and Marlow likewise creates “the wife of the high dignitary,” a woman he never meets, to allow him to use the letter to vent his pain yet not fully deal with the consequences therein. The overwhelming feeling of this first letter is a repression of emotion, a refusal to accept the realities of trauma, and a need to place blame elsewhere to maintain his sanity.

It is only after he has retold his tale of the Congo affair, and, through the story, escape the nightmares of the jungle, that Marlow can process his trauma, and, again, as the pain comes to the surface, letters become the dominant artifact around which trauma circulates as he hands over Kurtz’s letters to the Intended. The pomp and circumstance around this exchange of letters — the only direct handing of a letter from one to the other we see in the novel — compels the reader to process what Kurtz’s death has meant for the world, and the reverence which all have for him despite his crimes. The strange ritual the Intended performs before the exchange, “put[ting] out her arms as if after a retreating figure... I shall see this eloquent phantom as long as I live and I shall see in her too, a tragic and familiar shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, bedecked in powerless charms stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness” (125), ties Kurtz’s fiancé to his African lover. A continent apart, in this moment of bringing the letters of Kurtz, borne from the depths of the Congo to Belgium, the two lovers of Kurtz both reach out in a moment of solidarity, trying to grasp their lost hero, the imagined interlocutor of the bundle of letters.

This exchange of Kurtz’s correspondence is the only moment in which letters convey a sincerely intimate moment. The Aunt’s letter gets Marlow a job, the Chief Accountant sends a verbal-letter to assure Kurtz he was doing great work, Marlow sends letters to get his rivets, and the letters brought to Kurtz assumedly entail Company business. Yet, these letters, brought over land and sea, are now all that remain of Kurtz, and this final memento is, in many ways, sacred to both Marlow, who knew the real power of Kurtz, and the Intended, who worships an idealized version of her fiancé. Despite the view of all the other characters who write and send letters,

Marlow sees correspondence as sacred and worthy of protecting, as evidenced by the fact that he tells the “clean shaven man” requesting all of Kurtz’s materials to “expect nothing else...there are only private letters” (120) which are explicitly meant for the fiancé of the fallen monster. The implied interlocutor of the collection, the image of Kurtz which exists in the composition of this bundle of business letters, allows him to exist in perpetuity, and the image is different depending on the holder of the bundle. The Intended’s image is the purest form of Kurtz which can still exist, and this preservation of his purity lessens the sting of his crimes, in some small way, abating Marlow’s trauma.

To William Blackwood in 1899, justifying the ending of *HD* prior to publication, Conrad wrote “the interview of the man and the girl locks in—as it were—the whole 30000 words of the narrative description into one suggestive view of a whole phase of life, and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the Centre of Africa” (*Blackwood & Meldrum* 154). In viewing the Intended, with “the summing up whisper of her internal condemnation,” a moment of physical intimacy occurs mediated by the letters, as Marlow “la[ys] the packet [of letters] gently on the table. She put[s] her hand over it...” (*HD* 123). The ellipsis halts the moment in time. This first touch with the remains of Kurtz lasts infinitely, much as he does through them, and in that moment, there is a transcendence. While the Native Woman was unable to hold onto Kurtz, the Intended, by virtue of being European, and able to read her fiancé’s writing, can hold onto his words forever. The physicality of the letters and their link to the Congo affair allow for a less direct processing of trauma and, as such, can bring healing and comfort by creating a continuity of Kurtz’s memory.

In truth, these letters are nothing more than the clinical pieces seen throughout the novella. They appear earlier, when Marlow first meets Kurtz, noting “we had brought his belated correspondence, and a lot of torn envelopes and open letters littered his bed. His hands roamed feebly amongst these papers...this Shadow looks satiated and calm as though for the moment it had had its fill of all the emotions” (106). The letters, then, stand as the last relic of the traumatic moment when Marlow had his vision of Kurtz’s shattered upon the shores of an Inner Station lined with skulls. The sharing of this trauma with the Intended, and Marlow’s handing over of the nightmares these letters symbolize, allows him to grieve, even if he cannot tell her the reality of her husband’s crimes. In touching Kurtz’s

letters, the Intended sees an intimacy between the men, and thinks Marlow “knew him well,” with Marlow confirming “[i]ntimacy grows quick out there” (123). It is this intimacy which both saves and destroys Marlow, as the reality of Kurtz keeps the trauma fresh in his mind, yet the purging of this final vestige of the monster which he brought back to Europe with him, in the intimacy of the Intended’s home, allows for a moment of healing, for both of them.

Yet, much as Conrad withholds the full reality of the situation in Poland from Galsworthy, he never allows the reader to see the contents of the parcel Marlow delivers. This refusal to grant the reader insight requires one to look outside the novel to understand their significance, and through understanding Conrad’s personal aversion to trauma one can begin to contextualize why these business correspondences are treated differently. Even in trying to share, and thus lessen, his personal trauma, Conrad seems unable to paint a full picture of a scarring situation, and so too does Marlow appear incapable of opening the letters. These are letters of colonization, but, with Kurtz, these are letters of his subjugation and extortion of the natives; these letters chronicle the slow spiral from idealized man to twisted god. Marlow’s comment that “[h]is words will remain” (124) via this bundle of letters is haunting. To the Intended, her ideal of Kurtz, the fearless crusader and brilliant man of enterprise has found immortality in these letters, but to Marlow, his twisted memory lives on through his handwriting on the page. To open them, to show the reader the reality of this final memento of Kurtz, would be to release his demonic presence again, and it is better to pretend the full reality is nonexistent. It is unhealthy, and keeps Marlow from truly recovering from his trauma, yet this compartmentalization allows him to maintain his sanity in a situation which is, in so many facets, wholly insane.

To understand this, however, one must understand the ways in which Conrad thought of letters, and how he utilized them to process trauma in his personal life. Conrad’s personal letters imply a subversion of form by playing with convention in writing to Galsworthy as his most intimate familiar. If *Heart of Darkness* is to be understood as, in many ways, autobiographical, it is vital to understand Conrad’s comprehension of tragedy, and his refusal to process it completely. Galsworthy grants the lens necessary to read the underlying trauma of letters in the work, yet, when one peers through that lens, the story becomes all the more tragic. In the end, the

letters of *Heart of Darkness*, though they move the plot along, show Marlow’s — and by extension, Conrad’s — inability to process trauma. The refusal to open the letters of Kurtz, instead handing them to the Intended to discover the implied horrors of their contents, implies such intense trauma can never be processed, and it is best to leave such nightmares far away and to refuse to acknowledge their existence, to refuse to heal.

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