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Joseph Conrad and the Secular Scripture

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Abstract: To reckon the postcolonial world of the 20/21C we have to count heads beyond the intense partisans of pro and con, to include the great majority who lost their allegiance to imperialism. Conrad's Marlow rehearses that loss in *Heart of Darkness*, and it is best understood through René Girard's theory of human culture originating in religion, in man's power to fool himself that the gods require blood sacrifice. Once violence misunderstood as transcendent is understood as solely human, violence can produce nothing but itself. For Girard, this revelation derives from Scripture, but also great literature, the secular scripture.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Rene Girard, imperialism, secular scripture.

This essay is part of a longer project of rethinking of what comes before and after postcolonialism for world literature in English, by looking at Joseph Conrad as the chronicler of colonialism's failure from the inside point of view of the colonists, at Chinua Achebe, obviously, from the inside point of view of the colonized, and at Dermot Bolger, who insists that it is time for both colonisers and colonized to be done with postcolonialism, at least in Irish writing. René Girard's mimetic anthropology, as I will show, is vital to this project[1].

To begin very quickly my discussion of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: English imperial history has been narrativised as a romance, and recognized as a perdurable and dangerous fact. Marlow's first words in *Heart of Darkness* ("And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth") show that he is talking back to the complacent British imperialism of his fellow weekend sailors, putting them back in their place — humbling them, perhaps, which is very different from humbling oneself.

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1. For insightful reckonings of the potential of mimetic theory for reading Conrad's own reckoning with the psychology of his own time and mimesis, see Lawtoo (2013; 2016).

But what set Marlow off? It was the complacent romancing of English history we hear first which is rendered, in a complex way, by the narrator who was there, listening, but whose narrative is now influenced, darkened, by what Marlow then said in response. The first seven paragraphs of the story are the narrator's preamble to Marlow's first utterance. Their purpose is to situate Marlow's first words of disagreement with the group's complacent invocation of English imperialism. They would not have talked so openly and complacently, even fatuously of the "race" which peopled the banks of the Thames, which serves them as some global Tube system leading to the uttermost ends of their earth, if they knew Marlow (and if Marlow himself knew) that he was sensitive, undependable on the subject. But Marlow does not majestically, categorically renounce imperialism from some unassailable position of lifelong virtue. We are present at the moment when it publicly weakens in him, it starts to fall apart.

As Marlow warms to his subject he declares his own belief which distinguishes between profane and sacred "imperialisms": robbery on a grand scale or "the devotion to efficiency". He declares:

> What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence 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 1923: 51)[2]

Marlow suddenly stops mid–sentence because he hears his own increasingly religious fervour (devotion, redemption, worshipping) rhyme with Kurtz's, in sacrifice. What follows, in a genuine attempt at patience and humility, is a story Marlow has told once already, in orthodox fashion, to Kurtz's Intended, which he must now tell *on* himself, with a fuller comprehension. Once, he gave the reaffirming romantic lie to Kurtz's last words ("the last word he pronounced was — your name" instead of what Kurtz really said: "the horror! The horror!"). Now in this subsequent telling he must include Kurtz's last words as well as the fact that Marlow lied. We have witnessed a sudden crisis for the ideals of imperialism, and an important stage in Marlow's conversion away from them.

Marlow authentically and effectively begins to convert from his own kind of efficient or modernising imperialism by not pretending that he never believed in it. That is, in *Heart of Darkness* we are not in the narrow circle of the converted, writing for the converted, whether imperialist or postcolonialist. Unlike Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), however, where one version of solidarity is no more comprehensive than the other, where persecuting, limiting solidarities and all–inclusive solidarities take

2. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references are from this edition and will appear in parentheses after the quotation.

turns in the narrative (Johnsen 2003); in this story written three years later two "theories" of human solidarity no longer contend with each other, as if sacrificial and nonsacrificial solidarities are of equal value. Now the delimiting of the less comprehensive theory enables or permits a movement towards the more comprehensive theory to advance a solidarity without exclusions, keeping faith with the promise of Conrad's famous "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* of a nonexclusive solidarity of the human and natural world, perhaps more explicitly in Marlow's listener(s) than in himself.

One element of Marlow's passage out of "efficient" imperialism is to bracket with irony his earlier participation as a withdrawal from a former belief. He frames his horrific experience of the "grove of death" near the Inner Station, where a tangle of black bodies lie in every pose of neglect and suffering, with the gentlemanly language he once shared with the Company's chief accountant. His farewell comment to the ravine, "I didn't want any more loitering in the shade", is to be heard ironically, distinct from yet recalling the accountant's expressed wish to "get a breath of fresh air." Marlow knows that *we know that he knows* what horror he has seen.

But Marlow does not pretend he never shared a language and European "ethnic" identity with the accountant. He speaks of his admiration and respect for him, that "in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance" (68). "I could not help asking him how he managed to sport such linen. He had just the faintest blush and said modestly, 'I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work'" (68). Throughout this ironic narrative Marlow reinvokes and re–experiences his enthusiasm for a fellow colonialist, admitting to his use of the shared idiom of "sporting" European gentlemen. In fact, he is so close to that prior enthusiasm that we can hear him recognise it in himself, rising in him again, as he remembers: "moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes" (68).

A postcolonialist/feminist deconstruction of the accountant's colonizing methods is easy enough now: the accountant translates (or perhaps overwrites, since it is unlikely that he knows her language) the resistance of the native woman, overwrites her own language, into his "distaste", into an issue of his own personal propriety, internalised, embodied into "just the faintest blush." It is important that we can now perform such readings, but we need to ask: What are the multiple and complex sources of our capacity for deconstruction, and what might be its enabling not simply deconstructing consequences? If we think more about what conditions make postcolonialism possible, we might better imagine what comes after.

It is true and obvious that part of our ability to see such persecution comes from attending to our recent generation of feminists and postcolonialists, by reading circumstances of victimization in partisan kinship *from*

the inside that Conrad sees *from the outside*. Yet if such a reading is there to be seen in Conrad's story, part of the reason is also that Marlow can no longer commit fully his powers of narration and representation to approve the accountant's job of oppression, of blocking the native woman's own potential narrative. As Girard promises, when persecuting méconnaissance begins to fall apart, it falls into the truth.

The unnamed narrator of *Heart of Darkness* tries several times to render Marlow's complex effect of modest and intermittent revelation, seeing him as a hybrid Buddha in street clothes, without a lotus–flower. Marlow's ironic way of telling a story is intermittently reflective and revelatory of the truth.

> Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre — almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister. (79)

Blindness and insight work so closely together here that it is almost as if the narrator and then his reader were asked, without Marlow ever quite being able to articulate his unease, "what is wrong with this picture?" Once we look at the picture long enough, one might ask "how can anyone arrive in such a pose without getting burned, torched?" Is the woman first given the torch, then blindfolded, for example? It is impossible to imagine her doing all this herself, without "assistance". To put our modern interest abruptly, we read the painting not from the point of view of its creator, but from the point of view of its subject, who is its victim. When we attend to the painterly effect that Marlow notes as sinister, we understand that it derives from Kurtz's own weakening commitment to high–minded imperialism, almost inadvertently showing the perversion of two contemporary iconic stereotypes which make women "stand" for what men believe and what men alone enjoy by law — statu(t)es of justice and liberty: justice, blindfolded, holding scales; liberty holding a torch, not blindfolded. The painterly effect of the light on the blindfolded face is the work of Kurtz's weakening commitment to imperialism, sensing and depicting contradiction. Marlow never explains to his audience why he found the painting sinister (he won't or perhaps he can't —he only knows that this troublesome observation belongs here, in his narrative), and the narrator, perhaps in deference to Marlow's complex state of emerging consciousness, includes but also does not comment further, but we can say what Marlow's tale has surely left for us to say. By being faithful to his prior belief as well as its disintegration, Marlow "dates" (as Edward Said says)[3] the painting by which Kurtz begins

3. "Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence,

to give himself away, marking its beginning and its approaching end when idealistic or sacred colonialism will be unsustainable.

Marlow's first disciple is the narrator, who in turn "dates" the stages of his own storytelling, before and after Marlow's story. The beginning of *Heart of Darkness* belongs to this first narrator, this latest listener to Kurtz's tale, where he dates himself and his fellows by reinvoking their self–satisfied choral recitation of British naval knight–errantry, but with his commitment to "the gigantic tale" of English imperial adventure now diminished and weakened by the intervening tale by which Marlow blocked it. This latest, unnamed narrator admits to no vocation of accountant, lawyer, or director of companies perhaps because, like Marlow, like Conrad, he has changed jobs, to storytelling. Marlow himself despairs of this new work of storytelling, complaining that work is for oneself only, that no one listens, that we live as we dream, alone (82), but Marlow's tale is one of the earliest and most effective of all subsequent interventions into the twentieth century colonialist archive, culture and imperialism's gigantic tale. It is surely important to recognise the blocking of the grand narrative of imperialism which Marlow and his narrator sustain; if novels build nations, form consent, as one says endlessly, then they can perhaps serve as well to interfere with, even revise these constructions.

Not all of Marlow's interventions into the culture of imperialism are solely verbal.

> I pulled the string of the whistle, and I did this because I saw the pilgrims on deck getting out their rifles with an air of anticipating a jolly lark. At the sudden screech, there was a movement of abject terror through that wedged mass of bodies. "Don't! don't you frighten them away", cried someone on deck disconsolately. I pulled the string time after time. They broke and ran, they leaped, they crouched, they swerved, they dodged the flying terror of the sound. The three red chaps had fallen flat, face down on the shore as though they had been shot dead. Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river.
>
> And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun and I could see nothing more for smoke. (146–147)

Marlow *acts*, trying to save them all. At least three of them he presumes are saved, only seeming to be shot dead. But Marlow's narrative language is

and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end. But come to an end it would, if only because — like all human effort, like speech itself — it would have its moment, then it would have to pass. Since Conrad *dates* imperialism, shows its contingency, records it illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*), he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be" (Said 1993: 28).

inadequate to what he does — his action is more than an interference in an "imbecility", and his word for the saved men, "chaps", does not improve much on the belittling pilgrim idiom of a "jolly lark", or on Marlow's usual practice of seeing limbs and wedges of bodies where he doesn't want to see persons. Mere irony cannot avoid corroborating the "truth" of the stereotype popular to ethnographic texts contemporary to his own, particularly English ones, that the ignorant natives are easily scarified by what any Western child understands as a mechanical whistle.

Finally, in Marlow's narrative idiom the "barbarous and superb" woman cannot be saved from her "tragic" fate. Presumably, "superb" is touristic shorthand for thinking that she is a superb example of raw, barbarous feminine sensuality; "tragic" means that, like Kurtz's "other" Intended in Brussels, man cannot alter [for these women] what the gods have foreordained. Tragedy is customarily the western narrative plot of what must be expected and suffered by those whose flaws invite its retribution. Surely, despite his closing off of the episode, Marlow's last thought on her was not that he could see nothing more — aren't we to wonder if he wondered if she was killed, for example? Irony defines itself by withdrawing itself fastidiously apart from what it says. It is the act of telling this story on himself, even exposing his self–protecting irony, which indicates conversion.

When the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* gives us his famous advice on how to read the significance of Marlow's stories, to learn that their meaning is outside rather than inside, he is mostly proposing more than he can do himself.

> But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him 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 these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (48)

If meaning can be outside, not inside, then it is perhaps the contiguity or solidarity of narrator to listener that carries, contagiously, the meaning. This new community of listeners and readers bears the promise of Conrad's career–long commitment to full solidarity, and bears correlation with Virginia Woolf's idea of how human character changed in the early twentieth century, a cognitive breakthrough (indicated and represented by the "literary" device of stream of consciousness) producing a new evolutionary form of humanity, with Yeats's subtle sense of symbolism and spirituality, Eliot's sense of an infinitely gentle infinitely suffering. But that is another subject for another time.

But this is for some future narrator of overlapping territories to fulfill, a promise perhaps beyond the threshold which the Guyanese novelist

Wilson Harris and Edward Said recognise as Conrad's own limit — Conrad could see the waste of colonialism, its decay, but could barely imagine what would replace it. The figurative language of this narrator's story, like Kurtz's, like Marlow's, is still magnetised by imperialism's polarising of centre and periphery, repeating Marlow's phrase "heart of darkness" like a religious incantation. Conrad himself explained "That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck." (Conrad 1923: xi). The European tribal drumbeat reinforces for the narrator as well as for Marlow, that Africa is to be blamed as the source of darkness, disease, madness, perhaps now contaminating London and Europe.

Marlow experiences in Africa a more advanced stage of "demoralisation" than the narrator of the *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, when he recognises albeit faintly his human kinship with Africans, further weakening the sacrificial morality which produces solidarity at the expense of a victim. Kurtz also continues Conrad's parallel reflection on the increasingly turbulent and unstable leadership of modern societies typically modeled in their "millionaires, politicians, reformers", but also in their outcasts such as Almayer, Willems, and James Wait, three preceding central characters of Conrad's fictions. When Marlow returns to Europe he is told of Kurtz's "popularity", that he would have been a successful musician, journalist, painter, or politician "on the popular side" (154). If Marlow personifies narrators who have been listeners, telling tales to listeners who will become narrators, if he personifies "us", then Kurtz belongs to Conrad's remarkable portraits of those charismatic and paradoxical leader/scapegoats we are driven to recognise as "one of us": James Wait, Lord Jim, Nostromo.

But in reading Conrad "we" are not just English, not just Penrith boys, trained up in seamanship and duty on the Conway, an additional cushion always reserved for us on the deck of the "Nellie", nor are we simply European by birth or sympathy. We are at least everyone who reads Conrad, and these "leaders" of ours have in Conrad's fiction a global (if transitory) popularity — not just in the European sphere, but also within its sphere of influence, the overlapping territories of Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, among both colonisers and colonised: in Said's phrase, the culture of imperialism.

As I have argued in *Violence and Modernism. Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf* (2003), the relation of myth and modernism has been misunderstood. The moderns do not welcomingly invoke the atavistic return of the primitive sacred in updated sacrifices, fisher kings, and scapegoats. Their patient observation recognises the astonishing parallels between primitive rite, as collected by their anthropologist fellow–researchers in the field and in the library,

and modern behavior, where they do their own fieldwork. Their own case histories of modern leadership indicate an ever–increasing societal turbulence, depicted not only in the short–lived, up–and–down public career of a leader, but in the mercurial expression and rescission of the public's encircling favour.

If writing *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* made Conrad a writer because he could no longer imagine himself only as a fellow–sailor, ignoring the "outside" view, it also gave him theoretical leverage on one of his greatest research subjects: the increasingly turbulent position of leadership in modern solidarities everywhere on the planet. Conrad's attention to different worldly theatres of operation suggests that they are organised similarly enough so that Kurtz, like other multinationals, would be able to rise to the top in all the communities he inhabits: Europe, the Company, tribal Africa. But if he is able to become popular anywhere, then he is equally "able" or likely to then become unpopular anywhere. The sudden decline of Kurtz's prestige in the Company perhaps anticipates a sudden decline in tribal Africa — there are ominous signs for him there as well. The shift in Conrad's understanding of James Wait signaled in his 1914 American preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, away from analyzing Wait's personal character, to analyzing the collective psychology around him in the ship's crew which "enables" Wait's character position, is in a vital stage of development at this moment, the moment of *Heart of Darkness*, in his writing career. This shift can be traced through the further consideration of Kurtz as well as "Lord Jim" and "Nostromo" (as one might call them).

Girard's general model of sacrifice is crucial for belatedly revisiting and crediting modernism's anthropological insights. His explanation of the scapegoat process as a mechanism renders unnecessary the discredited hypothesis which the Cambridge Ritualist school (Frazer, Harrison, Cornford) proposed to account for their undeniable recognition of parallel social structures across primitive cultures. Their unwieldy and unconvincing explanations of tribal migration or collective psychological development to account for global parallels in ritual and myth squandered modern anthropology's research interest in ritual, and, as Girard suggests, derailed its search for the origin and function of religion.

Further, the "Cambridge" hypothesis (and its subsequent generations) poorly served and ultimately brought into discredit the myth and ritual school or archetypal criticism in literary study which first theorised the overt attention of modern art to ancient myth and ritual. Girard's mimetic hypothesis shows that similarities in ancient and modern ritual and myth are produced by a common mechanism which can be generated anywhere, anytime by the consequences of breakaway violent behavior. With a stronger hypothesis like Girard's, we may return as this whole generation of early

modern writers did, to their special research subject, to ask with renewed interest: *why does modern behavior resemble ancient rite?*

As a representative of the sacred, the ritual victim is credited for everything wrong and right in society. Expelling him gets rid of the wrong, which is how he is credited with right as well as wrong. Rites resemble each other, but are not identical across cultures because each society rationalises this intolerably paradoxical *sacer* of victims in a slightly different way. To recover the intelligibility of the full paradoxical quality of profanity and divinity, the curse and blessing co–existent in the victim, one must compare globally (as Girard does, as Conrad does). Societies that rationalise in favour of the expulsed one's sin, minimising his blessing, and developing perhaps a weak leader in a strong judicial society, must be compared with those societies that minimise his sin in favour of his blessing, leading to a society with strong leadership. Girard's model clarifies Conrad's lifelong interest in "Men of the People" such as Nostromo (who can just as easily become "Enemy of the People"). We can see that Conrad's special research topic is the overlapping global circumstances and the single general model of the leadership dynamic, at once exacerbated and revealed by the theatres of imperialism.

Placed next to Kurtz, the Russian is a curious figure, a rich and subtle example of Conrad's comparative method. His motley garments make one suspect that Conrad had devised his own theory of the ritual origins of modern behavior to rival the Cambridge ritualists who are Conrad's contemporaries. The Russian is Kurtz's substitute or ritual victim, his harlequin (122), his Fool. Sometimes he speaks for him when Kurtz is ill, sometimes he risks elimination at Kurtz's own hands or the tribe.

More importantly, The Russian is himself speculating about crowd dynamics. He is newly careful about his own relation to tribal culture, as if he has now realised something from the spectacle of Kurtz "getting himself adored" that he is not yet able or ready to explain. When Marlow tells him that he is worried by the natives lurking in the bushes, the Russian says earnestly that they are simple people. He first says that they meant no harm, but adds "not exactly" (123). A little later when asked again how he kept them off, asked if they wanted to kill him, "Oh no, he cried — and then checked himself" (124). If they are simple people, it may mean that their customs had at first seemed simpler, apparently more stable and predictable than modern ones: the downfall of the leader, the friend of the people who will become the enemy of the people develops irreversibly within an appointed rite. The Russian should receive credit for being in advance of everyone, characters as well as colonial/postcolonial readers of Conrad's story, for suspecting that African tribal culture is not supinely incapable of resistance, of deciding that Kurtz's methods are ruining not profiting their district.

Like Kurtz's painting, like The Russian's shy demurral, Marlow's description of Kurtz's African Intended may also reveal aside from or even in spite of his intentions an African capability for resistance, its nascent reckoning with Europe.

> She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witchmen, that hung about her, glittered and trembled in every step. She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild–eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (135–136)

This description, which admittedly delivers exoticism to *Blackwood Magazine*'s male European readers, where *Heart of Darkness* was first published, for which the story was first written, also compromises and controverts what it delivers. Marlow identifies the wealth of several elephant tusks adorning her as the gift of witchmen. We do not know how Marlow knows how her adornments come to her, but we might speculate on what these gifts mean. Dutifully following Marlow's complacent belief in the hypnotic power of advanced western technology of weapons and whistles, before which all other cultures must admit their backwardness and secondary status, we would see her solely as Kurtz's female consort, "his" prize, his Africa. In this manner, she is therefore made by Kurtz and Marlow to stand for Africa as Kurtz's Intended stands for Belgium, as the posed subject of Kurtz's painting stands for justice and liberty. Like Yeats's Leda, she merely "puts on" (wears) her Zeus's power.

But plural witchmen may suggest a power group of witchmen within the tribe, the donation from single or several witchmen of several tribes, the successive donations of a series of single replaceable witchmen, or even all of the above. Cumulatively, these gifts would indicate that her power survives her successive witchmen adorers; perhaps Kurtz is to be understood as another disposable (*sacrificiable*) witchman.

She is in martial procession; brass gauntlets and shin guards, hair dressed as a helmet, and especially the crimson mark on her cheek are the marks of violence; perhaps she appears stately because she takes herself, presents herself, to be of the state, violently sacred, in league with the world superior to and beyond the power of the human one. It is her ritual procession, not western exoticism, which first totalises her identity with the whole sorrowful land.

The story's pernicious interlocking of racial and gender persecutions is well attested now in *Heart of Darkness* criticism by feminists and post-colonialists. Having recognised the power of Kurtz's African Intended, it is perhaps possible to follow yet again these valuable but well–traveled structural parallels of the story to see now Marlow's half–recognised fear of the ominous sacred, sacrificing power of his Belgian Intended as well. Kurtz's Intended drives the conversation she has with Marlow, trapping him in a corner ("you who have heard his last words", 158) until he must dare to tell her Kurtz's truth, keeping faith with the male tribe, or give her the sacrifice she demands. He gives in to her, he sacrifices his Kurtz to her. Marlow leaves her in her "triumph", silently and callowly mocking her to his male listeners on the Nellie: "She knew. She was sure" (162). Safely outside her door, he weakly exonerates himself for giving in to her imperious wish for Kurtz's last words by saying: "The heavens do not fall for such a trifle" (162). This cannot seem to us as a reservation of strength. The emplacement of Kurtz's Intended in the same elevated space as depicted in Kurtz's painting, a place "out of it", somewhere above the "confounded facts" which men contentedly move amongst, is also reserved for Marlow's Aunt, (who gets him *his* position in the first place). The parallel between Kurtz's Intendeds and Marlow's Aunt shows us that women are sacred to male tribes, whether in Africa or Europe.

Kurtz's choice of vocations or amorous/geopolitical theatres of operation would not have changed his ultimate fate, as long as it was "popular". Like any modern CEO, he has already become a scapegoat for "unsound methods" within the Company. He is not innocent of "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale" (50), but hardly guiltier than the rest of them. Inevitably, after an initial popularity, his "unsound methods" would have been exposed as a tribal leader in Africa as well, and dealt with in the customary manner. If sacrifices are offered to him when things go well, who will be sacrificed when they begin to go badly? Presumably, the same fate awaited him in Europe as a popular painter or musician swept up by fame and then buffeted by decline, perhaps even as a journalist or politician, in either Europe or Africa. Kurtz's vocation for modern public life stands for those hybrid, global public figures and performers in Africa like Stanley, Casement, Mobutu, or Conor Cruise O'Brien, who get themselves adored and then reviled.

Yet if any modern leader anywhere on the planet can be over time a scapegoat or a hero, the tincture or ratio is nevertheless different for each Conrad hero — being an outcast is strongest in Willems, in Conrad's first novel, but present even in Kurtz early on. If we know a little of the story of how Kurtz got himself adored in Africa, we know nothing about the popular vocation that Kurtz topped out at when he first paid suit to his

Intended in Europe. Kurtz is presumed by the Company as pre–eminent among the gang of virtue, but seen by his future in–laws in Belgium as not yet being good enough to become "one of them." Throughout his writing career, Conrad restlessly maps out all the variables in the relations created by the increasingly tenuous solidarity of the modern community and its leader in the global world being integrated by imperialism.

Conrad constantly struggled, it hurt him to think and write, with pains from head to toe. The contest between what he knew he had to write and what he could complete at the moment continues all the way up to *The Rescue* (1920), which finishes the Malaysian trilogy he tried to complete in 1897, but he wrote *The Nigger of the Narcissus* instead. *Usque ad finem*. We must assume that everything he wrote up until *The Rescue* (where the narrative of colonialism closes, when the native prince tells Lingard, the first of Conrad's white heroes, "forget it—go home") needed to be written first. To read Conrad properly we must read as he wrote, often defeated yet overcoming one obstacle after another, but also we must keep a consciousness of the whole collected enterprise before us. Girard's mimetic theory of the violent sacred is, as Benoît Chantre would say, "fecond" for this necessary attention to Conrad's lifelong project concerning solidarity and leadership. For this next step, I need to spell out the simplest most economical version of the mimetic theory model for the generating of the violent sacred.

The archaic world understood through magical causation. Everything that happens is caused by somebody or something. Nobody dies; somebody or something killed them, so one better bury any such incitement to retribution. Burial is one of the first necessary cultural prophylactics against violent retribution. Girard's model of the run of spontaneous violence is driven by the fear of violence, of trying to stop the violence of others, including the violent people trying to stop your violence. The transcendent God–effect seemingly unattainable by humans themselves is the aggregating of everyone's enemy in one figure who causes everything to go wrong. How can this process be understood?

Humans are creatures more mimetic than others; they copy each other with greater effect, making them in one way more cohesive. But when they copy each other's desires, they will become conflictual whenever the objects desired cannot be shared. Beyond a certain threshold, perhaps simply beyond a certain size population, hominid groups cannot restore peace through the dominance patterns which pacify animal and proto–human groups. Brute power and intimidation can only carry so far. As violence spreads, it creates a burgeoning center of attention; "outliers" must address, match, copy, equalise this expanding violence at the center it creates, or be engulfed as its (next) victim.

Violence can proceed from rivalry, the consequence of imitating another's desire. Why is violence copied, how is violence "contagious"? Why does it "snowball", why does it spread so far, so fast, like wildfire? Girard does not give the quick (non)–answer, "because that is the way people are — violent, and that is the manner of violence, to be contagious". He reasons out this sequence which recurs everywhere in the world, in the same pattern, that it recurs as a mechanism. And we should not short–circuit our own thinking by "ritually" depending on mythical shortcuts or agencies such as "contagion" or "polarization" which only depict the steps or algorithms a community invokes to speed–up the process to its resolution.

Girard begins with the universal claim of humans that they want peace from violence. It is as true now as it ever was: we all want peace, we never admit to being aggressive. It is all these others who seem to be aggressive, who want what we need, who want 'our' things, and violence is the only way to retrieve the peace that they interrupted.

In the ensuing mêlée, everyone returns the violence against them. With interest, as Girard says, for we all love peace and hate violence, violently. As they contest with each other, combatants become more like each other. If mimetic violence makes all the same, then, as Girard reasons, it becomes easier for one person, ultimately, to be the same single enemy, to stand for everyone's enemy. Easier, yes, but how could that happen?

In the spread of violent conflict, a third person or more no doubt takes one of the sides of the first two rival opponents to stop the violent "other" one, but perhaps also to hide themselves from becoming the potential next victim to the victor's violence; as the attention of the victors expands to see if there is any more violence to be put down, this third person increases their group's size when s/he imitates their collective violence on yet another person, inviting the group to copy its violence against another (which is of course itself a copy of the group's violence) and, perhaps consciously, but perhaps not, deflecting the group's violence away from itself.

How then does peace return from everyone imitating each other's violence, from blow and counter–blow, when reciprocal violence engulfs everyone? A *mêlée* will exhaust the group's limited resources, will wear down into a few left, into finishing off one last. Thus, peace would return when the last antagonist or antagonists are vanquished by all who are left. The more lop–sided the final result is, the better it is for group survival; the best score for any iteration is all against one. Violence which spreads "contagiously", engulfing all against all, in appearance and effect "polarizes", finally, exhaustively, into all against (the last) one. Ritual sacrifice commemorates, formulizes this spontaneous outbreak and resolution of runaway violence, economizing it, but (mis–) attributing it to some causative force external to itself. Violence seemingly expels violence.

Where does the increasingly formalized ritual come from, as opposed to a runaway mechanism? It is as if the group asked itself, 'what were we doing the last time peace arrived, or the last time the powers or forces greater than us that cause everything gave us peace in the midst of everyone fighting?' They remember: all were united in opposition to the last antagonist. Again, for the survival of the group, the best, final score is all against one.

But how does that happen, how does endless reciprocity polarize? Lapidating as a collective act well–attested in the anthropological literature is especially susceptible to a mimetic reading, and Girard regards the great texts of sacred and "secular scripture" (Northrop Frye's term [1976] for literature) as fellow theorists of human behavior, especially mimetic behavior. The anthropological lesson which Girard draws from the Biblical story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8: 1–11) is that throwing a stone is at once an accusation and a self–exculpation: the target is made responsible for contamination, the stone–thrower becomes an innocent trying to beat it down. Jesus' analysis of scapegoating reveals its rivalrous and self–exculpating spirit by not following the accusing crowd's urging of him to accuse the woman, to be the first stone–thrower. Instead he says "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Revised Standard Version). He makes them see exactly what they are proposing to do. Instead of each imitating, as quickly as possible, the first stone–thrower, to show they are as innocent as the first, as they usually do, here, in this case, the first stone–thrower, the first one to declare his innocence, would now, (thanks to Jesus' unwelcome critical introduction), have to pass the test of the group's resentful gaze by declaring in their face that he is more innocent than they are, first among them, inimitable, the most innocent of all, the least accusable. *Connaissance* replaces sacrificial méconnaissance, *and it matters*.

The group is still mimetic but they imitate instead the retreat of the most likely first–stone thrower, not rampaging but somehow conscious, departing in birth order, oldest first. Jesus solemnly completes the pattern when he asks the woman if there are any accusers left, then seals her answer with his refusal to accuse, which came first and then last.

Lapidation is powered and organized by the dynamic embedded in the analogy of snowballing described earlier: the outlier is warding off the approaching threat of becoming the next object of the group's violence by deflecting and redirecting the accusation, by seducing the group to imitate his imitation of their own violence against someone else. And "seducing" may be too strong, too calculating or functionalist an explanation. Perhaps this outlier facing a violence approaching him cannot really believe he is the problem, he cannot "stand it", let us say, he cannot 'bear' to see himself as the cause of violence; it has to be someone else.

So, he like the others stands around the victim, unable to identify except negatively. The simple causal imagination of archaic culture, that somebody or thing or force caused whatever happens, now sees a unique cause for what makes everything go wrong for everybody. When the group agrees on who their enemy is, and dispatches him, they are then at peace. The peace which they could not achieve by themselves must be the work of some more than human force, who is pleased or satisfied with the victim they have chosen according to his signs. Thus, begins the association or the identity of the victim with the divinity. Yet we must constantly remind ourselves that the process would usually fail, the group would usually disintegrate rather than save itself at the expense of the (last) one or, perhaps, stop halfway, producing what Simone Simonse has described as a dual system (Simonse 2017).

In particular, we must be careful not to cheat this relentlessly logical and ordinary explanation of runaway violence by turning "polarization" or "contagion" into magic processes or god–terms which without further explanation 'cause' these emergent patterns of all–against–one. We cannot 'accuse' them; they are but descriptions, formalisations of the consequent patterns of human mimetic behavior. Contagion does not explain mimesis; mimesis explains social contagion, perhaps even the biological process of contagion.

How then might we place Conrad in the formation of the secular scripture as Northrop Frye saw it, the weakening of the literary hero's being from classical to modern life which parallels the evolution in understanding sacred scripture? From the endless fecundity of Girard's reading of John 8: 1–11 we may also see that to decline to accuse is to admit a share of personal guilt of the accused. This is what Marlow's story does, not because he wants to, but because he can't *not* think about what he has seen, out loud. Further, the weakening or secularisation of Kurtz the hero as well as the crowd that first adores and then vilifies the accused is also part of a necessary educative or even spiritual emptying ourselves of the satisfactions and self–justifications of the violent sacred until we see, as Girard says so implacably, that the time of this violent 'transcendence'[4] is over, that there is nobody to blame but ourselves for our violence and warning us, in *Achever Clausewitz*, that nothing now prevents us from making peace or wiping out the planet.

4. Jean–Pierre Dupuy efficiently places René Girard's discovery of the function of sacrifice by saying that sacrifice 'contains' violence in both senses of the word, holding it and holding it back, and that sacrifice exteriorizes violence by expelling it, placing the blame for it beyond the human community. To indicate its family resemblance to other necessary human inventions Dupuy nicknames this paradoxical transcendence "bootstrapping".

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