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"Always Symmetrize!: Forging Bonds in *Heart of Darkness*"

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Abstract

"Always Symmetrize!," the title of this essay – which echoes Fredric Jameson's better-known admonition to "always historicize" – alludes to a type of literary analysis, inspired by the Chilean psychoanalyst Ignacio Matte Blanco's concept of "symmetric logic," which I have been working on for several years. Briefly, it treats the makers of literary monuments as engaged – like the alchemists discussed by Mircea Eliade in *The Forge and The Crucible* – in the task of perfecting the work of nature, a project that they pursue under the guidance of what I call the "symmetrical imperative." The "unsurpassable horizon" of this literary endeavor is Homer's *Iliad*, whose perfectly achieved, albeit covert, bilateral symmetry (magisterially detailed by Cedric Whitman in his classic *Homer and The Heroic Tradition*) is made overt in the undisputed masterpiece of Greek geometrical pottery – Exekias's amphora, "Achilles and Ajax Playing Dice," which I discuss briefly at the outset of my essay.

The greater part of this essay is devoted to an analysis of the similarly covert workings of the symmetrical imperative in Joseph Conrad's modernist masterpiece *Heart of Darkness*. In the initial phases of this "alchemical process," Conrad treats as symmetrical the two otherwise asymmetrical stages of Marlow's journey (first to the Central Station and then to the Inner Station). In its second phase, he creates a container within which to contain

this pairing of symmetrized episodes in the form of a narrative whose covert bilateral symmetry achieves, as Fernando Pessoa recommends in T*he Book of Disquiet*, "a realization freed from the taint of reality" (30). Having completed my analysis of this two-fold alchemical process in *Heart of Darkness*, I then devote a few concluding pages to its return in "The Secret Sharer," a short-story which Conrad wrote several years after publishing *Heart of Darkness*, and in which he may well have "perfected the work of nature" even more impressively.

Keywords: Symmetric logic, the symmetrical imperative, bilateral symmetry, symmetrical inversion, approximate perfection, alchemical craft of the writer, realization vs. reality, the Exekias Complex, involuntary vs. voluntary servitude, container and contained, "contrapasso."

"Between us there was,
as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea"
(Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 15)

This essay will eventually become the first chapter of my current project entitled "Perfecting the Work of Nature: The Symmetrical Imperative of Writing," whose title was inspired by Mircea Eliade's observation, in *The Forge and The Crucible*, that "The alchemist takes up and perfects the work of Nature, while at the same time working to 'make' himself" (47). The focus of my project is on the uncanny interplay in selected masterpieces of Western literature of two otherwise quite distinct activities: on the one hand, the work of nature – which produces "prime matter" in the form of a real-life situation – and, on the other, the alchemical craft of the writer, who transforms it into the "philosopher's stone" of his perfected work. It may be read as a sequel to my *The Séance of Reading: Uncanny Designs in Modernist Writing* – which, drawing its inspiration from Eliade's *Commentaires sur la légende du maître Manole* – used as

its governing paradigm the interplay of the author of a selected work as its "master-builder" and its protagonist as the "designated victim" who must be sacrificed in order that the projected monument – whether it be made of stone or of words – be successfully constructed.

The watchword for my project – "always symmetrize!" – which echoes the "always historicize!" (9) admonition with which Fredric Jameson begins his *The Political Unconscious* – was inspired by my discovery, while reading Rodney Bomford's *The Symmetry of God*, of the Chilean psychoanalyst Ignazio Matte-Blanco's concept of "symmetric logic," a coinage that refers to the characteristic tendency of unconscious thought processes to "treat asymmetrical relations as though they were symmetrical" (29). So, for example, the statement "A is unlike B" must – in a flagrant violation of the principle of non-contradiction – be treated as equal to the statement "A is like B." In my own "alchemist" appropriation of Jameson's Marxist slogan, dialectical thought becomes symmetrical thought, and the Marxist goal, which, in Jameson's own formulation, involves "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (19), becomes the struggle of individual writers to produce – in the inimitable words of Bernardo Soares, the narrator of Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* – a "realization untainted by reality" (30), an achievement that Simone Weil invokes when she observes that "A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it. It imitates the anonymity of divine art" (205).

The title of the introduction to my project – "The Exekias Complex" (an echo, in its turn, of Sigmund Freud's "The Oedipus Complex") – was inspired by my discovery during an early stage of my work on this project of an amphora, made by the 6th-century Greek potter Exekias, called "Achilles and Ajax Playing a Board Game." The introduction that I eventually write for this project will include a lengthy discussion of the ways in which this amphora (images of which are freely available on the internet) is produced in obedience to the "symmetrical imperative." The greater part of this

introduction will be devoted to an examination of the ways in which Exekias's masterpiece makes *overt* the bilateral symmetry that lies at the heart, albeit in a *covert* way, of the foundational monument of Western literature – Homer's *Iliad*.

For the purposes of this essay, I will simply begin by calling to mind the American artist Jasper Johns's disarmingly off-hand description of the three stages of the process set in motion by the symmetrical imperative: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it" (42). The "object" that Exekias took more than two thousand years ago was a game of dice that has an asymmetrical outcome: Achilles wins by throwing a four to Ajax's three. The "something" that Exekias does to this object involved his symmetrizing the *imbalance* between winner and loser in such a way that, at first glance, the viewer is struck, rather, by the *balance* between them. The "something else" that he then does is to *contain* this symmetrizing of the board game played by Achilles and Ajax within a *container* – the amphora itself – which transforms the taint of reality found in the event itself into the most perfect realization of bilateral symmetry to be found in a masterpiece of geometrical pottery from the Greek classical period.

If we now turn to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) with Johns' alchemical formula in mind, we will readily see that the "object" that Conrad takes is the *involuntary servitude* to which European colonizers have subjected African natives. The "something" that he does to it is to forge a bond – using the technique of symmetrical inversion – between it and the *voluntary servitude* that Marlow offers to Kurtz. The "something else" involves his placing this symmetrizing of two asymmetrical forms of servitude within a narrative container that transforms the reality of servitude into a realization that has been freed from its taint.

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What most strikes us as we begin reading Marlow's account of the journey that will culminate in his meeting with Kurtz is the "justified" domination exercised over the African natives by their European colonizers. Before Marlow leaves for Africa, his aunt

talks to him about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (28). Readers will probably recall the report, in which Kurtz opines that "from the point of development we had arrived at, we must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity" (83). Marlow himself frequently echoes this prejudice in favor of a natural right to dominate. We recall, for example, his condescending description of the fireman who tends the boiler aboard the steamboat that he is piloting up the river:

> He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. (64)

Marlow frequently has recourse, as well, to the "N-word" when referring to his encounters with the natives, as when he observes the trinkets offered to them in return for the ivory that they carry to the Central Station: "Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory" (37). The "S-word" occurs even more frequently, as when Marlow describes the workers – deemed "criminals" by their European masters – whom he comes upon at the Central Station: "All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (33).

Under the influence of his unexamined belief in the naturalness of the involuntary servitude that Europeans inflict on Africans, Marlow can acknowledge nothing more than a remote relationship to the natives: "It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your *remote* kinship with this wild and passionate

uproar" (62-3; emphasis added). "Remote" becomes "distant" when Marlow describes the bond that he suddenly feels with his dying helmsman, who looks at him with an expression on his face that was "like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (85).

* * *

Turning our attention now to the "something" that Conrad does with the involuntary servitude imposed upon the African natives, we notice that, writing under the influence of the symmetrical imperative, he transforms it into voluntary servitude; he likewise makes what had been the relationship between a subservient and a dominating *group* (Africans and Europeans) into one between two *individuals* (Marlow and Kurtz). He provides us with a useful shorthand for focusing our attention on this initial stage of "doing something" by having Marlow refer to the Africans as being bound by "all the *legality* of time contracts" (35; emphasis added) and Marlow by his "*loyalty* to Kurtz" (112; emphasis added). In a more general way, we observe that the *historical* nightmare of colonialism becomes in the second phase of *Heart of Darkness* what Marlow himself calls the *personal* nightmare of his loyalty to Kurtz. Conrad, in his turn – guided by an imperative that requires both reflection and reversal – pairs the *major* episode of Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz with the *minor* episode of the young Russian's devotion to him.

Notice, for example, his forging a bond between the young Russian's briefly mentioning the effect produced upon him by *listening* to Kurtz – "this man has enlarged my mind" (90) – and the much lengthier and far more significant elaboration of this experience that he will create for Marlow:

> If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He

> had something to say. [. . .]. He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth – the strange commingling of desire and hate [. . .] he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to drawback my hesitating foot [. . .] But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond. (113-4)

Conrad further symmetrizes major and minor episodes of individual servitude by following Marlow's description of the young Russian's "devotion to Kurtz" as a circumstance that "he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism" (91), with his own acknowledgement that he was similarly fated: "I did not betray Mr. Kurtz – it was ordered I should never betray him – it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice" (104). In a similar way, Conrad will have Marlow echo on two other occasions this idea that he experiences in a major key what for the young Russian was a minor fate. In one of these, he returns to the choice of the word "nightmare" to describe his loyalty to Kurtz, which he sees as an expression of his destiny: "My destiny! Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (112); in the other, recognizing that "I had no clear perception of what I wanted," he hypothesizes, albeit inconclusively, that "Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfillment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell" (117). While Marlow himself sees his behavior as the work of a "merciless logic" that serves no clearly intelligible purpose, we, as readers of *Heart of Darkness*, may see it, rather, as evidence of the operation of the symmetric logic that guided Conrad as he deepened the bond between major and minor instances of voluntary servitude.

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Having, in this way, "done something" to the portrayal of involuntary servitude with which *Heart of Darkness* begins, by

forging a bond between it and its voluntary counterpart, Conrad then "does something else" by transforming this double portrayal of the *reality* of servitude into a narrative *realization* that has been freed from its taint. We could begin our study of this second stage of the alchemical process by noticing the ways in which Conrad makes two such dissimilar characters as Marlow and Kurtz mirror images of each other. We all remember, to be sure, Kurtz's self-description, in the report that he writes for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, as a deity in the eyes of the African natives (83). However, we may not necessarily recall, while reading this passage, which occurs two-thirds of the way through Marlow's narrative, that, in the prologue to *Heart of Darkness*, the unnamed narrator had twice described Marlow in a similar way, albeit with, we assume, an ironic intent quite at odds with what Kurtz had in mind. In the first of these, he tells us that "Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled *an idol*" (16; emphasis added); and, in the second, that "lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a *Buddha* preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower" (20; emphasis added).

Conrad forges yet another bond between Marlow and Kurtz by describing both of them as deviating from conventional norms – Marlow in his way of telling stories whose meaning "was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze" (18), and Kurtz, whose way of doing the company's business, as we learn from the manager of the Central Station, "had ruined the district" (94). Notice, as well, the way in which Marlow pairs himself with Kurtz by suggesting that they were – curiously, in the event – buried together: "I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets" (101). He returns once again to this idea of Kurtz's death being

mirrored by his own when he tells his listeners "I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole. And then they very nearly buried me" (112).

Conrad's fashioning of a narrative realization based on symmetries that have been freed from the reality of servitude is likewise observable throughout *Heart of Darkness* in the proliferation of poetic comparisons that create mirroring relations between quite dissimilar things. Here are just a few examples, chosen at random from a multitude of possible choices:

- "In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint" (15).
- "The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river" (20).
- "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (58).
- "The brown current ran swiftly [. . .] and Kurtz's life was running swiftly too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time" (109).
- "… some weird incantation come out of the black, flat wall of woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive" (104).
- "His [Kurtz's] was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines" (111).

We notice, too, the frequency with which Conrad resorts to metaphors drawn from the realm of religious belief to describe the activities of both European colonizers and African natives. The word "pilgrim" occurs dozens of times in references to the first group. At one point, Marlow refers to the natives as "Mr Kurtz's adorers [who] were keeping their uneasy vigil" (103), and he alludes to Kurtz's wayward activities as "the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation" (81). Later, when he finds Kurtz crawling to the place where one of these ceremonies is being performed, he notes "the drone of weird incantations" (107). Shortly afterwards, he tells his listeners that "the deep murmurs of

the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany" (108).

Conrad will likewise invest a *single word* with two quite opposing implications. Notice, for example, the way in which the word "collar" becomes its own uncanny antonym when, having first been applied to the workers whom Marlow encounters in The Grove of Death – "I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking" (33) – it then shifts to his description of the chief accountant: "When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear silk necktie, and varnished boots" (36). Lest we overlook this detail of the accountant's collar in Marlow's description of his attire, Conrad has him repeat it twice in the same breath: "I respected his collars [...] His starched collars and got-up shirt fronts were achievements of character" (36).

Conrad also uses the word "crawling" to treat the asymmetrical relation between the African natives and Kurtz as though it were symmetrical. The Africans are described as "Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest" (35). Much later, Marlow will find Kurtz himself rather incongruously mimicking their behavior: "I remember the exaltation with which I said to myself, 'He can't walk – he is crawling on all fours – I've got him'" (105).

Notice, too, the bond that the word "wool" forges between two such otherwise unrelated episodes as Marlow's visit to the company office in the "Sepulchral City" and his coming upon The Grove of Death as he makes his way up to the Inner Station. In the first of them, Marlow tells his listeners that "I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one

fat and the other slim sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool" (24). Recast as "worsted" and undergoing a change in color as well, the women's black wool becomes the piece of white material worn by a native: "He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck [. . .] It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas" (35). While Marlow wonders inconclusively what this might signify – "Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge – an ornament – a charm – a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it?" (35) – we may reasonably conclude that it signifies nothing more (or less) than further evidence that Conrad is writing *Heart of Darkness* under the influence of the symmetrical imperative.

This may also explain why Conrad uses the word "wilderness" so frequently to refer to the jungle in which Marlow will ultimately encounter Kurtz. "Jungle" and "forest" do occur a good number of times, but Conrad does seem to have a particular fondness for "wilderness," perhaps because it serves the purposes of symmetric logic more effectively than would either of those two alternative choices. He uses "wilderness," for example, to create a reciprocity between the jungle and the men who inhabit it. Referring to neither the region nor its inhabitants by name, he forges a bond between them by way of a verbal synecdoche: the jungle is a "wilderness," and the men who live within it are "wild." At one point, Marlow describes the likeness of the men to their environment in a way that foregrounds the appropriateness of Conrad's synecdoche: "They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, and intense energy of movement, that was as natural and as true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there" (17). No more need of an excuse, we might add, than "wild" needs for being in "wilderness."

Since the wilderness is personified in *Heart of Darkness* as an invisible, but nonetheless palpable female spirit, it is fitting that the epithet "wild" should be applied repeatedly to Kurtz's African

mistress, who suddenly appears in the midst of the wilderness that is her natural home:

> And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. [. . .] She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. [. . .] Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. [. . .] She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (99)

Single words or phrases will also serve at times Conrad's purpose of symmetrizing the asymmetry of major and minor episodes. Readers will probably recall the scene in which Marlow discovers the signs that Kurtz has resorted to cannibalism:

> I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen – and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling, too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber. (94)

The conclusion that Marlow draws from this grotesque sight will also come readily to mind: "They only showed that Mr. Kurtz *lacked restraint* in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (95; emphasis added).

We may, however, not immediately connect this "lacked restraint" judgment with the otherwise minor episodes in which Conrad, writing, once again, under the influence of the symmetrical imperative, has Marlow repeat under quite different circumstances. He says, for example, of his helmsman that "He had no restraint, no restraint – just like Kurtz – a tree swayed by the wind" (85). Earlier, he had wondered what could possibly be the cause of the restraint that prevents his cannibalistic oarsmen from feasting on

him: "Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour?" (71). As with the episode involving the white worsted worn by the African native, so also here we may speculate that the motive that eludes Marlow is quite simply Conrad's achieving an "approximation of perfection" by forging bonds between episodes of unequal significance to the *action* of *Heart of Darkness* but of equal significance to its *construction*. For doubtlessly the same reason, the company manager's praising Kurtz as a "universal genius'" (51) will, by way of symmetrical inversion, generate the figure of the manager himself who, according to Marlow, "had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even" (42).

Perhaps the most intriguing example of the pairing of a major with a minor episode in *Heart of Darkness* involves the echoes of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* that we find there. Thanks to Marlow's resort to a literary allusion to describe his impressions upon entering The Grove of Death, the first of these references could not be more obvious:

> At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound – as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible. (34)

Less obvious, but of far greater significance to the construction of *Heart of Darkness* is the appearance of the phrase "Transgression – punishment," which translates into English "contrapasso," the term that Dante used to summarize the relationship between the punishment meted out to the sinners whom he encounters in the afterlife and the sin that they committed while in this life. The term "contrapasso" occurs only once in the *Inferno* – at the end of Canto XXVIII, where Bertran de Born tells Dante that, as punishment for his sin of having "parted the union" of David and

Absalom "I carry my brain/Parted from this, its pitiful stem" and concludes with the observation "Cosi s'osserva in me lo contrapasso" ("This retribution that you see is mine," ll. 125-7). The unspoken presence of "contrapasso," however, is felt everywhere throughout the *Inferno*. In *Heart of Darkness*, it emerges at the moment at which Marlow observes Kurtz on the verge of dying. We notice, in particular, that Marlow, describes Kurtz's deathward drift in at least two ways that recall the fate of the damned in the *Inferno*. The first of these recalls Kurtz's vaunted eloquence:

> The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts, the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was *his ability to talk*, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (79; emphasis added)

In the "contrapasso" to his eloquence that Conrad fashions for Kurtz, his "gift of expression" deteriorates into swallowing and faint shouting: "I saw him open his mouth wide – it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly. He must have been shouting" (97).

While "contrapasso" is central to the major episode involving Kurtz's last moments, the phrase "Transgression – punishment" actually appears in the minor episode involving the beating of an African for supposedly setting fire to a grass shed: "... the beaten nigger groaned somewhere. 'What a row the brute makes!' said the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us. Serve him right. Transgression – punishment – band! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent conflagrations for the future" (48). Along with shifting "Transgression – punishment" from a major to a minor episode, Conrad also symmetrizes these two episodes by having Marlow

personify the wilderness in both, albeit with quite different implications. For Kurtz, the wilderness is an agent of retribution:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball – an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and – lo! – he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favorite. (81)

Marlow will return to this "contrapasso" form of personification a bit later:

> But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and he whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. (95)

And yet again:

> I tried to break the spell – the heavy mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to it *pitiless* breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions" (106-7; emphasis added).

If we look for a possible symmetrizing of this image of the wilderness as an agent of *retribution*, we will find it, unsurprisingly, precisely in the episode involving the native whose "transgression" was punished by a beating. Symmetric logic will oblige by transforming "pitiless breast" into "bosom" and making the wilderness itself into an agent of *consolation*: "I saw him, later, for several days, sitting in a bit of shade looking very sick and trying to recover himself; afterwards he arose and went out – and the wilderness without a sound took him into its bosom again" (44-5).

If we now turn our attention to the general design of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole, we will see that Conrad was guided by the same impulse to perfection that we have noticed in his symmetrizing of particular words and episodes. As is true of Exekias's amphora, Conrad's masterpiece is constructed in a rigorously symmetrical way: it begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue; Marlow's journey to Africa is preceded and then followed by his visit to the "Sepulchral City"; each of his visits there has both a personal and a professional motivation; the journey itself is marked by two destinations – first to the Central Station and then to the Inner Station.

Having begun by observing these overall symmetries, we then, upon closer inspection, notice that each pair of episodes contains an asymmetry created by the greater significance attached to the second of them. On his first visit to the "Sepulchral City," Marlow signs a document at the company's office in which he promises not to reveal any trade secrets" (25) and then visits his aunt, who talks to him about "weaning the ignorant millions"(28). The main action of *Heart of Darkness* would not have suffered greatly if these episodes had been deleted. The same cannot, however, be said of the two events that occur upon Marlow's second visit: both his concealing the postscriptum of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs – in which Kurtz advises "Exterminate all the brutes!" (84) – and his telling Kurtz's fiancée that his last words were – not "The Horror! The Horror!" (112)– but her name" (123) are essential to the effect that *Heart of Darkness* produces in us. Similarly, his encounter with European cruelty so vividly described when Marlow enters The Grove of Death has less of an impact on him than his witnessing Kurtz's final moments. Curiously the "rule" whereby the second event is more significant than the first is reversed in the pairing of the prologue and the epilogue. Not only is the prologue significantly longer than the epilogue (six pages to a single paragraph), but it treats repeated details – including the comparison of Marlow to a Buddha, the reference to the tide in the River Thames, and the poetic evocation of the setting by the unnamed

narrator – at much greater length. This asymmetry between the prologue and the epilogue is captured succinctly by the great disparity between the weight that we attach to first spoken words in one, Marlow's "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth" (18), and the only spoken words in the other – the Director of Companies' "We have lost the first of the ebb" (123).

Before concluding, I would like to say a few words about Conrad's "The Secret Sharer," which will be the subject of the ninth and final chapter of my "Perfecting The Work of Nature" project. The "object" that Conrad takes in this short-story – which he wrote several years after *Heart of Darkness*, in 1910, and in which he arguably achieves an even greater "approximation to perfection" – is Captain Archbold's decision to *inculpate* Leggatt for a killing to which he was an eye-witness. The "something" that he does to this object involves his pairing Archbold with a young captain whose hearsay knowledge of the killing leads him to *exculpate* his "secret sharer." The "something else" is to be found in his taking this symmetrizing of the asymmetry of guilt and innocence and placing it within a narrative container that abounds in bilateral symmetries that have been liberated from their conflicting claims.

Conrad makes the two opposing accounts of what happened aboard The Sephora on the night of the storm – one by Captain Archbold, the other by Leggatt – symmetrically equivalent. Captain Archbold's claim that he saved his ship by setting the sail – "I don't mind telling you that I hardly dared give the order" (18-9) – must, in obedience to the law of symmetric logic, be shortly followed by Leggatt's counter-claim: "I assure you he never gave that order" (46). Instead of having Leggatt brought to trial – a sequence of events that would have led to a judgment in favor of one of these versions – Conrad symmetrizes the crisis aboard The Sephora, which was provoked by a storm at *sea*, by having the young captain provoke a comparable crisis aboard his own ship by sailing it dangerously close to *land*. Here is the storm at sea and Leggatt's account of how he dealt with the "half-crazed" mate:

> I believe the fellow himself was half-crazed with funk. It was no time for gentlemanly reproof, so I turned round and felled him like an ox. He up and at me. We closed just as an awful sea made for the ship. All hands saw it coming and took to the rigging [..] They say that for over ten minutes hardly anything was to be seen of the ship – just the three masts and a bit of the forecastle head and the poop all awash driving along in a smother of foam. (16)

And now the mirror image that Conrad devises for it, in which the role of the violent storm at sea which had threatened The Sephora with shipwreck is played by the island of Koh-Ring:

> The wind fanned my cheek, the sails slept, the world was silent. The strain of watching the dark loom of the land grow bigger and denser was too much for me. I had shut my eyes – because the ship must go closer. She must! The stillness was intolerable. Were we standing still? [...] The black southern hill of Koh-ring seemed to hang right over the ship like a towering fragment of everlasting night. On that enormous mass of blackness there was not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard. [. . .] Already she was, I won't say in the shadow of the land, but in the very blackness of it already swallowed up as it were. (67)

The presence in "The Secret Sharer" of opposing testimonies regarding the major crisis that occurred aboard The Sephora is repeated as well on the level of small details. We can notice, for example, Conrad's making an oppositional pairing from Captain Archbold's and Leggatt's physical appearance:

Leggatt:	Captain Archbold:
"The voice was calm and resolute" (12)	"he persisted in his mumbling" (36)
"The self-possession of that man" (12)	"the manner of a criminal" (35)
"light eyes" (13)	"smeary blue, unintelligent eyes" (36)
"no growth on his cheeks" (14)	"a thin red whisker" (35)
"a strong soul" (14)	"a spiritless tenacity" (35)

"a well-knit young fellow" (14)	"one leg slightly more bandy" (35)

Oftentimes, complementary pairings appear so far apart in the story that they may escape detection even after several readings. I noticed only on the most recent of my several rereadings that the young captain, observing that the hat he gave to Leggatt had fallen off his head, exclaims that "It had been meant to save his *homeless head* from the dangers of the sun" (71; emphasis added), a remark that uncannily mirrors his first sighting of Leggatt, who appears to him as a "headless corpse" (10). This pairing is paralleled somewhat more obviously by the "faint flash of *phosphorescent* light" (10; emphasis added) that is the first sign of Leggatt's arrival and the "*evanescent* glimpse of my white hat" (72; emphasis added) that signals his departure.

Likewise, we may miss the way in which the phrase "perfect communion" on the last page of "The Secret Sharer" (72) echoes "quiet communion" at the beginning of the story (3). At other times, these complementary pairings will occur so closely to each other that their contribution to the "something else" of "The Secret Sharer" is impossible to miss. Such, to be sure, is true of its concluding lines, in which the young captain's achievement of "the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command" is matched in the same breath with his evocation of Leggatt as "a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny" (72).

I will now conclude by recalling and commenting upon the unnamed narrator's remark in *Heart of Darkness* about the "inconclusiveness" of the stories that Marlow tells. To be sure, *Heart of Darkness* does not conclude in a conventionally plotted way: the African natives do not rise up against their colonizing oppressors, and, upon his return to Europe, Marlow does not lead a crusade against the abomination that he has observed. Instead, as we have seen, Conrad subjects the "prime matter" of involuntary servitude to an alchemical process whose goal is not to conclude but to "perfect." For the same reason, he does not create a scenario in which Leggatt either stands trial for murder or swims directly

from The Sephora to a neighboring island: neither of those alternatives would have satisfied his authorial intention of fashioning throughout "The Secret Sharer" the continuous interplay of oppositional and complementary asymmetries.

This narrator's complaint about inconclusiveness does have the merit of reminding us, however, that the alchemical quest of the artist to "perfect the work of nature" will never be completed. At best, it will produce an "approximation to perfection" in the form of a work whose bilateral symmetry embodies both opposition and complementarity. Pessoa points to the ideal model of bilateral symmetry that an author, writing under the influence of the alchemical imperative, strives to imitate when he has Bernardo Soares, the narrator of *The Book of Disquiet* formulate his artistic goal: "Ah, to be able to construct a complete Whole, to compose something that would be like a human body, with perfect harmony among all its parts, and with a life, a life of unity and congruency, uniting the scattered traits of its various parts" (289). Applying Soares's artistic credo to *Heart of Darkness* and "The Secret Sharer," we could conclude that Conrad, leaving to other writers the task of producing works based on *causality* and leading to an eventual conclusion, has crafted masterpieces that – like the human body, as well as Exekias' amphora – achieve approximate perfection by drawing upon the inexhaustible resources of *congruency*. "Mens agem molen" – "mind moves matter," the line from Virgil's *Aeneid* that Pessoa compressed into the title of his epic poem *Mensagem* – could well be the watchword of a writer whose way of writing, rather than coming to a conclusive end, celebrates the inconclusive endlessness of writing itself.

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