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# YESTERDAY'S DARKNESS: SPENSER, CONRAD, AND EMPIRE

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YESTERDAY'S DARKNESS:  
SPENSER, CONRAD, AND EMPIRE

An Essay Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
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Master of Arts

By  
Marten R. Frazier  
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The essay of Marten R. Frazier is hereby accepted:

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Date

## Yesterday's Darkness: Spenser, Conrad, and Empire

Readers of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) listen along to protagonist Charles Marlow's perilous tale of captaining a Congo River barge within the jungles of Central Africa, just like his audience on *The Nellie*, the ship upon which he recounts this life-altering journey. Throughout this tale, Marlow wrestles with his complicity in the violent pursuit of ivory extraction in Belgium's Congo Free State. Marlow recognizes the horror of his participation but also hides the truth of the atrocities in Congo from those back in Europe; he simultaneously scoffs at his fellow voyagers who believe they are part of a glorious, enlightened legacy of English explorers yet ruminates that "the idea" behind empire—namely that it has the potential to benefit both colonizer and colonized—upholds the value of the enterprise. Marlow's relationship to empire is complex and contradictory, but this makes sense because the scope of the novel is recursive. He recounts his story on the boat in part to make sense of what he has experienced—I believe that Marlow himself does not know precisely how to feel regarding his choices, and this ambiguity is exactly what Conrad hopes to expose. Marlow longs to hang on to the wistful notion that perhaps Kurtz's project—one to bring "civilization" to the "darkness"—might work if only the idea of it could be flawlessly executed. Through Marlow's deliberations and contradictions, Conrad reveals the impossibility of this benevolent kind of invasion.

This "idea" of marshaling violence for the sake of colonial plantation and "improvement" is not a Victorian development, however. Conrad traces it back to Roman interventions across Europe, including England, long before England was the heart of its own global empire. *Heart of Darkness* is clearly interested in the lineage of empire, as the

narrator waxes patriotically about the Thames and its legacy of launching fleets of English forces around the world: “It (the Thames) had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea” (*Darkness* 5). The narrator frames a timeline of conquest, naming Elizabethan explorer Drake (1540-1596) as an antecedent to the more recent Franklin (1786-1847), lost in an attempt to navigate the Northwest Passage during the early reign of Queen Victoria. The first few pages of *Heart of Darkness* connect intentionally to history and ask readers not simply to consider the present moment but also the long arc of empire across generations of English explorations.

My project intends to connect not only these historical threads but also literary ones, as I believe *Heart of Darkness* asks questions of literary legacy as much as it does imperial legacy. The narrator roots the English empire in Drake, an Elizabethan figure who shares a biographical timeline with another giant of the Elizabethan era, Edmund Spenser (1553-1599), an author whose work I believe echoes throughout Conrad’s novella. While not referencing Spenser directly, Conrad’s early evocation of “knights” loosely links *Heart of Darkness* to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590), an epic rooted in chivalric romance and quest narratives. While I will not focus on *The Faerie Queene* directly in this essay, I am particularly interested by the way in which Edmund Spenser exhorts the use of violence in Ireland during Elizabeth’s reign and the extent to which Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) extols the virtue of English plantation abroad—itsself a kind of quest as outlined by Irenius, Spenser’s character calling for targeted violence against the Irish in this tract. Through a dialogue between

Irenius (who represents Spenser's positions) and Eudoxus (a stand-in for the curious and less-informed English public), Spenser outlines the specific campaigns and policies England should consider in order to succeed in controlling Ireland and planting English systems on foreign soil. My goal in this essay is to demonstrate that Conrad revises Spenserian ideas of empire through *Heart of Darkness*, ultimately proving that the imperial theories of enacting targeted modes of violence for the sake of "improving" foreign lands fall under deep scrutiny within *Heart of Darkness*. Though centuries apart, I believe that *A View* presents an outlook on colonial practices that *Heart of Darkness* comes to criticize, as Marlow reckons with the darkness within himself and the darkness at the root of any imperial project, no matter how benevolent it appears. Like Drake and Franklin, *A View* and *Heart of Darkness* serve as bookends to a centuries-long conversation about England's global role and global rule.

### **Origins and Echoes of Empire**

David Armitage situates the development of state-sanctioned "improvement" of foreign colonies through violent means in Spenser's *View*: "Spenser's conception of the British Empire appeared most forcibly in his *View of the Present State of Ireland*, in which he used it to support his argument for the cultural suppression of the Gaelic Irish and the reform of the 'degenerated' Old English settlers" (*View* 54). Spenser makes it clear that only through systematic elimination of unwanted cultural practices and values—those of the Old English and Irish—could civility flourish: "It is vaine to speake of planting lawes, and plotting policie, till they (the Irish) be altogether subdued" (*View* 21). Spenser's anxieties reinforce the imperial prerogative to subjugate through violence for the sake of long-term opportunities for Britain. Armitage demonstrates Spenser's

affinity for drastic and brutal intervention: “Spenser placed himself at a distance from those among his contemporaries who argued for more gradual forms of pacification, such as colonization, legal reform, and education alone. Spenser demanded all of these measures, too, but without fear of the sword, and even its exercise, they would not be enough to restore civility and the rule of law within Ireland” (54). While ultimately Spenser’s model for intervention was not fully employed in Ireland, Armitage suggests that Spenser’s argument continues to haunt conceptions of an emerging British empire well beyond Spenser’s own moment.

While Spenser writes at the cusp of the British Empire, Conrad pens many of his works at its height. It is clear that Spenser’s ideas about successful management of colonies remain entrenched in Victorian approaches to empire, as evidenced by Spenserian scholarship of Conrad’s era. In his 1912 study “Spenser and British Imperialism,” Edwin A. Greenlaw repudiates any criticism directed Spenser’s way by arguing that the call for violence in *View* is discredited “without proper regard to its historical setting” (365). In essence, Greenlaw is a Spenser apologist whose Victorian position helps today’s readers understand the enduring legacy of Spenser’s imperial ideology three-hundred plus years after *The View*’s publication. Greenlaw summarizes Spenser’s claims in *A View* rather benignly: “The advice he (Spenser) gives is to send tried soldiers, well paid and well commanded, to capture the rebel chiefs; then to send colonies of English-men to settle the country...this done, to give the laws and settle policy that will bring peace and prosperity to English and Irish alike” (364-365). In this light, Spenser’s plan sounds much more palatable, and it also hinges on the idea of a greater imperial good for the Irish. In fact, Greenlaw names Spenser as “the imperialist,

longing to see so fair a land reclaimed to ancient glory” (19). Words like “glory” and “fair land” cement Spenser’s plan as being about more than just conquest and quotidian political debates but something more ethereal and reverent. In his conclusion, Greenlaw calls him a “Dreamer of dreams, Galahad of the quest for Beauty... a member of that little group of men who saw beyond the welter of court intrigue and petty politics the glorious vision of an imperial England” (370). The echo of Marlow’s opening words in *Heart of Darkness* ring out here, as Marlow, like Greenlaw, looks off into the distance and reminisces about the benevolent “idea” that one can hold up and “offer a sacrifice to” (*Darkness* 7) in order to rationalize any colonial project. Greenlaw excuses Spenser—much in the way that Marlow excuses Kurtz—because of the greater idea behind his plots. Spenser the poet and Kurtz the imperialist face little scrutiny for their savagery, since their unique visions for “amelioration” justify their violent strategies. Spenser—like Kurtz in the Congo—emerges in Ireland as a member of a “new” band of colonists, one greatly admired by Greenlaw. Spenser’s vision for English policy and dominion in Ireland does not match the recalcitrant status quo, and his arguments for change rest on the furthering of an ideology greater than just profit or maintenance of already established outposts. Greenlaw is quick to reward this ideology and lift Spenser up in the way that the narrator praises Drake and Franklin in the opening of *Heart of Darkness*. All of these men fulfill a promise much deeper than simply making a profit or expanding English territory—they traffic in expanding the benevolent idea of global English rule.

Spenser arrived in Ireland as a member of the “New English, who emigrated to Ireland after 1534, but principally in Elizabeth’s reign, to take up relatively lucrative positions in the civil service, as army regulars or soldiers of fortune, or to acquire land on

one of the schemes for colonizing Ireland” (Hadfield 20). Spenser and his New English brethren contended not only with the indigenous Irish but also with the Old English—those native Englishmen and their offspring who “degenerated” on Irish soil. In *A View*, Irenius—an Englishman recently returned from Ireland recounting his experience to Eudxous, an eager listener—claims that “some of them (Old English) are degenerated and growne almost mere Irish, yea, and more malitious to the English then the Irish themselves” (*View* 54). The Old English disagreed with the New English over just how best to govern this colony, an argument Spenser explores in *A View* and also in *Colin Clout Comes Home Again*, a poem that Hadfield argues “represents the English in Ireland as caught between the twin evils of hostile natives and neglectful metropolitan authorities, both of whom threaten their efforts to establish good government” (17). No simple colonizer vs. colonized binary emerges in Ireland as disparate elements (the metropole, the old guard, the new guard, and the indigenous) all tussle for power in this system of governance. Who best represents English interests becomes a fraught question, as notions of Englishness split across geographies and positions within the colonial administration. What Spenser makes clear via Irenius in *A View* is that the status quo cannot stand and that English forces must bring violence and subsequent political maintenance to quell both misrule by the Old English and brooding rebellion among the Irish. Before linking Spenser’s position to Conrad more directly, I believe it is important to contextualize recent scholarship on Spenser that argues against his role as an ardent colonist and posits that *A View* questions English violence more than encourages it. Refuting these claims will be central to my later argument on Spenser’s relationship to Conrad.

### **Anti-Imperialist Spenser?**

While Spenser occupies a complex position as a member of the New English in Ireland, it is critical that today's scholars ground their reading of *A View* in its historically accurate context, not least because recent projects have claimed that *A View* actually espouses closeted sympathy for Ireland and vanquished Irish citizens. Several critics, among them Katarzyna Lecky and John Walters, posit that Spenser's posthumanist position—one that subverts the idea of human superiority in nature—also calls into question the argument for Irish subjugation in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. For these critics, not only is Spenser a posthumanist, but he is also an anti-colonialist. Moreover Spenser's "view" on Ireland (according to these scholars) questions expansion rather than endorses it. While it is true that moments in *A View* bring humans into relief with non-human actors like the environment, it is dangerous to apply a contemporary theory of posthumanism to Spenser as a means of elucidating an anti-imperial reading of *A View*. Spenser questions the past role of English rule in Ireland, but he does not endorse an anti-English, self-aware, and ironic vision of Elizabethan Ireland. Such claims (as made by Lecky and Walters) place post-colonial and posthumanist studies at the center of the argument and overlook evidence contained in the text itself.

Lecky hinges her thesis in "Irish Non-Humanness and English Inhumanity" on the idea that Spenser portrays the Irish as both "subhuman and superhuman...demonstrating the soft boundary between human and nonhuman spheres of existence during the Renaissance" (138) and contends that this ambiguity serves an anti-colonial purpose by exposing "how the ideologies of violent empire dehumanize colonizers and colonized alike" (133). Her argument rests mainly on an analysis of the infamous scene of

starvation at the 1580 Siege of Smerwick, where Irenius recounts the Irish rebels “creeping forth upon their hands, for their legges could not beare them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves” (*A View* 101). Lecky claims that Irenius’ positioning of the Irish as non-human “ghosts” and “anatomies of death” actually strips the colonists of their humanity, showing just how callous Irenius and his brethren are in Irenius’ bloodless recapitulation of a violent scene. Lecky believes that early modern readers will see the brutal these brutal depictions and be critical of such an approach; she argues that Spenser paints Irenius as monstrous so that readers will reflect on the horrors of England’s intervention in Ireland. In her reading, the colonists become the villains, not the cannibalizing Irish. She sees the depiction of their cannibalism as a “disavowal” of their humanity and believes that it “exposes the agonized bodies of the Irish as the all-too-human physical evidence against the ideals driving the biopolitical machine of imperialism” (Lecky 141). Thus, Irenius looks like an unfeeling monster and the Irish become “pieces of raw flesh upon which the reader stumbles, which derail Irenius’ genocidal logic” (Lecky 143). In such a reading, Spenser wants the reader to question the English imperial project, not endorse it.

Lecky does a compelling job of highlighting Irenius’ complex role and relationship to both England and Ireland. Her claim, though, that Spenser constructs Irenius as a symbol of inhumanity and violence recognizable to readers who will interrogate and scrutinize England’s colonial mission does not hold up when the starvation scene is put into its broader context within *A View*. Lecky’s perspective is precisely the kind of quick reading Spenser derides within his text. Eudoxus takes the position of the public who has heard about such horrors in Ireland, and Irenius makes it

his role to correct the assumptions Eudoxus has repeated. Eudoxus summarizes what he has heard about Lord Grey and his management of the Irish: “So I remember that in the late government of that good Lord Grey, when after long travail, and many perilous assayes, he had brought things almost to this passe that you speake of, that it was even made ready for reformation...complaint was made against him, that he was a bloodie man, and regarde not the life of her subjects no more than goddess” (*A View* 103).

Eudoxus has heard about the war and the accusations of abuse under Grey, notably that Grey is a violent and insensitive man. Irenius soon becomes animated in the task of unlearning this assumption of violence, of re-contextualizing the truth for Eudoxus (and the general public): “...that good Lord (Grey) blotted with the name of a bloody man, whom, who that well knew, knew to be most gentle, affable, loving and temperate; but that the necessitie of that present state of things inforced him to that violence, and almost changed his naturall disposition” (*A View* 103). Lecky is right that Irenius wants to rewrite a narrative—just not the legacy of colonial violence she identifies; his concern is to preserve the legacy of Grey in a positive light.

Irenius tries to justify Grey’s tactics and to convince the public that they are necessary for the betterment of the country and that these unfortunate deaths are simply a required byproduct of reformation toward a greater good, not just for England, but for Ireland as well. Irenius claims not to like violence—he even mentions its potential to turn a man like Grey away from his “natural disposition” —but he sees it as a requirement for the worst cases, those Irish and Old English who will not follow the righteous path of the Queen. To Irenius, Grey embodies the challenges of leadership and the difficult decisions of reformation: “But his course indeede was this, that he spared not the heads and

principals of any mischievous practices or rebellion, but shewed sharpe judgement on them, chiefly for examples sake, that all the meaner sort, which also were generally then infected with that evill, might by terrour thereof bee reclaimed, and saved, if it were possible” (*A View* 104). Here we see the heart of Grey and Irenius’ shared philosophy: “saving” those willing to submit for the greater good of Britain and eliminating only the truly evil, those too willful to acquire civility through subjugation.

Of course, the irony strikes a contemporary reader: just how, exactly, does one advance ideas of civility and benevolence through a campaign of subjugation and starvation? And here Spenser is absolutely trapped in a bind. Irenius acknowledges the bind and recognizes the violence he espouses is unfortunate but required; he tries to explain away the violence in the most rational way possible, emphasizing the kindness and discretion of Grey: “Yet he (Grey) touched only a few of special note; and in the tryall of them also even to prevent the blame of cruelty and partiall proceeding, and seeking their blood, which he, as in his great wisdom did fore see would bee objected against him” (*A View* 104). Here, Irenius acknowledges appearances and the likelihood that Grey’s initiatives would be misunderstood, and he tries to account for this through a “sensible” explanation of Grey’s violent actions, detailing how fair Grey made some of the trials that prosecuted (and executed) Irish rebels: “For the Iury that went upon their tryall, hee made to bee chosen out of their nearest kinsmen, and their Iudges he made of some of their owne fathers...yet he uttered their judgement in abundance of teares, and yet hee even herein was called bloody and cruel” (*A View* 104). Grey is the figure readers should pity here according to Spenser, as Grey “uttered their judgement in an abundance of tears” (*A View* 104); such a turn away from the pain of Irish subjects to the pain of the

punisher shows a rhetorical move on Spenser's part to shift compassion from the victims to the perpetrators. It also details the devilish trick Irenius finds himself in when trying to positively paint the actions of a man behind a massacre. This is such a conspicuously absurd move that it does potentially read as ironic given just how preposterous it is, but I do not believe that Spenser is self-consciously constructing a kind of irony here—he truly does feel pity for Grey and the challenges he faced as a leader.

In an article that echoes some of Lecky's conclusions, John Walters insists that in Spenser's Ireland "the power of nonhuman, natural factors threatens to undo any plans would-be colonial rulers like Irenius and Eudoxus might make" (151). His article "Human, All Too Human" posits that Spenser seeks to demonstrate the power of Ireland's flora and fauna to thwart colonial activity: "The persistently challenging presence of cattle (and natural factors more broadly) undermines the anthropocentric assumption that a dominant class of properly civilized human beings has the power to impose whatever use upon the land they will" (Walters 153). Walters is certain that "Spenser challenges both anthropocentric and colonialist ideologies" (154) through his depiction of Ireland's demanding natural landscape. Nonhuman elements pose challenges for the colonial project—Spenser seeks a georgic application of agriculture upon a relatively untamed terrain where cows wander freely and shepherds follow flocks rather than containing them. However, the land poses far less of a threat of colonial failure than the earlier colonial policy which Irenius criticizes—namely that of leniency on the part of the Queen and her dismissal of Lord Grey. Whereas Walters believes the environment stops the advancement of the English, I contend that Irenius sees only the English stopping themselves. Eudoxus summarizes what he knows about a recent retreat

following rumors of Grey's violence and mismanagement: "...so as now she (Queen Elizabeth) had nothing almost left, but to raigne in their ashes; eare was soon lent thereunto, and all suddenly turned topside-turvy; the noble Lord eft-soones was blamed; the wretched people pittied; and new counsels plotted" (*A View* 103). The "topside-turvy" turn comes not from unmanageable livestock but from poor communication, rumors, and "pity" for the Irish. Irenius is certain that had Grey been able to "stay the course," the civilizing mission might have been completed.

Irenius' vision does involve the subjugation of the Irish landscape and the reshaping of agricultural life, but I do not believe that Spenser thinks this kind of agricultural management is impossible, as Walters contends. Walters suggests that *A View* exposes Spenser's "deep pessimism that such a final victory could ever happen" (163), but in my reading, he views the Old English, New English, and Irish as plagued by a kind of tribal cannibalism that requires strong management and direction from a commanding authority. The Irish are literally eating themselves, but both the Old and New English are just as vicious to themselves, thwarting Lord Grey and destroying his advancements for different reasons; Spenser sees all of these parties as self-destructive, moving away from choices best for their survival. The intransigent Irish refuse to extricate themselves from a "famine, which they themselves had wrought," (though, of course, in actuality the famine was induced by English military tactics), and the New English possess "evil tongues" that "backbite" (105) Lord Grey, one of their own, cannibalizing his reputation and standing. I find the emphasis on mouth imagery in Spenser's account of Grey a parallel to the Irish "feast" (*A View* 102) of human flesh depicted within the very same section of text, highlighting the fact that the greatest

enemy to peace and civility may be internal conflicts and malicious gossip. This is all to suggest that Spenser does not believe the colonial project to be a “pessimistic” one, nor one that will be dictated by the landscape or environment of Ireland. His emphasis on England failing (and eating) itself reminds us that he believes the power to change Ireland remains with England—they are their own worst enemies, not the Irish or the land itself. With unified vision and commitment to a shared policy, he implies, England’s attempts at reformation will succeed. The only force strong enough to corrupt England is England itself.

Reading Spenser as a posthumanist critic of colonialism—as Walters and Lecky do—displaces his work from the context of its historical and cultural moment. Spenser was far from the only writer musing about colonial possibilities and challenges in Ireland, and investigating other early modern authors helps us understand the danger of endowing Spenser’s tract with too much irony or self-awareness. Decades before Spenser wrote *A View*, Edward Walshe penned “Conjectures Concerning the State of Ireland” in 1551, one of many political tracts ruminating on the Irish question. According to Thomas Herron, Walshe was “an Old Englishman of the Pale” who “grew increasingly pessimistic in the 1550s as to the possibility of London-led reform in Ireland” (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 46), and he was one of the earliest Old Englishmen to advocate for an extensive plantation policy (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 47). Walshe seeks a robust investment in Ireland by way of English military and plantation: “I conjecture eviry goode subjecte that knoweth the state of yrland shuld desire not onely the plantinge of ynghish men there but also the comminge of more thither... Whereby great nombres shalbe planted thicke together and so the lande stronge and well manured” (315). It is easy to see the influence upon Spenser here, as

Walshe suggests the power of “plantinge of ynglish men” to improve the quality of the soil and to invest in the cultivation of the land. Herron acknowledges the connections between the two authors, by describing Walshe’s attitude toward English plantation as “a highly optimistic view of the possibilities of colonial change...an uncanny prediction of Spenser’s reformation and plantation vision” (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 47).

Along with planting English men, Walshe also insists that England “plant justice...by appointing presidents and counsels” (315). In a kind of cultivation metaphor, Walshe underscores that simply bringing men without justice would breed unlawful men, even if they were English: “For without Iustice evin English bloodes wax wyld yrishe And the kinge where no Iustice is looseth his right and revenue” (316). Walshe notes the possibility for English blood to “wax wyld Irish” or turn into a degenerate, spoiled Irish-like state; adding English population will not magically resolve the barbarism of Ireland. Purposeful civility and laws must govern over all. As Spenser would later explore in *A View*, without these provisions of justice, the English are apt to wax even more “wyld” than the Irish: “For the chiefest abuses which are now in that realm, are growne from the English, and some of them are now much more lawlesse and licentious then the very wilde Irish” (*A View* 67). Thus, Walshe and his conjectures help us understand the sincerity of someone like Irenius, a man who sees the potential for degeneration and depravity in both Irish and English men (as does Walshe). While no English man is immune from blame (or potential ruin) in either text, both Spenser and Walshe suggest the benefit of the application of English justice systems and policies in governing Ireland and the planters sent to rule the land.

Victorian historian George Hill includes a 1572 tract from Sir Thomas Smith in his larger 1873 work *The Macdonnells of Antrim*, a history of the influential Irish clan, the MacDonnells. Herron describes Smith as a “high-ranking administrator, ambassador and political theoretician” who “wrote in the hope that his energetic and unruly son of the same name might make a greater name for himself and profit by leading the ‘enterprise’” (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 47); the “enterprise” depicted by Herron is, of course, English plantation in Ireland. Smith’s pamphlet is simply titled “Tract by Sir Thomas Smith on the Colonisation of Ards in County of Down.” Like *A View*, the work is situated as a dialogue. The subtitle reads, “A Letter sent by T.B. Gentleman unto his very frende Mayster R.C. Esquire, wherin is continued a large discourse of the peopling and inhabiting the Cuntrie called the Arden” (405). T.B. Gentlemen recounts to R.C. Esquire his “view” of Ireland and strikes a note quite similar to Irenius twenty years later: “Ireland is a large Cuntrie, commended wonderfully for fertilenesse and commodious site thereof, wherein the Kings of England have had footing and continuall gournement these foure hundred yeeres and more” (Smith 406). Spenser mimics the language directly in his very first line of *A View* when Eudoxus opens with a question about whether Ireland is a “goodly and commodious soyl as you (Irenius) report” (*A View* 11). Smith also invites skepticism about the English management of Ireland, noting that part of the reason that the island is “at no time fully subdued” is because of “the evil government of deputies, which either have been negligent or corrupt” (406). A lack of total investment has caused piecemeal progress and cyclical failures without sustained attention to the needs of upkeep; even the deputies installed by the English have been corrupted because of a lack of proper management.

Also like Spenser and Walshe, Smith warns of the degeneration of those in Ireland who develop without the firm hand of steady moral oversight: “The Englishe race overrune and daily spoiled, seeing no punishment of malefactors did buy their own peace, allied and fostered themselves with the Irishe, and the race so nourished in the bosome of the Irishe, perceiving their immunities from law and punishment degenerated” (406). Spenser echoes an almost identical warning in his *View*: “Some (English) in Leinster and Ulster are degenerate, yea, and some of them have quite shaken off their English names, and put on Irish that they might bee altogether Irish” (Spenser 68). Smith influences Spenser in his argument that Ireland needs both people and policy, not simply additional English presence, but presence with a clear purpose and with intentional policing. National identity appears fungible, with Englishmen slipping into Irish positions once they move away from regular supervision and enforcement of English values.

The Irish have a negative influence on English civility, but both Spenser and Smith suggest that civility is not permanent, nor is it tied inextricably to a particular race or group of people—it is fickle and fleeting and requires upkeep. Early in his summation of the challenges facing Ireland, Irenius recounts the cycle of progress and regression in cultivating Irish civility in the wake of a period of absence from English oversight: “Being straight left unto themselves and their owne inordinate life and manners, they eftsoones forgot what before they were taught, and so soone as they were out of sight, by themselves shook off their bridles, and beganne to colte anew, more licentiously than before” (Spenser 16). Panic about unfettered reproduction imbues the metaphor of “colting” and the broken bridles—the Irish have a fundamentally wild temperament and are apt to procreate, further degenerating more deeply into a state of savagery. I would

argue, though, that both Spenser and Smith imply that that such a rejection of a “bridle” is a natural consequence for a government that is not properly maintaining its population through regular supervision. Thus, in reviewing authors like Walshe and Smith, we get a greater sense of the strategy for investing in and maintaining Irish lands and people. While some critics may suggest that Spenser’s *View* reaches heights of hyperbole, it actually feels much more squarely in line with contemporary political tracts on Ireland than many posthumanist scholars may wish to acknowledge. Herron reconfirms this in his assessment of Smith: “His work has drawn the attention of historians as a comprehensive statement of humanist-inspired plantation theory...Spenser, who as a young man operated in the same intellectual circles as Smith, continues this sophisticated discourse of renaissance colonial reformation in his poetry and prose” (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 50).

### **Further Debate Among Today’s Critics**

Critics like Lecky and Walters appear to be on the fringes of this conversation, as the bulk of recent scholarship acknowledges the likelihood that Spenser was an ardent colonialist, though not one afraid to question national policy decisions on the topic. Similarly, Spenser is far from an absolutist when it comes to seeing “the other” as barbaric relative to his English brethren—this does not mean, however, that Spenser rejects subjugating them. Brian Lockey summarizes this position succinctly in “Colonialism in the New World” by noting, “Spenser refuses to follow continental humanist ideas of essentializing barbarism. For Spenser, both Irish barbarism and Anglo-Irish degeneration into barbarism can be reformed by the application of a new military and governance strategy” (65-66). Simply because Spenser recognizes the potential for

English degeneration and for the shared capacity between both Irish and English to slip into barbaric behavior does not mean that he is calling into question the whole colonial project; it only proposes a greater need for management.

Thomas Herron reinforces many of these interpretations in his article “Colonialism and Irish Plantation.” His historical work helps to contextualize Spenser and his *View*: “*A View* follows many of the same principles recommended by other hardline reformers, including ancient Roman models. It is remarkable for both its disparagement of the Old English and for its staunch support of a greatly enhanced bureaucratic and English military presence in the country” (“Colonialism” 74). Herron also identifies how notions of spreading civility mark Spenser’s text as a work that seeks not simply to develop a more functional government in Ireland but to bring benevolence to a needy land: “Such tracts followed classical and humanist principles by trumpeting the value of ‘civilizing’ and reforming the native population...Economics, arms, and ideology combined in stark but not always successful ways” (“Colonialism” 74). Herron and Lockey ground *A View* in its rightfully ambiguous place and wrestle with its complexities and ironies without jumping to the conclusion that it is challenging anthropocentrism or suggesting that the colonial project is a futile endeavor. These critics recognize its inherent ironies for us today while not presuming that they appeared as such to Spenser, a man convinced that an intense period of invasion and military strategy would result in a lasting peace. In his monograph, *Spenser’s Irish Work*, Herron deepens his argument against facile readings of an anti-colonial Spenser: “Yet too many recent and not-so-recent articles and monographs on Spenser (and Shakespeare and Jonson) and Ireland stress the idea of the exiled, ‘anxious,’ gender-conscious, ideologically unstable

and frustrated multicultural and/or anti-authoritarian poet: an academic Spenser for our time” (23). Herron cautions against “the idea of a disaffected colonial Spenser at odds with the communal spirit of plantation and conquest” (*Spenser’s Irish Work* 22), and as I have tried to do in my own reading of both primary and secondary texts, he dismisses Spenser as self-consciously constructing *A View* to criticize the very strategies of colonization Irenius describes.

### **The Spenser and Conrad Link**

Whereas it seems a revisionist stretch to endow Spenser with the capacity to criticize a civilizing mission abroad, this does not mean that *A View* cannot have an anticolonial legacy all its own. I believe that Joseph Conrad repurposes many elements of *A View* to do the very work critics like Lecky and Walters wish Spenser had done—I will attempt to demonstrate how Conrad rereads Spenser through *Heart of Darkness* and subverts the idea of colonial plantation so prescribed by Spenser in *A View*. Though the texts are centuries apart, a simultaneous reading of both works demonstrates the influence of Spenser’s text upon the way in which Conrad warns readers about the potentially damaging consequences of well-intentioned colonial intervention. *Heart of Darkness*, first published serially in 1899, takes place amidst the European “scramble for Africa,” in many ways the epitome of colonial possibilities imagined by Irenius: European powers use a variety of military, economic, and “moral” rationales to subdue the “savage” populations of Africa, just as Irenius prescribes for Ireland. Though not a dialogue precisely in the vein of *A View*, *Heart of Darkness* is a frame narrative structured in a dialogue form (almost the entire text is one long digression by Marlow), and the story Marlow relates about his journey up the Congo River does have an audience—albeit a

quiet and relatively inactive one—sitting on a boat as it departs England for an unknown adventure abroad, likely to a far-flung colonial destination. Like Irenius, Marlow seeks to educate his audience of lesser experienced shipmates and disavow them of some of their assumptions about the effects of European expansionism.

Conrad never references *A View* directly in any of his diaries or letters, but Spenser graces both the title page of his novel *The Rover* and his gravestone with this line: “Sleep after Toil, Port after stormy Seas, / Ease after War, Death after Life, does greatly please” (*Faerie Queene* Book I, Canto IX). The line speaks to Conrad’s history both as a sailor and a political prisoner, but it does not bring up questions of empire or reference Spenser’s political tract. It does, however, show Conrad’s exposure to the Elizabethan poet’s work and his regard for his poetry. As a non-native English speaker, Conrad relied on a voracious diet of English literature to hone his craft. Dimitrie Borcan summarizes Conrad’s reading history in “The Literary Background of Joseph Conrad’s Fiction”: “Conrad underwent multiple literary influences, especially French, but also Polish, British and American. His first contact with the English language was by means of reading, in a self-teaching effort, when he was twenty-one. Until then he had been speaking Polish and French and reading extensively in both” (544). Borcan goes on to assert that not only did Conrad read extensively across a multitude of languages, genres, and time periods, but also that this diversity seeps into his work, cultivating “mosaic-like fictions that could be ascribed exclusively to none of the literary trends of the age” (544). Conrad wrote extensively about other authors, peppering his letters and journals with references to Henry James, Stephen Crane, and the English Romantics, not to mention Shakespeare (*Notes On Life and Letters* 3-19).

Conrad was keenly invested in questions of literary influence, and critics have investigated his literary background in comparative studies before. Borcan begins a list nearly a paragraph long that I will abridge here simply to show the depth of this kind of work: “Michael John DiSanto remarked that in *Almayer's Folly* Conrad rewrote parts of *Madame Bovary*, in *Heart of Darkness* he rewrote parts of Stevenson's *The Beach of Falesá* and of Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be God*, in *The Secret Agent* he rewrote Dickens's *Bleak House*....” (Borcan 543). While Conrad is a singular kind of genius, his skill in writing is one that emerges not from direct English instruction or simply growing up speaking the language; he acquired his facility in English through a fervent autodidactic spirit and an affinity for replicating and hybridizing his favorite works in exciting new forms.

Even if Conrad had never read a line of Spenser—which his epitaph cited above casts doubt on—I posit that Spenser’s centrality to British imperialism means that Conrad contends with Spenser whether he is aware of doing so or not. As mentioned earlier, Marlow recalls how England “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (*Darkness* 5), which is eerily reminiscent to a line from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* that David Armitage references when introducing Spenser’s relationship to imperialism in his book *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*: “The land, which warlike Britons now possesse, / And therein have their mightie empire raysd,/ In antique times was salvage wilderness, / Unpeopled, unmanured, unprov’d, unpraysed’ until settled by Brutus and passed to his three sons” (FQ II.X.5 as referenced in Armitage 54). Their accounts of ancient Britain mirror each other, with Spenser concerned with tracing the success of the

British to its conquest by the Roman Brutus, connecting the lineage of British monarchy directly to the Roman Empire.

### **Textual Echoes of Spenser's *View* Within Conrad's *Heart of Darkness***

The beginning of *Heart of Darkness* opens with an unnamed narrator imagining the glory of the British crown and the legacy of its colonial conquests: “What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!...The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealth, the germs of empires” (*Darkness* 5).

Marlow's first lines deflate the soaring rhetoric of the narrator when he interjects, “And this also has been one of the dark places of earth” (*Darkness* 5). Such a striking counterbalance to the earnest and optimistic colonial narrative is one Marlow will provide throughout the text. An elusive question facing *Heart of Darkness* is the extent to which Marlow represents Conrad and whether it is fair to ascribe Marlow's commentary to Conrad's own views. Marlow is a fictional construction and not a direct stand-in for Conrad, but he is Conrad's construction, and in creating Marlow, Conrad participates in imperial skepticism through his main character's journey and revelation. Therefore, I read Marlow and Conrad as inextricably tied when illuminating the extent to which *Heart of Darkness* challenges European ideas of imperial projects in Africa. Marlow serves as an object of scrutiny for readers who must interrogate his choices and analyze his narrative to gain an enlightened sense of the horrors of colonialism for themselves, even if Marlow himself isn't able to always recognize these truths. In his first lines, though, Marlow is apt to remind the narrator that his beloved England was once a backwater to the Romans: “I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—...darkness was here yesterday” (*Darkness* 6). Eudoxus

makes a similar claim about the former barbarism of the English people and their “dark” past: “For the English were, at first as stoute and warlike a people as ever the Irish, and yet you see are now brought unto that civility” (*A View* 21). Spenser recapitulates the “tumultuous rebellions” that “hazarded oftentimes the whole safety of the kingdome” but were ultimately controlled by “the continuall presence of the King” and his civilizing mission (*A View* 21). Marlow’s reflections remind the narrator of the violence inherent in conquest and rule in the name of civility and benevolence, a movement Marlow will continue to scrutinize in his reflections of his journey into the Belgian Free State.

In the opening pages of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow references this Roman legacy but gives life to the depictions of savagery and wilderness evoked by Spenser. Conrad expands on the notion of an “unpeopled” landscape with his devastating depiction of pre-Roman England: “Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages—precious little to eat fit for a civilised man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempest, disease, exile and death” (*Darkness* 6). Readers see England through Roman eyes the way we later see the Congo through Marlow’s English eyes—his upcoming story will narrate the same kind of emptiness and otherworldly gloom in Africa. The England/Africa parallels continue as Marlow imagines the kind of men who begin to trickle into England via Rome, though clearly each is a veiled depiction of a kind of English man now set on a course to Africa—the very men with whom he finds himself surrounded on this boat: “They (the Romans) were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he (a Roman soldier) was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna, by and bye, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the

awful climate” (*Darkness* 6). Marlow projects the vision of the itchy sailor he once was, eager for opportunity and caught up in a system of nepotism and bureaucracy—his listeners will soon hear this “Roman” character assume modern form, embodied in Marlow himself and the many other young men who set out for Africa full of ignorance and a lust for adventure. In fact, the whole of *Heart of Darkness* nearly fits within this imagined Roman man who must face the “utter savagery” and “all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men” (*Darkness* 6).

So far Spenser and Marlow share a relatively similar vision of an English past, one marked by savagery and emptiness and the possibility for improvement. Thereafter Marlow changes direction, moving away from the royal lineage Spenser asserts through Brutus, and instead offers a counter-history to Roman involvement in England; whereas Spenser seems set on defending the notion that England was blessed to have Roman intervention, Marlow interrogates that benevolent narrative: “They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others” (*Darkness* 7). Rather than painting a haloed rendition of the beginnings of Britain, Marlow remarks only that the Romans “grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness” (*Darkness* 7). To a group of men off to tackle the “darkness” of Africa, Marlow taunts their assumptions and subverts the comfortable narrative of progress through outside intervention. Marlow

contends that the grand ideas the English have about the founding of England by Roman conquerors are as misguided as contemporary English ideas about plantation in Africa. All of these Roman references foreshadow so keenly the events of the novel to come—Europeans sacking Africa with little care for consequence, just as the Romans did in England. Marlow's words offer an implicit critique of any kind of subjugation based on violence and differential power dynamics: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (*Darkness* 7). Marlow sets up a direct criticism of cultural domination, and it would seem that his critique of Spenser or imperial practices has fully emerged.

Somewhat unexpectedly, after delivering a clear condemnation of brutality, Marlow retreats: "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..." (*Darkness* 7). The "it" he references is invasion, more specifically colonial plantation. Here Marlow tries to make the distinction between brutal conquest and a type of benevolent imperialism—this second variety is the one he claims is saved by this vague "idea." Marlow's quick turn, his acknowledgment that violence can be worth it for the idea of a colonial project, is positively Spenserian. This is exactly the argument that Irenius makes about Ireland, that the razing of rebels for the purpose of transplanting English colonies there is worth the cost in lives, that the "idea" of a greater purpose supersedes whatever violence may be necessary.

Though Marlow does assert this claim at the beginning of the text, I am arguing that the novel asks us to interrogate its validity, to ponder whether or not the “idea” of imperialism is really worth the devastation it brings. It is noticeable, of course, that Marlow trails off with an ellipsis and does not elaborate whatsoever on the contents of this idea—what exactly is this idea worth bowing down towards? A nation? A faith? The ambiguity of the idea allows listeners to project their own beliefs on to this idea but also exposes it to potential criticism given its lack of definition. Ultimately Marlow keeps Kurtz’s secrets and lies to his Intended about Kurtz’s true character and last words, preserving Kurtz’s “ideas” instead of exposing his truthful decline. While some may read Marlow as an apologist for “benevolent” colonialism, I think the text itself asks us to read against Marlow’s choice to worship such an idea, and I believe that in the retelling of this story, Marlow himself questions his choices through reflection and a lost capacity to fully articulate the very idea he once stood behind.

Conrad taps into the intracolonial tensions by positioning Marlow as a new arrival in a colonial system with already well-entrenched operations. Marlow’s newness—much like Spenser’s—is a threat to the existing mechanisms of material extraction and the status quo of colonial operations. When Marlow arrives, we get a glimpse of the disorder of the bureaucracy inherent to those who have been deep within the Congo for such a great deal of time through his depiction of the manager of the Central Station, a character we might cast in the “old” vanguard: “He was obeyed, yet he inspired neither love nor fear, nor even a respect...He had no genius for organizing, for initiative, or for order even...He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill...Because triumphant health in the general route of

constitutions is a kind of power in itself" (*Darkness* 24). Marlow depicts an intransigent, lackluster, and uninspiring colonial leader, one who has maintained power simply by continuing to live rather than by actually developing any unique approaches to the work. He is the opposite of a visionary; he is simply an unthinking cog in the greater project of ivory extraction, and his lack of "ideas" strikes Marlow as unimpressive. I cannot help but read in this figure an echo of Spenser's depiction of the Old English whose mission has devolved into maintaining a status quo instead of accomplishing the civilizing mission with which they were charged.

Where I see Conrad echoing Spenser—and subverting Spenser's notions of superiority of the New English—is through Marlow's own ignorance of his position as a man in this "new" category of colonizers. Whereas Spenser wears the banner of the "New English" proudly, Marlow does not even realize that he is a part of a new order within the company. When Marlow enters this Central Station, he is appalled by the behavior of the manager and his men, but he is unsure as to why the men are treating him with such bizarre distance. It is not until he learns that they believe he is directly affiliated with Kurtz (and his new vision for the company) that Marlow begins to unravel the intracompany politics a bit more when an assistant manager tells Marlow about Kurtz: "To-day he (Kurtz) is chief of the best station, next year he will be assistant-manager, two years more and...but I daresay you know what he will be in two years' time. You are of the new gang—the gang of virtue. The same people who sent him specifically also recommended you" (*Darkness* 28). Suddenly Marlow unpacks the connections others had been making all along—they perceive him as a member of the "gang of virtue," a collection of new agents who are seeking to combine benevolent colonial ideas with

economic success. Marlow overhears more from the manager through eavesdropping on a conversation he is having while disparaging Kurtz's vision. The manager recounts with mockery by quoting Kurtz himself and his ideas for the future: "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing.' Conceive you—that ass! And he wants to be manager!" (*Darkness* 37). The manager is clearly threatened by Kurtz's "new" vision – familiar to us as a recycling of an old colonialist model—and and has a profound distaste for any disruption to the way he is currently handling the affairs of the company. Here we have a conflict among different colonial factions that is emblematic of the tensions that festered between the New and Old English in Spenser's Elizabethan moment. The politics are far from identical, but, like Spenser, Conrad narrates the complexities of shifting priorities and the way in which policies that originate in a metropole play out in the field under contending values.

Conrad further lampoons the idea of the "gang of virtue" or the new vision for the company through Marlow's lack of knowledge of the arrival of such a group. Marlow's ignorance illuminates the emptiness of such a worldview—the perceived practitioner of virtue does not even know that he is on the "virtuous" team! Immediately following the revelation that Marlow has a connection with Kurtz—that "the same people who sent him" also recommended Marlow—he turns this virtuous bond into a lie by manipulating the assistant manager to listen to him and to bring him the materials he needs to repair his steamship. Marlow recounts with a mischievous grin, "Yes—I let him run on...and think what he pleased about the powers that were behind me! I did! And there was nothing behind me! There was nothing but that wretched, old mangled steamboat I was leaning

against” (*Darkness* 31). Marlow himself depicts the emptiness of the “gang of virtue,” as there simply is not any “power” behind it—the virtue itself is a complete lie; Marlow has never heard of such a “gang,” and yet he uses it to his advantage in learning more about the politics of the company and asserting a new-found position of (imagined) authority. This is all just mere moments after Marlow asserts, “You know I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie” (*Darkness* 30). Whereas Spenser proclaims the virtues and necessities of a “new gang” to offset the intransigence of the Old English and their potential for degeneration, Conrad unravels the hypocrisy of rebranding violence under the lofty banner of progress. Kurtz’s methods may be novel, but ultimately there is nothing behind them, and Marlow is just as empty and puffed-up as the “papier-maché Mephistopheles” assistant manager he decries (Conrad 29).

Much of my argument hinges on the irony of Marlow upholding the imperial blueprint devised by Kurtz, though he knows it to be a lie—it is as if he cannot come to terms with the emptiness of the “idea” he holds so dear, and he is determined to preserve this idea at any cost. Spenser uses *A View* as a means of clearing Grey’s name, defending his “unsound methods” (Conrad 71) the way Marlow does for Kurtz. Irenius remarks that “Good” Lord Grey is “blotted with the name of a bloody man, whome, who that well knew, knew to be most gentle affable, loving, and temperate; but that the necessitie of that present state of things inforced him to that violence, and almost changed his natural disposition” (*A View* 103). Irenius locates any potential blame not with Grey himself but with his fragile position and the vague “present state of things,” arguing that something about his job in Ireland (the land, the people, the expectations) has turned him into something he naturally is not. We see this recurring trope of “turning” based on exposure

to the “wilds” of Africa (or any foreign space) as a means of excusing violent behavior of Europeans throughout the Victorian era. Prior to Marlow’s departure, a doctor quickly examines his skull and warns him that while abroad the “changes take inside, you know,” before asking him, “Ever any madness in your family?” as if anticipating the potential for an African environment to nourish some kind of latent psychopathy (*Darkness* 12).

Irenius doubles down on Grey’s good reputation and emphasizes the importance of elevating his name even after his death—wanting more than anything to clarify that his methods were just and patriotic: “Therefore most untruely and maliciously doe these evill tongues backbite and slander the sacred ashes of that most just and honourable personage, whose least virtue of many most excellent that abounded in his heroicke spirit, they were never able to aspire unto” (*A View* 105). Whenever Irenius mentions Lord Grey, he invokes his reputation and “immortal fame,” along with the potential for some who “backbite him,” or criticize him, only to ultimately be found incorrect in their estimation of his tactics (*A View* 29). Marlow, too, takes careful aim to preserve Kurtz’s reputation with his Intended—though unlike Spenser, Conrad shows us the seams of this deceit. Readers know that Marlow is lying, that he is putting the preservation of Kurtz’s ideas far above the preservation of truth.

I believe Conrad asks us to reconsider not only Spenser’s depiction of Grey but also the vaulted reputation of any man whose death encourages a kind of martyrdom or outsized sense of valor—such a reputation is as much made of papier-maché as nearly every character’s integrity in *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz’s Intended remarks of her fiancé, unaware of the truth: “You know what vast plans he had. I knew of them too—I could not

perhaps understand—but others knew of them. Something must remain. His words, at least, have not died...And his example...Men looked up to him—his goodness shone in every act” (*Darkness* 88). Marlow can only affirm her assumptions because it “would have been too dark—too dark altogether” (*Darkness* 89) to tell her the truth. I believe that Conrad reveals the potential for specious hero-making done through the manipulation of a person’s reputation—a project we clearly see in the case of Irenius and Grey. Spenser and his character Irenius may very much believe in the honor and “heroicke spirit” of Lord Grey, but history bears out a very different reputation, as Grey slaughtered hundreds of men who had already admitted defeat and were at his mercy. Like Grey, Kurtz was a man who allowed his devotion to an imperial project to lead him to extreme violence, as Marlow encounters on first meeting Kurtz: “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” (*Darkness* 66). Whereas Spenser stands beside Grey, I believe that *Heart of Darkness* asks readers to cross-examine the reputations of the heroes of imperialism rather than to uphold their ideas just because doing so is easier than confronting the darkness of their truths.

Marlow’s recounting of his story and his slippage into endorsing the “idea” of colonial benevolence exposes this flaw and endows him with some self-awareness he lacks in the action of the story itself, wherein he covers up the truth of the violence and “horror” he witnesses to save the legacy of Kurtz, a man who captures Marlow’s allegiance. Marlow’s ostensible job is to navigate a steamer up a river to collect ivory and recapture Kurtz—a company leader whose methods for ivory extraction have degenerated

into chaos. Geopolitics and colonial dynamics play an integral part in the takeover of land in the Congo, but unlike Irenius who wants to salvage Ireland for the sake of England and to settle the country for the long-term, Marlow seems detached from any particular brand of patriotism; he is just looking for a job: ““Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all!”” (*Darkness* 8). Marlow decides without much thought to “dash it all!” and hop on a boat bound for the Congo to do some trading—he has no initial designs of civilizing or bringing “light” to anyone. Perversely it is later learning about Kurtz’s model of benevolent imperialism, integrating economic success with the “white man’s burden” to raise up the “savage” people of Central Africa, that Marlow agrees to hide the truth of what he witnesses. This implied benevolence, this civilizing mission, is actually what ironically perverts Marlow’s capacity to do what’s right—to tell the truth about the violence inherent in bringing “light” to Africa.

Many of Marlow’s recollections seek to subvert European assumptions about Africa and the entire European presence on the continent. I contend that Conrad draws directly from texts like Spenser’s *A View* to reach back to earlier colonial assumptions and refute them in a new Victorian context—precisely at the moment when this colonial policy is reaching its apex across the globe. Motifs of savagery and civility echo across both texts in parallel fashion, in particular. Irenius recounts the shouts and cries of the Irish to emphasize their alterity: “There be other sorts of crys also used among the Irish, which savour greatly of the Scythian barbarism, as their lamentations at their buryals, with dispairfull outcryes, and immoderate waylings, the which M. Stanihurst might also have used for an argument to prove them Egyptians” (*A View* 61). Here, Irenius suggests that the Irish cries are barbaric and “immoderate,” or over the top in their execution. He

contends that a more civilized burial would show more restrained grief and stoicism. The Irish cries distance themselves from the English; perhaps their origin can even be traced to “Egypt.” By contrast, Conrad uses the cries of the Africans to showcase the humanity of the colonized body.

Prior to the arrow attack that nearly kills Marlow on his way to the inner station, he hears “a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation” (*Darkness* 45), as if to mark the Africans’ sorrow at the arrival of Marlow and his crew. After Marlow has successfully led a battle to reach the Inner Station, fighting off indigenous forces, he recounts that yet another cry emerges in the wake of the Africans’ loss: “The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly, and then from the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from earth” (*Darkness* 52). Unlike the “immoderate waylings” of the Irish, Marlow savors the despair and isolation in the cries he remembers, going so far to say that they are some of the most deeply felt sounds he could ever encounter. The cries from the African wilderness evoke not a kind of savagery but distinct human emotions—fear and despair. These mournful reactions supplant the “warlike yells” and connect Marlow to these humans rather than distancing him in the way the “barbaric” cries of the Irish do for Spenser. Such a rendering by Conrad makes us re-read and reconsider Spenser’s insensitive depiction of the capacity for the Irish to feel and express pain—Conrad seems to be suggesting that mourning has the capacity to unite different cultures across a common shared experience rather than divide as Spenser proposes.

Much in the way that Conrad employs mourning as a means of re-reading Spenser, so too does he employ ideas of “restraint,” a term Spenser uses to describe how the rule of law must confine and control the Irish, or any group for that matter. Spenser suggests time and again that without the supervision and management of authority, humans will move toward barbarism. In depicting the English who later “wax wyld” like the Irish when living outside of England, Spenser accounts for this degeneration due to a lack of restraint in Ireland: “The bad minds of the men, who having beene brought up at home under a straight rule of duty and obedience, being always restrained by sharpe penalties from lewde behavior, so soone as they come thither, where they see lawes more slackely tended, and the hard restraint which they were used to unto now slack, they grow more loose and careless of their duty” (*A View* 144). Restraint is far from inborn; it must be applied and maintained to work, otherwise men will be left to their “bad minds.”

Conrad repeatedly suggests that Africans demonstrate restraint—notably even African cannibals—as a means of countering Spenser. For Conrad, these Africans possess self-restraint against all likelihood and throw into relief the absolutely unrestrained violence of the Europeans. Marlow has been sailing for days with a team of cannibals who are extremely hungry but refuse to eat human flesh, and Marlow ponders precisely why. He lands on the idea of their internal restraint: “Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is...And these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would have just as soon expected restraint from a hyena” (*Darkness* 47). This callback to Spenser repositions the Africans as restrained relative to the “bad minds” of

the English, who are wrong in viewing the natives as animals. Unlike the English who turn toward “lewd behavior,” these Africans demonstrate power over their appetites while employed under the Company, even when they are pushed to the edge of death.

Marlow struggles to determine why. It could be shame or fear of reprisal from an employer, but Marlow suggests there really is no reason not to indulge in their lust for human flesh. Unlike Spenser’s assumption that humans will lose restraint without strict application of policing, these cannibals seem to show it inherently, when they are under no obligation to do so. As Marlow mentions, almost every moral scruple fades in the face of hunger, yet these cannibals choose to endure hunger rather than violate their agreement. Set against the degeneration of the English who ravage Africa without a moment of pause, these cannibals look positively cultured. In fact, it is Mr. Kurtz—the epitome of European values—who lacks restraint. When surveying the landscape of his station and the brutality of Kurtz’s decision to place enemy heads on stakes, Marlow notes, “They (the heads) only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (*Darkness* 67). Conrad shows us the consequence of the so-called benevolent, civilizing mission of Kurtz, a man who enters the Congo with the design that “each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (*Darkness* 36); such theoretical hopes prove to be an untenable practice that degenerates into violence, ironically demonstrating the moral failings of such an endeavor.

### **Conrad’s View of Imperialism**

Such a reading of *Heart of Darkness* becomes even more complicated when considering the fact that Conrad’s expressed views on politics and imperialism outside of

the text do not always match such a position. Terry Collits' *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire* employs a title well-suited to describe Conrad's complex relationship to questions of empire—no one view clearly emerges. Collits notes of *Heart of Darkness*, "No matter how resolutely we regard Conrad's text as essentially 'about' imperialism, its meanings slip and slide...and so while at one moment the narrative confidently exposes the naked greed of colonialist exploitation, at another it reflects nervously on the impossibility of using language to communicate truth" (111). Marlow struggles not simply with conveying accurate information about Kurtz but also with conveying anything at all accurately: "'No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible'" (*Darkness* 30). Following this line of logic, though, all language becomes fraught with imprecision because it is impossible to use to convey accurate meaning, and we then find ourselves incapable of discussing the content of the book whatsoever. It is here where some critics have argued that *Heart of Darkness* is not about imperialism at all but about broader issues of language and referentiality. While the text does evoke such a debate, I am more interested in following another question that Collits raises about Marlow: "How is he to separate the idea 'behind' colonialism from its sordidly economic manifestations?" (112). I believe that *Heart of Darkness* exposes the danger of this potential idea of a benevolently-led colonial mission—even if Conrad himself lifted it up in his journals and letters.

In her most recent work, *The Dawn Watch: Joseph Conrad in a Global World*, Maya Jasanoff is quick to avoid casting Conrad as an anti-imperialist. In fact, she believes that he separates the British empire from other European powers: "He saw

through the hypocrisy of Africa's would-be civilizers, granting a pass only to British domains" (211). She also reminds us that Conrad refused to publicly join any efforts to reform the Congo and that he "never had faith in organized action and steered clear of signing on to any movement" (282). As an émigré and adopted British citizen, Conrad showed lasting allegiance to his new country, always holding it apart from the rest of Europe: "His travels in the empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium had left intact Conrad's romanticized faith in the British Empire as something better and different" (Jasanoff 302). While comparing colonial atrocities seems reductive and fraught, I find it implausible to suggest that the British Empire lies somehow outside the imperial histories rooted within these other countries—one might just consider the legacy of Transatlantic slavery or the Boer War as two significant examples with which Conrad might have had to contend; England seems more than sullied by its involvement in such violent imperial endeavors. I would argue that just as Marlow tries to absolve Kurtz, so too does Conrad seek to make an exception of England—Conrad seems unable to fully reconcile his new home with the extent of its violent past and present. Conrad falls for the same trap he exposes via Marlow's commitment to Kurtz and his legacy. Or, if he does recognize that violence, he excuses it for the "idea" of England that he holds so dear, as Allan H. Simmons suggests in "The Art of Englishness": "Perhaps like colonialism, Englishness itself is saved by the 'idea only'" (22), referencing Conrad's terminology from *Heart of Darkness*. Simmons reflects on Conrad's turbulent past and contextualizes his affinity for England in the aftermath of fleeing persecution in Poland and economic instability in France—it is only in England where he truly establishes a sense of home: "When speaking, writing, or thinking in

English, the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain”  
(*Collected Letters* 12).

In *A Personal Record*, Conrad’s autobiography, Conrad describes the first moment that he communicates meaningfully in English. He was working as a sailor on a British ship in 1878 when “for the very first time in my life, I heard myself addressed in English—the speech of my secret choice, of my future, of long friendships, of the deepest affections, of hours of toil and hours of ease, and of solitary hours, too, of books read, of thoughts pursued, of remembered emotions—of my very dreams!” (*A Personal Record*). Two notions from *Heart of Darkness* strike me with this revelation. This first is that England becomes a “secret choice,” implying that Conrad has agency over his future through the English language. In this I hear echoes of Marlow who maintains his relationship to Kurtz precisely because of a choice: “I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe. I was unsound! Ah! But it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares” (*Darkness* 72). English becomes a powerful bedrock for Conrad because he chooses to learn it and chooses to hitch his future to all the opportunities that may come with an English identity. In his joyful reflection of the grandeur of English and the world it opens up to him, he echoes the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* who muses on an equally auspicious English past while floating down the Thames. Herein lies the irony—English is imagined as a “secret choice” (with resonances of Marlow’s choice of nightmares) and a language and identity deeply wrapped up in dreams, though I would argue that *Heart of Darkness* unveils much more the nightmare of imperialism than Conrad’s letters or outward reflections on English identity ever do.

Conrad chooses to end *A Personal Record* with an homage to England, depicting the raising of the British flag over a ship upon which he is sailing.

I saw it suddenly flicker and stream out on the flag staff. The Red Ensign!...the only spot of ardent colour—flame-like, intense, and presently as minute as the tiny red spark the concentrated reflection of a great fire kindles in the clear heart of a globe of crystal. The Red Ensign—the symbolic, protecting, warm bit of bunting flung wide upon the seas, and destined for so many years to be the only roof over my head (*Personal Record*).

Clearly Conrad espouses affection for his adopted land, and I have no doubt that he felt authentic security and gratitude for England. My argument is simply that *Heart of Darkness* disrupts this kind of patriotic nostalgia and interrogates the very kind of “idea building” that Conrad does here in *A Personal Record*. I am struck by Conrad’s first use of “flicker” in *Heart of Darkness*, a word Conrad also uses here in *Record* to describe the flag, which he then codes in the language of fire and warmth. The first usage in *Heart of Darkness* comes in Marlow’s opening lines of the novella when he begins his story: “Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keep rolling! But darkness was here yesterday” (*Darkness* 6). Whereas Conrad’s *A Personal Record* casts the Union Jack as “protecting” him and “destined for so many years” to kindle the world with its benevolence, *Heart of Darkness* reminds us of the impermanence and fleeting nature of such a light. Marlow understands the empire not as an eternal flame but one with a lifespan we are simply lucky enough to inhabit. Thus, I use *Heart of Darkness* to read skeptically into Conrad’s pronouncements of patriotism and benevolent colonialism. The power of the red ensign encapsulates the benevolent “idea” behind Spenser’s proclamations for a broader British empire. As

Marlow and Spenser both suggest, for colonialism to work benevolently, there must be something raised one can bow down before (a British flag with one flaming red ensign works perfectly in this scenario, no doubt). What I have hoped to demonstrate is that while Spenser illuminates this goal of glorious and benevolent expansionism and Marlow tentatively echoes it through his refusal to pronounce Kurtz's ideas dangerous, *Heart of Darkness* ultimately unravels such an argument by exposing the emptiness of this grand "idea," replacing any hopes for a stable and permanent British empire with a reminder that "darkness was here yesterday."

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