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## Creation's Abortion and a Great and Terrible Violence Restrained: The Influence of Judeo-Christianity on the Cosmopoetics of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (with Some Help from Northrop Frye)

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### Abstract

In Genesis, Creation begins with four words: "Let there be light" and Adam later sub-creates by mimicking God and naming the animals he observes. The implication is that the deer wave function does not fully collapse into *deer* until Adam says, "Let there be 'deer'." But what happens to Creation when words fail? Does the inability to describe reality constitute a reversal of Creation and an Armageddon of sorts? If it does, an Armageddon of what? Or an Armageddon of whom? And where might one find examples of Creation's extinction? The answers lie in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* which are heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian cosmopoetical mythmaking and which are replete with characters who create or destroy – that is, they un-create – depending upon their ability or inability to precisely describe reality.

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During an English Department Honours seminar at the University of Sydney in 1986 visiting professor Northrop Frye told students he had had difficulty writing a sequel to *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1983) because he wasn't a writer of sequels: "Every book you write has to be numbered 'zero' and not 'number one'" (17). Frye went on to explain the two chief processes of reading literature: the reader begins by moving through time, page after page, and then ends in the "gathering of impressions" via visual metaphors; that is, after we read literature we *ruminate* upon what we've learned (17). Now, Frye doesn't use the word "ruminate" anywhere in his lecture, but since he's discussing The Bible – where rumination is the second of two marks of a clean mammal (*Authorized King James Ver.*, Lev. 11.3) – I reckon this is precisely what he means since he precedes reflection with *movement*, something we usually associate with *feet* which, again probably not coincidentally, has to do with the first, *external*, mark of a clean mammal: the cloven hoof. Anecdotally, an old rabbi once explained to me that the word "rumination" – the act of mulling things over – was taken from animals who periodically regurgitate and re-chew their food to maximally *internalize* the usefulness of nutrients extracted from the external world. The cloven hoof is a less-known symbol of *separation* that displays one's qualitative discernment, the ability to discriminate between what is accepted from what is taboo, and it is the symbol *par excellence* of the knowledge of good and evil, on par with the fruit of the forbidden tree. The cloven hoof says, "those berries are harmful, so eat these ones instead", "emulate this beneficial person instead of that injurious one", and "weigh *The Old Man and the Sea* against *Infinite Jest* and decide for yourself which will still be taught in the year 2125." Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs bear this external mark, but only the first three also bear the internal mark of a ruminant – they chew their cud – and a creature must bear both signs to be considered *kosher*: fit for consumption if it is an animal or fit for emulation if it is a human.

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The pig, on the other hand, is eternally voracious and can never get enough, like Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* whom the Russian and certain tribes of the Congo adore for his outward command of speech and his displays of power but who inwardly "lacked restraint in the gratification of his lusts" (72), "was hollow at the core" and whose "mouth wide...gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (74). Kurtz has an insatiable hunger not only for ivory, but for everything he beholds, which Caitlin Vandertop recognizes when she opines that he "is a vessel for larger forces" (687): he a channeler who allows infinitely larger things, such as the darkness, to possess him. Kurtz is also a soothsayer, a master of words, and the spells he weaves enrapture even Marlow who says:

[o]f all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating streams of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness (Conrad 58).

Later, on the steamboat, Marlow describes Kurtz's "volume of tone...emitted without effort" (75) that is also "grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper." Vandertop calls Kurtz a "figure of enchantment" (687) who purveys illusions for ivory and trades his very soul to what Marlow identifies as "powers of darkness" (Conrad 60). If Kurtz ever had a soul to begin with, for when he's not being described as a gluttonous and rapacious anti-Christ, he is also portrayed by the Russian and Kurtz's fiancée as a nexus of potentiality who might just as well have been filled with hope instead of horror had chance and circumstance nourished him with light instead of darkness.

But now I've gone and mentioned the soul, or Kurtz's lack of one, as well as his enchanting voice – which suggests magic is afoot – so I again invoke Frye who argues that all myths are alike due to one universal, and indisputable, element of their design; that is, myths rely on words to relay *meaning*:

Man is distinguished from the rest of the animals by his command of the word, by his mastery of language, and that being an idea that would be naturally in the forefront of almost anybody's mind who was thinking about original creation, you have the same principle, 'in the beginning was the Word' (Frye 23).

That the eloquent Marlow lacks the words with which to fully describe what he sees and experiences as he heads up the Congo River, where "[t]he earth seemed unearthly" (Conrad 44), suggests a suspension of creation. Anne McClintock argues that, to Marlow, Africa's "landscape is impermeable both to language and to understanding" (42) and so he projects his failure to penetrate the wilderness – as well as his inability to place signifiers upon it – back onto the landscape. He anthropomorphizes the landscape into a hostile personality when his "[e]very attempt to describe the landscape, to draw it near, reveals only the failure of language to find out its essence, to penetrate its innermost heart" (McClintock 43). If mythic creation begins with the Word, Marlow's "loss for words" signifies impending apocalypse, and where Frye contends that "[t]he Bible is a narrative which starts where times starts and ends where time ends" (17), then Conrad might answer that time ends when words fail.

Indeed, Marlow experiences a kind of mute timelessness as he “[has] some imbecile thoughts” (Conrad 81) about the knitting woman (a fate) and her cat; a cat Marlow mimics as he runs circles around Kurtz, who is himself crawling upon all fours in the darkness. Devoid of words, Marlow and Kurtz become languageless beasts of the jungle, playing out the primeval game of predator and prey; they have no words with which to signify events and therefore no events by which to measure time. They lose what Sergiy Yakovenko describes – in an essay on Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John*, a novel I shall discuss shortly – as “the Adamic agency of naming” and can no longer “linguistically [assist]” in sub-creation” (“Narrator’s ‘Dialectic’” 148). By abandoning language Kurtz and Marlow terminate their participation in Creation and instead become agents of entropy.

Where words end creations end and apocalypses begin, with extinction on their heels. As the Creation in Genesis is preceded by the same entropic silence that heralds the emergence of a singularity, such as a storm, or a Voice declaring “Let there be light” (Gen.1.3), likewise Kumklesseem (Tay John) “chooses for his initiation a taboo place” (Yakovenko, “Deceptive Initiation” 286) where he fasts in silence for twelve days to extinguish his existing identity before he can be reborn a *Man*. I capitalize “Man” for Kumklesseem echoes Adam in his Edenic spirit quest in that he *names* all the animals he encounters; six of these are active – in sequence, goats, an owl, mice, a martin, a linx, and “a great black wolf” (O’Hagan 33). Only the seventh, an “old bear, with snow-dust on its coat, [that] had made his bed beyond my feet”, is passive (O’Hagan 33). If the animals Kumklesseem sees are likened to days, then Squlekin declaring the seventh – the resting bear – as Kumklesseem’s guardian spirit is a call to passivity, reflection, and a sabbath-like observance. Of the Great Bear (the Big Dipper), Yakovenko opines, “[t]he Bear that sees Kumklesseem is an alternative concept of the omnipresent God” (“Deceptive Initiation” 289). As the various animals foreshadow Tay John’s various states of annihilation, reconstitution, and transformation throughout the novel, it is this constant state of resting power, symbolized by the passive but observant bear, that best describes his presence to others. For instance, Denham identifies in Tay John “something of the abstract about him – as though he were a symbol of some sort or another. He seemed to stand for something” (O’Hagan 60). The effect of Tay John’s alert silence on those around him is that what few words he speaks carry infinite weight and that when he speaks his words are a deliberate act of creation: what he says will happen happens – even when he loses a bet over Timberlake’s horse – and what he says didn’t happen, didn’t happen – as in his situation with Julia. Jack Robinson observes that Tay John speaks “barely a dozen words in the entire novel” (“Satirical Echoes” 113). Whether he’s dragging the stretcher bearing his dead and pregnant wife across a frozen lake in a blizzard, standing trial for rape, or just standing beside a raging torrent, Tay John embodies that uncanny “something” that inspires the same measure of awe and dread experienced by the companions of other mighty ruminants such as King David, Odysseus, and Theseus: a great and terrible violence restrained. Tay John kills a fully-grown grizzly with nothing but his wit and a dagger, maintains a cool demeanour throughout his contestations over Shwat and Julia, and only explodes into action after Dobbles forces himself upon Aeriola. Tay John thus personifies both the silence and the storm. However, like all heroes, his power is constrained mainly by his interactions with the chief foil of Man: *Woman*.

I capitalize “Woman” to emphasize that without her there can be no Man. Frye observes that “the creation of Eve, of course, is what turns the adam into a male being, Adam” (18) and that “God... formed adam from the dust of the ground, which is ‘adama’, a feminine noun, and there is obviously a pun there, and a very far reaching pun” (21). To paraphrase Frye, adama (the earthly feminine) begets adam (the earthly masculine) from whom Eve and Adam are severed, like a hoof cloven in twain, to become Woman and Man. It is only natural then, that, like matter meeting antimatter, “woman is a threat to [Denham’s] mythic hero” and that one of a hero’s primary destinies is to “surrender to woman” (Robinson, “Myths” 171). Denham observes “that woman was the death of heroes and the destruction of heroes’ work – but heroes, those vulnerable men, are gone from the earth, and women’s power therefore no longer what once it was” (O’Hagan 145). Tay John embraces annihilation through his encounters with Woman (as well as feminine landscapes, which will be explored shortly) through which he surrenders his identity as a lower-case man. Only then may he be reconstituted as an upper-case Man.

Curiously, Aeriola mirrors Kurtz in that she’s a European who’s in a relationship with an Indigenous individual and that she dies pregnant: where Aeriola is pregnant with Tay John’s baby, Kurtz is pregnant with “the horror” (Conrad 86). Similarly, Tay John echoes Kurtz’s African mistress in that he’s also an Indigenous individual whose fate is lost behind a blinding blizzard just as hers is lost behind the fog-of-war; lost to view, these characters are, like Schrödinger’s cat, neither alive nor dead. By denying us sight, neither O’Hagan nor Conrad provide conclusive destinies by which “desiring machines” (Casey 407) like us – that is, people so used to “thinned-out places” such as Netflix and social media that we have become “[selves] of infinite distractibility” (406, 407) – might, through the act of observation, collapse Tay John’s and Kurtz’s Mistress’s respective probability waves to arrive at definitive answers.

I now beg leeway as I adopt something of a Freudian perspective when I say that male writers of prose or poetry have sometimes projected female primary sexual characteristics onto wilderness landscapes. This is in opposition to artifices, such as cathedrals, that tend to exhibit in their hermaphroditic symbology both the internality of women and the externality of men: for example, the narthex as vulva, the nave as vagina, the Catherine as cervix; or the steeple as erect penis, the cross as penetrating penis, etc. When applied to wilderness in Conrad and O’Hagan, respectively, this interpretation requires the Congo River and the taboo valley to serve as yonic symbols that must be successfully penetrated if the hero is to be reconstituted and born again *on feminine terms*. Where Kumklessem enters the valley silently and observantly and emerges allied with the bear spirit and attuned to that Great She (the wilderness), She proves impenetrable to Marlow as it resists his efforts to comprehend or describe it. McClintock argues that Marlow sees blank space on a map as “a lure for penetration... [that] ...would yield the glories of exploration” and which becomes “the purest representation of interiority” (40). However, once Marlow arrives he discovers that this representation is, according to McClintock, an imperialistic fiction used by tyrants like Leopold II of Belgium to draw out explorers; blank spaces on maps, she argues, are “invitations for rape” (40). Thus, Marlow’s incomprehension results in a “transferred impotence” (McClintock 42) by which he ascribes hostile intentions onto an otherwise indifferent landscape.

Like Marlow, Robinson contends that Denham also “portray[s] knowing as a siege or an assault” and that the metaphors he uses are “those of white culture imposing itself on nature, or

knowing it only as object" ("Myths" 170). In contrast, Yakovenko identifies Kumkleseem's "chthonic mode [as] a striking opposition to what the modernizing spirit of the colonizers has to offer: accepting instead of imposing, patiently looking upon instead of restlessly changing, reading instead of dictating, and just diligently noting instead of actively interpreting" ("Deceptive Initiation" 288). In other words, while Kumkleseem is in female territory, he assumes her nature. He woos her by assuming a feminine "receptive position" through which he expresses, like an empathic lover, the patience and passivity that builds a lasting trust that supersedes chronometric time to form a *durée pure*, or the kind of devotion that leads to what Casey calls a "habitudinal bond" to a place (410). Tay John's relationship isn't with a particular place or home *per se*, but rather with the landscape he transits alone and again, sometime later, with Aeriola by his side.

Before he delves into the purpose of The Bible's Jahwist (J) and Priestly (P) Genesis narratives, Frye warns that "a myth is not a proto of science; it is not talking about the objective world and the order of nature at all. It is talking about human wishes and anxieties and concerns and aggressions" (19). This warning made, Frye explains that the 'J' narrative accounts for the development of the baser human impulses and explores the various reasons religions sublimate them (19). The 'P' narrative, however, explores the advent of an Intelligible Being, a consciousness that stands outside the human order but within its own intelligible order; it is an objective consciousness that existed before Created consciousnesses (Frye 19). This primordial consciousness, Frye contends, provides humans with something more than simply a "human mind gazing in the mirror of its own construction"(19). In *Tay John*, Smutuksen initiates Kumkleseem into one of the mysteries of a mythical Other when he points to the Great Bear in the northern sky he tells him, "you see him, and he sees you" (O'Hagan 31). Kumkleseem is made aware that he's not the only being with eyes and that the universe is filled with a myriad of consciousnesses, visible and invisible, of lesser, equal, or greater powers than his, and that, most importantly, he's under their constant surveillance. This awareness of alien consciousnesses prepares Tay John for his encounter with McLeod's Bible, in which he is already primed to recognize the Judeo-Christian conceptions of the Other as equally plausible. Moreover, internalizing scripture inoculates Tay John against evangelical, extra-scriptural doctrines that corrupt his father and uncle and which lead them to hypocrisy, sin, and ultimately, perverse imitations of Christ's crucifixion. For example, the preacher who converts Red Rorty repeats the Charismatic formula "Do you believe?" (O'Hagan 7) and, after his conversion, Red Rorty proclaims unbiblical prophecies such as "they will see their children born armless and on the foreheads of those children, that should be clean and shining, coarse, thick hair will grow" (13). Father Rorty's platitudes that "'you should come with me. You should be a good man. You should pray'" (O'Hagan 157) comes off as hollow since Tay John has already lost a hand through his personal understanding and observance of scripture. Tay John quotes the Bible directly when he says, "If your hand offend[s] you... cut it off" (O'Hagan 81; Mar. 9.43-47), and therefore negates Red and Father Rorty's dogmatic language. Like Moses, when his way is blocked (Exo. 4.24-26), Tay John is the only Rorty to sacrifice a piece of his body instead of simply sacrificing material goods and abstaining from sex as his backsliding father and uncle had done.

Internalizing what he's read, Tay John draws a connection between the one-eyed Jack of Spades he draws, Timberlake's missing eye, and Jesus' parable which begins "If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out" (Mar. 9.47). He interprets this triumvirate as a *sign* that a sacrifice is required to gain something as phenomenal as Timberlake's horse. The parable further instructs the believer to cut off one's hand or foot if they offend and ends with the observation that "every sacrifice shall be salted with salt" (Mar. 9.49). These logical connections made, Tay John concludes that Timberlake must have sacrificed an eye to gain possession of his steed (O'Hagan 76) and so Tay John embodies the parable by making the Word flesh: he hacks off his own hand with an axe (80). By offering his hand in lieu of Timberlake's eye, Tay John earns himself his promised salt (the horse). Unlike his father, who loses his life through hypocrisy and rape, and his uncle, who loses his life to hypocrisy and spiritual pride, Tay John circumcises a part of his body and exchanges flesh for flesh in a biblical sense: one of the Noahide laws is that blood must be paid for with blood (Gen. 9.4-5). While an eye may be paid for with an eye (Lev. 24.19-21) it may also be paid for with pecuniary compensations, including livestock – in this case, Timberlake's horse (Exo. 21.30-36). Misguided as he is, Tay John's recognition of this ancient revelation – that something of the present must be sacrificed to reap future dividends – is driven home in the first line of the following chapter where Denham observes that "possession is a great surrender" (O'Hagan 83).

Kurtz, however, is only willing to take, not to earn, and never to sacrifice. He is a godless, and thus a lawless, individual who lacks Tay John's awareness of objective, ever-watchful Others who have both the wisdom to judge and the power to condemn. Convinced there are no laws to obey in the wilderness, and no God to enforce them, Kurtz assumes godhood for himself; Marlow calls him a "pitiful Jupiter" (Conrad 75). Kurtz kills those who resist his reign and turns the decapitated heads of his enemies towards himself for everyone, whether quick or dead, must love him. Kurtz's mind, like the heads of those dead men, faces inward where his dark and horrific realizations shout back that he is alone, that he is nothing like his fellows, and that he is neither a god, nor a human, nor even a pig. Kurtz is Creation's abortion gazing too long in the mirror of its own reflection.

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