

Food for Vultures

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Beginning with a comparison of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and certain paintings of Piet Mondrian, this essay explores the inherent abstraction of Romantic precursors to those Modernist literary and painterly compositions that (continue to) place a subject squarely before an expanse (of water, of light, or of dark).

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"An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest."

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

At a dramatic moment in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Charlie Marlow recalls sighting the compound from which Mr. Kurtz, the rogue ivory trader, had diffused his grim radiance. There, in a clearing at river's edge, a meager hut stood surrounded by some half dozen poles. The seeming remnants of a fence, these posts were topped with what Marlow initially mistook for wooden carvings, "attempts at ornamentation." Closer inspection reveals them to be shrunken heads. Their unexpected appearance, suddenly magnified in his spyglass, causes him to recoil "as if before a blow." *Ornament* is thus positioned opposite the shock from which Marlow claims to have quickly recovered, but which reverberates through his physical being. Unalloyed and self-identical, the ghastly heads are transfigured only by desiccation and decay: "food for thought and also for vultures."¹ Arnold Schoenberg, who furnished the protagonist of his

Die glückliche Hand with a pair of severed heads, echoed Marlow's parsing (of carving from carrion) when he maintained that music "should not decorate, it should be true."² The truth of Marlow's experience is the startle of self-recognition that is Modernism's defining insight: that the primitive remains an ineluctable force internal to those who define themselves precisely in opposition to everything deemed "uncivilized." When Marlow puts down his glass, thereby making the head that seemed "near enough to be spoken to" leap away from him "into inaccessible distance" (58), he restores, under the standard of progress, the temporal dilation that pushes the primitive back beyond the horizon of prehistory. This amounts to a retreat from the experience that brought him face to face with the barbarism of his own project, as well as from that same Modernist grasp of the progressive potential of the tribal mask, which arises from its inherent, abstract power of differentiation. Expounding on Picasso's response (in 1907) to an exhibition of African and Polynesian fetishes, Robert Hullot-Kentor summarizes the emergence of a critical awareness that, subsequently interdicted, would be limited to a single moment in Western art:

Art [became] modern ... by appropriating [the primitive] as a power for the rejection of the sensuous in order to achieve a formal capacity to direct the violence of life back against its own violence. Sedimented in this formal achievement was the decisive element in modernism as the unfolding of an absolute depth of field in the profundity of the historical consciousness of the West. This defined the course of progress as modern progress. The desideratum of the *utterly new*, in a degree and quality never before conceivable but in a way that office buildings could spring fully imagined from Mondrian's canvases, originated in the awakening perception of the primitive—not in the establishment of a futuristic high ground that threw the archaic into deep perspective.³

This account finds partial confirmation in Düsseldorf's Colorium.⁴ Located on the stylish Rhine harbor, this seventeen-story structure was inspired conspicuously by Piet Mondrian, the Dutch artist whose career tracked towards configured cells



Figure 1.
William Allen Alsop
(architect), *Colorium*,
Düsseldorf, 2001.
(Photograph: the
author).

of primary color and non-color isolated within uneven but severe grids of emphatic black. The insistent flatness that characterizes his mature style (after 1920) provides a platform for the taut interplay of autonomous, non-identical elements whose precise positioning creates both a rhythmic balance and a visual pulse.

Mondrian's practice of using linear patterns to convey movement or vibration had its precursor in the earlier, less rarified *Composition No. 10 in Black and White; Pier and Ocean* (1915). The apparent flatness of this painting yields to a sense of embodied dimension that expands toward the viewer, just as the seeming

abstraction discloses a horizon as well as a fixed structure extending outward. A vanishing point can be discerned within the disciplined binarism of horizontal and vertical marks, which suggest the glint of sunlight on waves that seem on the verge of disintegrating into wavelengths.⁵

Predating Mondrian's painting by more than a dozen years, *Heart of Darkness* offers the following correspondence, which, however serendipitous, bears strikingly upon the prospect of engulfment, both visual and literal, with which abstraction contends:

A jetty projected into the river. A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare (18-19).

As much as any work, and despite all resistance, Conrad's novella casts Modernism in terms of the mutual imbrication of the primitive and the civilized. The world into which Marlow ventures is one in which, for example, pieces of industrial machinery have gone belly-up and lie amid the tall grasses like the

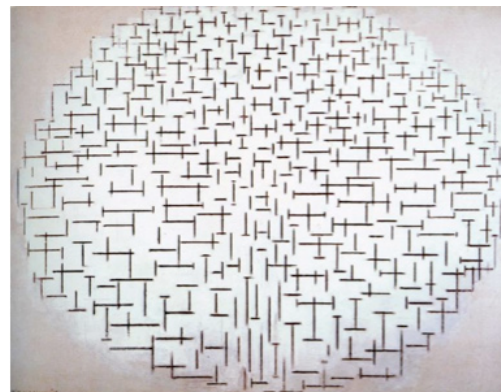


Figure 2. Piet Mondrian,
Composition No. 10 in Black and White; Pier and Ocean,
1915, Oil on canvas, 85 x 110 cm,
State Museum Kröller-Müller,
Otterlo.

carcasses of riparian mammals, or in which the natives employ the flotsam and jetsam of the European presence as fetishes and propitiatory charms. Certain of these same natives, employed as crewmen and with a supposed taste for human flesh, accept small increments of brass wire, which they cannot eat but are expected to use in exchange at the non-existent villages along the way. Marlow remarks at their “restraint,” baffling to him in the face of the hunger that has been gnawing at them for weeks, though the “futuraity” of this “promissory” currency matches their desire, which is also Marlow’s, to get up river and past the dangers of the present. Here, in the innermost “heart of darkness,” where even the harsh and blinding sunlight is experienced as something irrepressibly virile (*recrudescant*), Marlow admits to a “thrill” at the “terrible frankness” (38) of the noise issuing from the riverbank, and if the throbbing frenzy of native dance and song is plausibly Dionysian, so too is Marlow Odysseus-like in his determination to sail safely past temptation:

You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, ... I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook (38).

Marlow’s efforts at salvaging a boat that is itself a bricolage of cast-off materials bears a kinship to the overall style of Conrad’s novella which, while typically characterized as “impressionist,” is replete with a certain self-interfering materiality, as suggested by the clipped redundancy, from that first sample, of “jetty projected.”⁶ The sensibility emitted by the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz, whom Marlow recalls taking “for a painter who wrote for the papers, or else for a journalist who could paint” (71)—is of the more symbolist variety, as suggested by the painting (by Kurtz himself) that Marlow finds in a manager’s office at the Central Station:

Then I noticed a small sketch of oils, on a panel, representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the

woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister.

It arrested me ... (27-28)

Decidedly not impressionistic, Kurtz's small composition gathers within it the manifold tenebrism that informs Marlow's manner of summoning the mystery of his experience, characterized typically as "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (36). Consider too this most typical passage where Conrad's frame-narrator, describing the "sea-reach of the Thames," imposes the sensibility of a ship-builder upon the *sfumato* of the sunset:

In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas, sharply peaked with gleams of varnished spits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth (7).

Evidence of Conrad's "impressionism" would be the preponderance of *haze* in his narrative, which criticism invokes not as a spatial surrogate for the painted surface, nor as a phenomenon suited to a technique practiced in the conveyance of immateriality, but as a figure of uncertainty and confusion. Conrad's sense of "the bounded and ambiguous nature of individual understanding" is said to be heir to David Hume, who insisted on the primacy of impressions over ideas,⁷ though Hume's empiricism is of a sort that Marlow's African encounter might be seen to subvert. Witness Marlow's earlier affirmation of the "idea" with respect to the "conquest of the earth"—an undertaking that makes "aggravated murder" a consequence of "efficiency" ("not a pretty thing when you look at it too much"): "What redeems it all," he goes on, is "an unselfish belief in an idea, something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (10). Marlow's words expose the "dialectic of enlightenment"

whereby reason devolves into rationale and the means and methods of civilized disenchantment are themselves sacralized. Correspondingly, Mr. Kurtz, whose unprecedented effectiveness at gathering ivory has come to be regarded as uncontainable excess, is finally found in a morose and emaciated state, the very image of that which he has vanquished. Kurtz confronts the truth of his existence as he becomes his own death-mask, the gaunt and shriveled likeness of the shrunken heads that grace the posts surrounding his remote hut and which, in a kind of tautology, face (all but one) inward. Marlow, who first spies these objects at a distance, mistakes them for carved ornaments, deciphering them more accurately only upon drawing closer:

Now I had suddenly a nearer view and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures ... (57).

This revision accords with what Ian Watt once termed “delayed decoding,” with which he specified Marlow’s manner of only gradually forming a clear concept out of initial impressions, such as when he first mistakes a deadly fusillade of arrows for a shower of “little sticks” (45).⁸ It is an iteration of the aforementioned empiricist position, though we may begin to recognize in Impressionism proper a comparable decomposition of appearances into positive, pointillist information. This is consistent with the progression whereby the map of Africa that so fascinated the young Marlow, once “a blank space of delightful mystery” (12), eventually reappears as a sort of colored canvas:

There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there—a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer (13).

An aggregate of color-coded geographical data, the map mirrors the more

pointedly aesthetic evocations that punctuate Conrad's narrative: "Flames glided on the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily" (11). Thus the frame-narrator conjures the scene in the wake of Marlow's statement about the "unselfish idea," and the novella as a whole is accented by periodic interruptions in which Marlow, progressively enveloped by the encroaching gloom, becomes the largely invisible source of his story, which "seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river" (30). And much as Marlow, like Kurtz, distills into pure voice, so too does he, when glimpsed in the sudden glare of a struck match, resemble both Kurtz and the single shrunken head that, turned outward, implicates Marlow in a chain of figures and makes him the final bearer of the lie:

There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids with an aspect of concentrated attention; and as he took vigorous draws at his pipe, it seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame. The match went out (48).

Marlow's countenance takes on the appearance of the indigenous figures whose faces he likens to "grotesque masks" (17), as exemplified by one young man, who in dying looks up at Marlow, his "sunken eyes ... enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly" (20). This now metaphorized "dying of the light" prefigures the death of Marlow's native helmsman, struck by a spear thrown from the riverbank. Pierced below the ribs, the dying man recalls a tradition of hallowed figuration, as underscored by a passenger's exclaimed "Good God!" at catching sight of him. The "two whites" feel themselves "enveloped" by the light emanating from the helmsman's eyes until a frown creeps briefly over his face and lends it a "sombre, brooding and menacing expression." The poor fellow's expiration is signaled by a fluid, alliterative passage (as if along a stream) into the material negation of vision—an emptiness that evokes the original sense of *vanitas*: "The lustre of inquiring

glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness” (47). This swift fading echoes that initial tableau, already cited, in which the narrator describes the diminishing light over the banks of the Thames as they run “out to sea in vanishing flatness,” much as the helmsman’s “death-mask” has its precursor in the brooding motionlessness of London itself (7). The narrator’s subsequent comparison of the “haze” to “a gauzy and radiant fabric ... draping the low shores in diaphanous folds” (8) conjures a Romantic phantasmagoria, as does the oft-quoted line in which the same narrator likens the emergent meaning of Marlow’s enigmatic tale to “one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (9).⁹ Commenting on the sentence that summarizes the helmsman’s sad and silent surcease, Garrett Stewart isolates a degree of Romantic morbidity within the resurgent materiality of Conrad’s prose:

In this jungle world where death is so treacherously slurred with life, where the landscape itself evinces a Coleridgean “life-in-death,” the syllabic momentum of Conrad’s studied euphony smoothes and blurs one noun into its stretched sibilant antonym, the stare of life into the blank of death: “The lustre of inquiring *glance* faded swiftly into vacant *glassiness*.”¹⁰

Stewart’s intimation of life staring “into the blank of death” suggests, in the spirit of Marlow’s “fascination of the abomination” (10), an essentially Romantic tension between proximate terror and “inaccessible distance” (58), while the *blankness* beheld recalls the vast and empty tableaux that arrest the subject in attitudes of frozen contemplation. In a now classic study from the mid-1970s, Robert Rosenblum posits a genealogy connecting Modern painting to the Romantic tradition, discerning in Mondrian’s *Composition No. 10*, for example, a “[complete] annihilation of matter and objects” reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s seminal *Monk by the Sea* (1809), which like Mondrian’s canvas “can be experienced as both shallow and deep.” “Without material objects to define successive positions in space,” Rosenblum writes, “these pictures become resonant, luminous spaces that can alternately remain within the narrow confines of the picture’s flat surface or expand into illusions of infinite recession toward



Figure 3. Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809, Oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

remote unseen horizons.”¹¹

Friedrich’s reduction, which entailed the erasure of two ships, of the image to empty planes bisected by the horizon, has, according to Rosenblum, a particular legacy in the work of Mark Rothko, whose career evolved this archetypal form: “horizontal divisions evoking the primordial separation of earth or sea from cloud and sky, and luminous

fields of dense, quietly lambent color that seem to generate the primal energies of natural light.”¹²

It is interesting to consider the formal insistence whereby so many of Friedrich’s “unframed” compositions allow the eye to wander, to explore the edges of the painting, and to experience the painting itself as a material object in space. Rosenblum, however, after explaining the abstract discipline whereby Rothko, like Friedrich, “locates the beholder at the brink of a resonant void,”¹³ emphasizes a kindred spirituality, invoking the iconoclastic programs common to Judaism and Protestantism. The synesthesia of his critical language would seem to resist the disarticulation of sign and image, as does his tendency to find, for example, “an underlying structural skeleton”—a “cruciform symmetry” beneath the agitated rhythms of Mondrian’s *Composition No. 10*.¹⁴ This suggests a negation of the very negation intrinsic to the religion that, quoting Horkheimer and Adorno, “brooks no word that might bring solace to the despair of all mortality.”¹⁵ Rosenblum in fact revives the tendency to read those Romantic paintings allegorically while yet neglecting the decomposition, inherent in allegory, of image and idea. It is worth underlining the Modernist possibility that has long fixed critical attention on Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), with its schizophrenic perspective and ultimate refusal of solace. The sudden and inexorable recognition of the anamorphic skull hovering in the foreground is more

than vaguely akin to the moment, described by Marlow, when closer inspection reveals the apparently ornamental “knobs” atop those posts to be “symbolic”—“food for thought and also for vultures.” Without warning (and in both cases), the “dread objectified in the fixed image” pierces consciousness to reveal the anemia of art that is content to reproduce what already is.¹⁶ In his famous analysis of Holbein’s painting Jacques Lacan emphasizes how “as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as *caught*.”¹⁷ This experience of “imaginary capture” is related to that of the organism that, likewise captivated, assumes the appearance of its natural surroundings. Roger Caillois refers to this “mimicry” as a “magical tendency” in the biological world,¹⁸ and this “magic” may in turn be construed as an attribute of an art that did not simply aim at imitating nature but, more primordially, sought to influence nature through likeness. That “treacherously slurred” jungle world, in which limbs and foliage, that is, *human* limbs and *arboreal* foliage, seem indistinct, pull art into the orbit of camouflage, and Stewart’s “stare of life into the blank of death” is commensurate with the experience of a viewer held in silent thrall by an image that has, like that one shrunken head, turned to face the observer.

The feral undertow of captivation is explored and to an extent theorized by Freud at a step in his analysis of the “Wolfman.” Freud’s patient reported having



Figure 4. Illustration from Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

a dream as a young boy—his first anxiety-dream. He dreamt that the window at the foot of his bed suddenly flew open to reveal a walnut tree, leafless in winter. Perched among its boughs were a number of white wolves. A drawing provided by the patient shows five such animals, which, by his account, sat silent and motionless, their ears perked up and pointed forward.¹⁹ Fearing that he would be

devoured, the patient awoke and for minutes was unable to shake the feeling that the dream was real. Freud isolates the motionlessness with which the wolves appeared to watch the boy and interprets this as a projection of the rapt attention with which he, at a yet younger age, had observed his parents performing

intercourse “in the manner of beasts” (*more ferarum*). Freud’s conjecture of a “primal scene” (*Urszene*), whose influence over the present is as inexorable as it is forgotten, enfolds psychoanalysis within the broader compass of Modernism, in which, citing Adorno, “[archaic] layers have come into our field of vision that were hidden.”²⁰ In its relative primitivism, the drawing that Freud’s patient used to illustrate his dream exposes what would eventually be compressed—to the point of invisibility—into the single layer of the Modernist canvas. The drawing’s symmetry and frontal orientation is enhanced by a vague degree of perspective that causes the line of sight to angle upward. The wolves literalize the *incarnation* of a viewer within a perspectival system that, following Norman Bryson, “renders him tangible and corporeal, a measurable, and above all a visible object in a world of absolute visibility.”²¹ Freud, with an emphasis on the “instances of attentive looking and of motionlessness” (“die Momente des aufmerksamen Schauens und der Bewegungslosigkeit”),²² understands the watchful stillness of the wolves as an inverted distortion of the agitated movement ostensibly witnessed by the child in his parents’ bedroom. At the manifest level of the dream, however, such inversion (*Verkehrung*) allows also for a reciprocal viewing akin to the “dyadic reversibility” of the gaze that, according to Bryson, “returns that of the viewer as its own object.”²³ Dream and drawing alike confront the child with his own act of looking, much as the wolves personify what Lacan calls the “eye filled with voracity.”²⁴ The child’s frozen attitude is true to the hypnotic power of painting—a power found in “even those [pictures] most lacking in what is usually called the gaze, and which is constituted by a pair of eyes.”²⁵ Lacan invokes the tradition of Dutch and Flemish landscape, and it may be that the presence of the gaze is felt most uncannily in paintings focused on the materials of camouflage—trees, grasses, undergrowth, etc.—and in which “any representation of the human figure is absent.”²⁶



Figure 5. Piet Mondrian, *Grey Tree*, 1912, Oil on canvas, 78.5 x 107.5 cm, Gemeentemuseum, Slijper Collection, The Hague

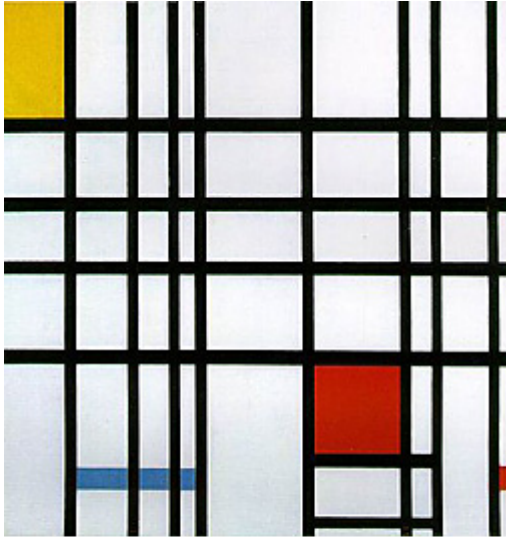


Figure 6. Piet Mondrian
Composition with Red, Yellow,
and Blue, 1937
Oil on Canvas, 72 x 69 cm,
Tate Gallery, London

Mondrian's road to rigid abstraction passed through a phase (before 1906-07) during which he specialized in twilight, chromatically muted scenes along quiet rivers with lone windmills or stands of trees. The limbs of these trees sometimes gather into dense and vaguely stylized meshes, which in coming years would dissolve into the faceted surface of his pre-war Cubist experiments. To the degree that these same limbs reemerge (after 1920) as the strict outlines of those rectilinear cells—lines that presumably represent nature's rhythms and vibrations but not its objects—

the course of Mondrian's development corroborates the thesis advanced by Wilhelm Worringer in his *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), a study closely contemporaneous with Mondrian's formalist turn.²⁷ According to Worringer, the practice of extracting objects from space reflected a residual human need for clear boundaries in the face of a luxuriant and enchanting nature whose limitless undifferentiation threatens the borders of the self.²⁸ Abstraction is a defense, its object, to paraphrase Charlie Marlow, *rioting vegetation*.²⁹ Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a veritable case study in the fascination exercised by space, the capacity of which to envelop is experienced as the potential to devour. The cannibalism feared by Marlow's fellow Europeans distills the voracious gaze of the African bush. Marlow and his passengers, "cut off from comprehension of [their] surroundings," scan the passing riverbank for a glimpse of "eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (37). Repeatedly, Marlow and his companions are overtaken by the glow or brooding shadow of a riverscape, their attitude mirroring the often uneasy stillness of the prospect.³⁰ They are stunned by that "sudden recrudescence of glare" (19) as if by the glowering Medusa, whose eyes retain their ability to petrify even after—or especially after—

they can no longer see. The severed head of the Gorgon shares its mask-like power with the shrunken head that “leaped up in the field of [Marlow’s] glass” (57). No longer simply organs of vision, the eyes become sources of fascination. Caillois devotes much attention to eye-spots (*ocelli*), such as the markings on the wings of butterflies that seem to mimic the eyes of predatory birds. These markings, he argues, fascinate and frighten not because they resemble organs of sight but instead because they seem to be watching even though they are not eyes. Of particular interest are owls given that, unlike virtually all other birds, their eyes are fixed in orbit and frontally positioned, their pupils dilated. Moreover, they are surrounded by a golden ring and feathers that accentuate their roundness and exaggerate their size. “The eyes of these birds are thus turned into ocelli: huge concentric circles, motionless and shining.”³¹ (Similarly, the “sunken eyes” of the dying African prisoner, “enormous and vacant” [20], are all the more mesmerizing for being sightless.) In this context, it is worth stressing that the wolves in the drawing by Freud’s patient are perched where one would normally expect to see owls — or vultures.

Friedrich’s *Landscape with Grave, Casket and Owl* (1837/38), a study in pencil and sepia, is a remarkable pendant to those many figures seen from behind—the *Rückenfiguren* that are his stock in trade. The owl, given its uncanny ability to rotate its head, is uniquely suited to the tropism endemic to a story—Conrad’s—in which the platform of the narrative is the deck of a boat that is shifting on its mooring with the turn of the tide.³² By story’s end it is facing in the opposite direction—a reversal consistent with the inversion (*Verkehrung*) named by Freud. This turning is also germane to the novella’s apotropaic aspect, of which those severed heads on posts are also examples. In turning, their purpose is to “turn away,” in the sense of “warding



Figure 7.
Caspar David Friedrich
*Landscape with Grave,
Casket and Owl*, 1836/37,
Sepia, pencil and charcoal,
48.5 x 38.5 cm,
Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

off.” Its association with death notwithstanding, the owl in this image is notably more amusing, its wide-eyed, comical dimension exaggerated by its central, frontal positioning. The tall thistles in the foreground allude to the expulsion from Eden, as does the serpentine coil of rope, reaching outward as if threatening to entangle a viewer already susceptible to enchantment. A visual metaphor, the rope’s form looks forward to that of the river unwinding out of the African interior, as described by Marlow, who is likewise about to be “charmed”:

But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river ...
resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea ...
and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map
of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird
(12).

Marlow admits to being bewitched by the “snake,” i.e., by the river coiling out of the Congo. He is, in his own terms, “fascinated,” captured, arrested before the map, as he is later “arrested” before Kurtz’s painted sketch. That little picture is part of the painterly program of Conrad’s novella. Its pronounced *chiaroscuro* accords with the conventions of painting—effects of light and perspective that help fix the viewer before the canvas and hold that viewer, as it were, *spellbound*. Consistent with the narrative generally, this aspect of illumination makes of light an *interruption* and casts Kurtz himself as Lucifer—as the “bringer of light.”

Friedrich’s drawing, one of many featuring owls, caskets, grave-markers, and grave-digging implements, bears a similarity to the *Scherzi* by Giambattista Tiepolo, which often include a plurality of owls. In his recent study entitled *Tiepolo Pink*, Roberto Calasso observes everywhere within the painter’s *oeuvre* an unexpected plethora of “poles, flags, pennants, tree trunks, stakes, staves, masting, branches, and halbherds.” It is a feature found also in Friedrich’s drawing, with its criss-crossing planks and shovel-handles, and it may be thought that Friedrich, with a similar propensity for painting the masts and riggings of ships, anchors, the mullions of windows, and even the occasional easel, was compelled wherever he looked to find the same “cruciform symmetry” that Rosenblum finds in Mondrian. Here is what Calasso has to say about this

remarkable habit on Tiepolo's part, and I emphasize in advance the arguably Conradian concern with immensity and emptiness that suffuses this passage:

For Tiepolo, [these slanted trunks] are the matrix of painting. Why? So irrepressible is Tiepolo's sense of the boundless, overmastering nature of space—a sense he allows to issue freely from his painting—that we are led to presume that those intrusive posts, those trunks or poles or staves that appear everywhere without any plausible explanation, serve to mark and explore the immensity of the atmosphere. They are tokens of the momentary, fleeting order needed by that which happens in order to detach, isolate, and confine itself to space, in order to make a lucky escape from the terror of that which contains [infinity] within itself.... Except for the sky, an entity whose “enigmatic instability” can only be attested to by clouds Every place is fit to be divided, wounded, etched by what—to use a generic collective—we might call *poles*. Tiepolo is the first and foremost painter of poles. They are his phrasing, they mark the tempo of the musical articulation of space. In a transient and irregular way, the poles serve to demarcate portions of space. Without at least a hint of a frame there is no image, but at the same time only a boundless immensity can be the background against which the image stands out.³³

These various references to a “matrix” composed of poles, their function being that of dividing space into “portions” and creating a pattern akin to “musical phrasing” may again put us in mind of Mondrian, the precise, linear patterning of whose later painting has been traced back to the trees and windmills of his earlier, more figural work. Likewise, Calasso's inference of a “terror” provoked by “infinity” recalls the “fear of space” or *Raumscheu* that for Worringer is synonymous with the “impulse to abstraction” (*Abstraktionsdrang*).³⁴ Note that in 1907, the same year in which Worringer completed his study (not to mention the year that Picasso saw those tribal masks and fetishes), Rilke wrote his poem “Island of the Sirens,” in which Odysseus seeks to recreate in words a terror

arising not from the Sirens' song but from an expansive calm that eerily proclaims the *possibility* of their singing—a silence that causes the crewmen to lean into their oars. And with an eye to those poles and stakes, which, everywhere in Tiepolo, compose a bulwark against “enigmatic instability,” recall how Homer’s Odysseus cleaves for nine days to timbers disgorged by the vortex Charybdis. Enigmatically, too, the so-called “pilgrims” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—the white managers and agents encountered by Marlow—are repeatedly described as constantly (and inexplicably) brandishing “long staves.” They’re never seen without them (“I verily believe they took these sticks to bed with them” [28]). Their importance may lie in the tactile assurance they provide, much as the book Marlow finds on some pedestrian points of seamanship, in providing him with “something unmistakably real,” made him “forget the jungle” (39).

But they are remarkable for their irreality. Calasso discourses on the near omnipresence of *snakes* in those etchings of Tiepolo’s—snakes that crawl, coil around staffs or the gnarled trunks of dead trees, and snakes that, in keeping with a certain Biblical exhortation, are burnt. Another in the series shows a magus burning a snake in a cauldron, and there are several such images. Relevant episodes from the Bible are named, such as when Aaron’s rod turns into a snake when cast upon the ground before the Pharaoh, or when Moses, whose people are beset with venomous snakes, commands them to contemplate the bronze figure of a serpent—“a gesture that marks the discovery that evil can be cured by its image.”³⁵ In this gesture we may recognize the aforesaid “capacity to turn the violence of life back against its own violence.” But what dazzles about these *Scherzi* is a blanching daylight so insistent that the owls confer upon it a sense of inverse extremity,



Figure 8.
Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
Scherzi/Satyr Family,
1742/63, Etching,
226 x 176 cm,
National Gallery of Art,
Washington,
Rosenwald Collection.

rather like that “sudden recrudescence of glare” along the Congo. What we see in these images is that shadowless time of day, noontide, when Pan plays upon his pipes and incites the “panic,” in which (again citing Horkheimer and Adorno) “nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power ... and trapped the human gaze in the fakery of sorcerers and medicine men.”³⁶ Marlow’s gaze is enchanted, and his fascination leads him to the experience of an extremity he characterizes in a way that makes it superfluous to go on—as “a vision of greyness without form ... and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things” (69).

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 57. All subsequent citations from Conrad’s text are given parenthetically.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006), 36. Adorno attributes this assertion to Schoenberg’s essay “On Problems of Teaching Art,” though I am unable to find it there.

³ Robert Hullot-Kentor, “The Exact Sense in Which the Culture Industry No Longer Exists,” *Cultural Critique* 70 (2008): 148-49.

⁴ Completed in 2001, the building was designed by British architect William Allen Alsop.

⁵ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 26.

⁶ The sonic resemblance (of “jetty projected”) to Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (“Petals on a wet black bough”) points to the haiku-like quality of the lines from *Heart of Darkness*. See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1971), 184. See also the sentence used as the epigraph to the present essay (Conrad 35).

⁷ Ian Watt, “Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*,” in Robert Kimbrough, ed., *Heart of Darkness: Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 316.

⁸ Watt 317-19.

⁹ See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 256.

¹⁰ Garrett Stewart, “Lying as Dying in *Heart of Darkness*,” in Robert Kimbrough, ed., *Heart of Darkness: Norton Critical Edition*, 3rd edition (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 362.

¹¹ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 191-92. Compare the following observation from Clement Greenberg’s “Obituary of Mondrian”:

“[Mondrian’s] pictures, with their white grounds, straight black lines, and opposed rectangles of pure color, are no longer windows on a wall but islands radiating clarity, harmony, and grandeur—passion mastered and cooled, a difficult struggle resolved, unity imposed on diversity.” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 188.

¹² Rosenblum 213.

¹³ Rosenblum 212.

¹⁴ Rosenblum 192.

¹⁵ T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed., Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18.

¹⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno 16.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), 92.

¹⁸ Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984): 16-32.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey, vol. 8, *Zwei Kinderneurosen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982), 149-50. I am indebted to Brigid Doherty for suggesting that I introduce Freud’s “Wolfman” into my discussion.

²⁰ Adorno’s line is cited (and translated) by Hullot-Kentor (147).

²¹ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), 106.

²² Freud 153.

²³ Bryson 106.

²⁴ Lacan 115.

²⁵ Lacan 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Writing with respect to Mondrian’s *Still Life with Ginger Jar I* (1911-12), John Milner supplies a characterization of Mondrian’s formalism generally and one that is especially resonant with respect to Worringer’s thesis: “Already in *Ginger Jar I* the planes are simplified so that they interlock in a structure which effectively unifies the heterogeneous mass of detail.” John Milner, *Mondrian* (London: Phaidon, 1992), 92.

²⁸ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich: Piper, 1987), 49.

²⁹ “Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings” (35).

³⁰ For example: “The long shadow of the forest had slipped downhill while we talked, had gone far beyond the ruined hovel, beyond the symbolic row of stakes. All this was in the gloom while we down there were yet in the sunshine, and the stretch of the river abreast of the clearing glittered in a still and dazzling splendor, with a murky and over-shadowed bend above and below. Not a living soul was seen on the shore. The bushes did not rustle” (58).

³¹ Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*, trans. George Ordish (New York: Potter, 1964), 96.

³² Brooks 238-39, 256.

³³ Roberto Calasso, *Tiepolo Pink*, trans. Alistair McEwen (New York: Knopf, 2009), 104-7.

³⁴ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich: Piper, 1987), 49.

³⁵ Calasso 172.

³⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno 22.