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Introduction

The drive to modernise cannot be divorced from the evolution of technologies that are designed to profit from nature (specifically, the nonhuman, physical world) without concern for long-term effects on the earth and its capacity to carry substantial human populations. While evolving technologies also have other purposes than this transformation of matter to profit, the twenty-first century ecological humanities respond to the way that industrialisation has mobilised environmentally damaging practices over recent centuries. Yet such critiques must also remain aware of the deep patterns that gird philosophies and practices of profit over sustainability. Current events reveal familiar structural tendencies that link them with ancient human predispositions. One of these patterns is the perennial cultural quest to symbolically live “in the light.” Mighty empires continue to colonise on behalf of a profane version of this symbolic quest, wherein the idea of inhabiting light — a figure commonly associated with goodness, truth, order and abundance — is intimately yoked to the power of the profit motive. But darkness shadows this modernising project, both as its wasteland (that
sense – or fear – of barrenness at the fringes of the city of light) and at its heart (at the very root of the drive to colonise and consume the earth with evolving technologies). This paper examines two of the early twentieth century’s most influential texts to uncover the deep anxieties they reveal about the way the symbol of light is co-opted on behalf of the modernising project of colonisation and its technologies. In doing so it shows that the colonising aspect of Western civilisation is indivisible from the aim of mastering the earth (thereby creating ecological devastation in its wake). It then discusses the way that Conrad and Eliot are sensitive to the shadow of this dream, recognise the limits of such an agenda of mastery, and experiment with alternative cosmologies.

In both Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and T S Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” darkness resides where the law of civilisation breaks down and this collapse – of standards, of order, of authority – is intimately connected with that amorphous chaos monster known in Western discourse as “nature.” During my exploration of the way light is variously symbolised across the Western traditions I have discovered a consistent, somewhat obvious theme running through these histories: light is co-opted as a symbol for dominant sociocultural, political, military and economic authority, while darkness is comparatively used to taint whatever force stands in the way of this projected dominion. This article investigates this theme in terms of the current ecological crisis, in regards to which the dualistic model operates like a new version of an old story – the culture hero of light slays the chaos monster of darkness and valid members of the marketplace cheer on and profit. For the modern consumer, “nature” continues to be associated with darkness. This time it is not the darkness of some medieval distance from God, but of the wasteland outside of modernity’s plenty, the arid plains beyond the well-lit shopping mall of an eternal urban feast. Leaders of industry facilitate the burning up of fossil fuels in order to light our cities at night so that we never have to inhabit the darkness of want (see image below). This otherworldly quest represents an ancient yearning for control over nature, which I have shown elsewhere is indivisible from large-scale agricultural settlement civilisation itself.¹
What directs my investigation in this article is the way that the modernising quest to colonise nature with the light of culture and its technologies exacerbates the ecological crisis; how certain important Modernist authors recognised this (as did the Romantics in an earlier phase); and how they considered the deeper meanings of (and possible exit routes from) this dangerous hubris. The ancient duality of light over darkness enthrones a damaging cultural law dedicated to the overcoming of earthly conditions and creation of a utopian paradise of eternal urban feasting. The attempt to manifest this vision, however, concomitantly destroys the conditions necessary to its realisation, with advanced technologies devastating consecutive ecosystems as grist to the mill. The early twentieth century saw the shadows of the great vision of modernity gnawing away at its utopian promise, like a dystopia at its Heart of Darkness (first published in novel form in 1902), or in the form of “The Waste Land” (1922) threatening the borders of the city.

**Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness at the Limit of Light**

Lounging on the sloop Nelly, moored up in the heart of light – London in the late nineteenth century – Conrad’s protagonist Marlow tells his tale of mercantile lust and tarnished ideals as revealed by a journey ever deeper into the jungles that mark the end of civilisation. But this is no mere warning against what the urbanite might fear sits beyond the borders of civilisation – the “ritual savagery” of the jungle – for all of Chinua Achebe’s vehement proposition that the book is racist (more on this later). While it is true that the novel’s anti-hero Kurtz succumbs to the great fear of anthropological
and military outposts by “going native” at the edge of the map where civilised authority falters, his unravelling is clearly meant by Conrad to be an indictment of European hypocrisy. Conrad is poignantly aware of the double standards according to which the light of civilisation is associated with order, truth, goodness – the usual gamut of positive allusions. He also acknowledges the darkness it represents – the profit motive lurking behind its missionary zeal. *Heart of Darkness* is an early example of a kind of fiction that will become more popular throughout the twentieth century, as the Modernist movement recognises a light both pervasive and domineering, profitable and threatening at once in the traditional aesthetic and political conventions it challenges. This new type of literature recognises that the light employed to represent civilisation (in this case the West) contains its own contradictory impetus. On the one hand, the light of civilisation promises to create a utopian paradise of eternal feasting in cities of perpetual abundance, and on the other hand the methods used to manifest this vision destroy the conditions necessary to its realisation. Early twentieth century writers experimented with literary form and with the transformation of Western, urbanised consciousness itself. Revised concepts of nature and culture became key territories in this thematic overhaul.

Conrad’s novella captures the double-edged nature of civilised light, which destroys ecosystems as it creates urban abundance, subtly yet compellingly. Kurtz, the talented wunderkind of empire, is travelling further away from the centre of the light’s authority, as guarantor of the colonising standards of civilisation. But it is our yarn-spinning guide and narrator Marlow who puts this idea in historical context for the reader. London itself had also “been one of the dark places of the earth” once, before it was conquered by men whose brute force could tackle darkness with violence, who did not have the advantage of being initiated into the mysteries of the wilds but had to go blindly, fascinated and disgusted, into abomination.4 At least redeeming what Conrad refers to as the robbery and murder perpetrated by the colonists is an idea and an unselfish belief in it, although the difference between this idea and the “noble cause” of commerce is muddied at best, made clear at worst.5 Marlow, taking leave of his excellent aunt, cannot quite stomach her vision of him as an “emissary of light” going to wean “those ignorant millions from their horrid ways” and suggests in response that the Company he had joined was in fact “run for profit”.6 The worker knows the reason he is visiting exotic climes. The grand speeches of dignitaries about piercing the darkness with civilisation’s light as a worthy crusade are designed to bolster support from the public as stakeholders and the heads of state who made such speeches were inspired by the fact that Africa’s “unspeakable richness” would repay the “enterprising capitalist.”7
As always, the light of empire goes forth cloaked in the ethical and juridical standards of behaviour that Western civilisation likes to remind itself accompany democracy at its base. The jungle it is designed to overcome symbolises savagery, isolation and moral collapse to the urban consciousness, as Adam Gillon puts it.\(^8\) The hypocrisy of the market, however, will prove just as savage as the irrationality of nature and ritual in the heart of this seeming darkness.

We are told that Kurtz himself came “equipped with moral ideas of some sorts”, believing that each station along the river’s course should be “like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing.”\(^9\) Here is Kurtz as the Enlightenment ideal, as Ian Watt points out; representing colonialism “through the two values with which the symbol of a lighted torch is conventionally associated – education and hope for the future.”\(^10\) Perhaps Kurtz acknowledged, and wanted to overcome, the impenetrability of the jungle that Marlow describes, that thing “so hopeless and so dark, so … pitiless to human weakness.”\(^11\) For many Enlightenment philosophers, too, nature was something to be mastered on behalf of an ideal of perfection.\(^12\) Marlow notes that the joyless brilliance of the sunshine on the river seems only to alienate the invaders, its obscure light “an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention,” an “inner truth” mysteriously and luckily hidden from the surface reality of tin-pot steamboats and their loads of ivory.\(^13\) Interestingly, the jungle here represents a similar kind of imagery that the forest had already enjoyed for centuries in the European imagination, according to Robert Pogue Harrison; it reveals both fascination and fear, with these contrary feelings often employed to venerate idealised cities of light and demonise the shadowy realms they seek to expunge.\(^14\) As noted, Conrad has been excoriated by Chinua Achebe, Edward Said and others for the way he homogenises Africa, its people and land into an “Other” against which the European Self can identify itself (and recognise its alienation).\(^15\) A recent ecocritical supporter of this position, Jeffrey Myers, claims that the way *Heart of Darkness* vividly imagines this alienating act of mastery is a Modernist recognition of the madness and horror left over when a previously constructed Self is dissolved by evolutionary insights but lacks “the deep ecological understanding of what [such insights] imply.”\(^16\)

Views like this have the advantage of pointing out previously unconsidered assumptions built into classic texts and this must be applauded; but they can also be unnecessarily reductive. It is valid to point out, as Myers does, that “the animals, plants, rivers, and hills are lumped together as “wilderness” … [to] figure simultaneously and together as the “Other” against which the European man delineates his identity.”\(^17\) This is espe-
cially so when linked to the idea that Kurtz goes mad because he recognises that his European “construction of human subjectivity over and against the otherness of the natural world [is] ecologically and evolutionarily irrelevant.”\textsuperscript{18} But I don’t see why this should dismiss the valuable finesse with which Conrad dismantles an erstwhile Eurocentric vision of masculine heroism. And it is not just Kurtz who is drawn into this vortex of undoing; the other white men who work upriver seem held captive by the jungle’s mystery as if “by a spell,” a witchcraft that speaks in drumbeats and ritual beneath the thin veneer of reason.\textsuperscript{19} The natives dance in “a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling,” while Marlow comprehends little but the thrilling “thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.”\textsuperscript{20} This sense of kinship crosses all the chasms placed between the Africans and the whites by their comparative histories. Even the difference between the earth as it seems to the civilised urbanite – “the shackled form of a conquered monster” – and as it feels in the jungle – “a thing monstrous and free” – becomes reduced.\textsuperscript{21} And the worst thing, for someone like Marlow who is willing to see beyond their own revulsion, was the realisation not that civilised types are forever barred from this prehistoric frenzy but that they could comprehend “the terrible frankness of that noise ... from the night of the first ages.”\textsuperscript{22} The predispositions of his civilised mission keep Marlow immured in the daylight chase to protect profit, even while he sees beyond the seemingly intractable difference between his humanity and that of the indigenes ashore. He does not venerate their ritualised passion from the condescending superiority of the racist European but from the relatively timeless recognition of human kinship. Marlow even suggests he would, given the time, have gone ashore for a howl and a dance; but he is saved from his fascination with the irrational (not necessarily degenerative) aspects of the human mind by the “surface-truth” of busyness.\textsuperscript{23}

As Jeffrey McCarthy points out, however, this same excuse does not deny Kurtz the opportunity to explore his own identification with a “darkness” in nature that seems just as dangerous to the early Modernist as the traditional version it ostensibly critiqued.\textsuperscript{24} For McCarthy, Conrad manifests part of the ecological anxiety of the time by showing how Kurtz comes to identify with a nature that dissipates “the confident, unified self of European civilisation into a universal proposition of flowing, provisional identities.”\textsuperscript{25} Clearly Kurtz, as Empire’s hero gone wrong, is not ready for this experience of flow. For McCarthy, Marlow is not just faced with the two nightmares of civilised hypocrisy and honest savagery when he follows Kurtz upstream, but has to choose “between a destructive separation from nature and unsettling connection to it.”\textsuperscript{26} McCarthy’s ecological interpretation re-
positions culture into the matrix of nature – but this supplies no easy answer to the dilemma of humanity’s place in the scheme of impersonal evolution. For McCarthy, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* suggests a new paradigm is arising to challenge conventional assumptions that European civilisation represents a higher moral authority than is present in so-called “savage” societies. In fact, according to this view, the novel seeks to show that civilisation is based on a falsehood that shields “smug Belgians” from the two things that Kurtz’s end makes plain:

first, humanity’s intermingling with nature; and second, the anguish that this nature is not some European fabrication of sublime beauty or human exceptionalism, but an uncertain unfolding of forces bathed in bloody conflict.²⁷

I will take up the “unsettling” aspect of “nature” as it seems to the Modernist again in my conclusion. For now I think it worth appreciating Conrad in historical context, as it hardly seems fair to expect him to have constructed a self-destructive anti-hero who could also have transformed the colonialist paradigm to one of comparative anthropological enlightenment. Learning more about the rites with which the Africans made reparation between themselves and the mysterious nature within which they existed may have helped the European colonists to disentangle themselves from the dangerous anthropocentrism of their own tradition. In fact, it should not be surprising that this education appears in reverse in *Heart of Darkness*, as Marlow’s African boiler operator learns the key to the “strange witchcraft” of technology, maintaining the furnace so that the “evil spirit” in the fire would not act on the anger of its thirst and take “terrible vengeance” upon the boat.²⁸

Marlow travels upriver expecting the words of Kurtz to be emblematic of this paradox of technological magic, which grants the Europeans power over the shackled monster of the earth while strangling it to death. The emissary expects the great man to speak words bewildering and illuminating, “the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness.”²⁹ But Kurtz is not only the epitome of civilised talent and standards; he is embraced also by the wilderness, which loves and consumes him, sealing “his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation.”³⁰ In Kurtz, the traditional Western mythology of abstraction from nature is undone by a ritualistic process of identification with it and even, according to Robert Hampson, with the storm gods of fructification.³¹ Kurtz, entrusted to make a report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, claims that “we whites, from the point of development
we had arrived at,” must appear as deities to the savages.32 Kurtz’s “burning noble words” explicitly associate light with civilisation, moral purpose and unbounded power: they form a “magic current of phrases” in a moving and altruistic appeal to advocate that civilisation offered “a power for good practically unbounded.”33 When the same man later added the footnote – “Exterminate all the brutes!” – he once again blazed with words “luminous and terrifying,” coming to the wild lands “with thunder and lightning,” filled with the power of the storm-god to both destroy and fertilise.34 Contesting Chinua Achebe’s interpretation of Conrad as another of Europe’s “bloody racists” homogenising Africa and its people into one lesser place and race, Wilson Harris points out that Heart of Darkness actively parodies “Kurtz’s liberal manifesto of imperial good and moral light.”35

Finally, then, Kurtz as the light of civilisation embodies an “impenetrable darkness,” his hunger for greatness mixing base lust for gain with the noblest of aspirations.36 Yet the duplicitous light of London and Brussels is not replaced with a simplistic ideal of nature worship, but a new sense of mystery no less foreboding. Under a star-filled night sky upriver, African drums beat out a “pure abstract terror” so “altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul,” reflected Marlow, that “the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger ... was positively welcoming and composing.”37 When civilisation’s spell is unveiled, it is left with a nature it imagined itself free from, and such a culture struggles with the seemingly ominous stranger it now faces. Nature remains the chaos monster of darkness that settlement civilisation has so often sought to order with its technological mastery. The limit of this law is met here in this fictional jungle ritual, a liminal space within which Kurtz had “kicked himself loose of the earth” so that “his soul was mad” for having looked “too far into itself” with only the wilderness for a witness.38 Marlow has no power, against such forces, to “break the ... heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” that drew Kurtz to its “pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions.”39 The light fails and splutters out in the sombre jungle, nothing yet coming forth to reignite or replace it. Achebe’s point is better served in this sense, that Kurtz is “alone” upriver, than in the idea that black Africans and their land are demonised.40 Conrad cannot imagine the jungle or its people being truly alive or conscious and thus offering a valid response to the dissolution of civilised light. For this early Modernist author, the darkness at the heart of the white dream is not really human but as impersonal as the nature Europe once dreamed it could master.

Once Kurtz has been carried into the steamer and is travelling away from the heart of darkness, the ultimately self-defeating quality of his power
is revealed, as he threatens “the invisible wilderness” that he will wring its heart yet.\textsuperscript{41} This is the voice of civilisation, failing in its quest for mastery, defying the primacy of the earth as it forges on towards ever-greater profits even while undermining the very nature that provides the raw materials for this trade. Conrad’s “horror” is a vision that embraces “the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness”.\textsuperscript{42} But this is not the darkness of Africa; it is the darkness that shadows the colonist’s drive towards being free of the earth while continuing to deploy the most effective machinations of plundering it.

What is so disturbing about Marlow’s recognition of our civilised kinship with ritualistic “savagery” is that it disturbs complacent faith in moral (cultural) law, the European version of which is revealed as a valuable human construction closely associated with a fiction of culturally sanctioned and very profitable anthropocentrism. Once this edifice is dissolved we must face the imagined “darkness” of nature all over again. While this represents a perennial possibility of better relations with nature, with other cultures and with all of earth’s creatures, it also represents a deep anxiety within the great white light of civilisation, which fears its enemy the darkness out of an old dualistic habit. When such a perspective looks into the impersonality of nature it sees the dependence of humanity, the interdependence of culture and nonhuman nature; where we must relinquish our imagined role as masters of the universe. In McCarthy’s psychoanalytical reading, Kurtz represents civilised light and steps across the edge of the map into the darkness of nature, such that we see the ego reclaimed by more ancient rights aligned with the mysterious power of the id; but then Marlow operates as superego, pulling the hero back from the jungle on behalf of the rights of the Corporation.\textsuperscript{43} The Modernist psyche was not ready to realign itself with the abiding truth of humanity’s home in nature. In many ways it would seem that we are now ready, just over a century later, to renegotiate a more sustainable relationship between culture and nature, but the forces of colonising on behalf of the profit motive still reign supreme over much of the planet and whether we are in time to avert climate catastrophe may remain the great question of our age.

The shattering of the mythic authority of civilised light by the shocking violence of the first half of the twentieth century, along with the insights of Freud, Darwin, and Frazer (and with the towering figure of Nietzsche standing behind them), resulted in a new fear of a wasteland beyond the laws of civilisation. In current times of renewed apocalyptic speculation and ecological crisis, contemporary urbanites turn to face the shadow in the heart of darkness that the light seeks so resolutely to avoid. But while the “grand narrative” of civilised domination over the planet is modified along the
course of twenty-first century history, the value of light as a symbol of goodness, truth, victory and overcoming remains assured; it will simply be idealised in new ways. For instance, while Kurtz’s ambiguous character continues to mesmerise Marlow as they begin their trip back down the river, the final scenes of the novel – the “mere shadow of love interest just in the last pages,” as Conrad described them to David Meldrum – allow a still further account of the power of light to remain victorious.\(^4^4\) Travelling to the abode of Kurtz’s “Intended” to deliver the dead man’s final papers, Marlow remembered him as “a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence.”\(^4^5\) As the messenger enters the house, Kurtz’s Intended remains illumined against the darkening gloom around her, lit “by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” and by her undying faith, “that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness.”\(^4^6\) Florence Ridley shows that, in protecting the Intended from Kurtz’s horrible depths, Marlow manifests Conrad’s faith that noble illusion could likewise help us all resist misery and maintain faith in some moral or ideal greater than the darkness of losing all restraint.\(^4^7\) But Marlow stumbles, seemingly prompted by the Intended’s murmuring grief, offering to repeat Kurtz’s final words only to quickly realise his mistake. Of course he cannot confide in her the truth: “It would have been too dark – too dark altogether” to tell her of Kurtz’s realisation, which is that nature, in the end, is a “conquering darkness” compared to the transient constructions (physical and symbolic) of civilisation.\(^4^8\) Such are the limits of the Modernist vision of nature, which remains entangled in a dualistic structure whereby culture was imagined to have escaped its old, still untamed foe.

**T S Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and the Ambiguous Light of Regeneration**

T S Eliot’s famous Modernist poem “The Waste Land” also deals with the perennial paradox that death leads to regeneration and that all of our constructions, whether material or symbolic, are fragments shored up against ruin, to use the poet’s memorable phrase.\(^4^9\) Eliot’s Old Testament sensibility for the tragic recognises that impersonal regeneration feeds upon the death of the individual and that true spiritual rebirth ironically comes when all vestiges of who we are as (splintered) individuals are scattered to the (anonymous) winds and depths of the sea. It can also be seen that “The Waste Land” displays a sense in which the light of civilisation and its formerly assumed cultural authority will inevitably be dispersed by these same natural forces. In this Eliot, like Conrad, seeks consolation in a new kind of understanding of and relationship with nature. In doing this, the poet strikes
up against the same historical limits as afflicted the novelist (and as con-
tinue to frame current interpretations of culture and nature today); the dual-
istic tendency to assign light as a symbol of cultural authority and darkness
as associated with the threats of death and the physical, nonhuman world.

In Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” there seems to be no resurrection for we
fallen modernites without the full force of tragedy extinguishing everything
we are or can believe in. Death is complete and eternal in its victory and
the only consolation we can take from this ultimate truth is that we can
grant compassion while alive; we can choose to give to those who are yet
to come, those future generations that will inherit our spiritual generosity,
and those less fortunate than ourselves. This seems particularly ironic
given the vicarious nature of the everyday, selfish lusts that are displayed
in the poem; lusts which effectively grant new life only out of the pettiness
and squalor of urbanised alienation from spirit. I find something deeply dis-
turbing in Eliot’s insinuated response to this, that only through Gnos-
tic/ascetic denial of the body can we overcome imprisonment in ourselves
and our sociocultural constraints. The otherworldliness of such an idea
hardly renders us immune from the medieval Christian notion that we are
cursed in the body and on the earth. In fact, in some ways such escapist
hopes destine us to suffer the limits of embodiment in heightened (yet
ironically pale or deritualised) fashion. Eliot’s urbanised moderns are puri-
fied by neither fire nor water, the poem suggests, but remain awash in their
inability to recognise the true nature of life and death, which is beyond sex-
ual difference and limits. Only Tiresias, physically blind, can see through
the impasse; not in denial of his mortal frame but in transcendence of it
even while inhabiting it. We will return to the seer shortly.

The sun, that familiar symbol of light and heat as it promotes growth
on earth, is introduced in the second stanza of the opening section of “The
Waste Land” in its harmful guise, as it beats down on a desert that provides
no shelter or relief. Imagery regarding regeneration, or rather its impossibil-
ity, is immediately linked with the symbol of light. We, the son of man, are
beaten down by an Old Testament sun, such that we cannot know what
may grow out of “this stony rubbish” because we have only “A heap of bro-
ken images” (Eliot, lines 19-22, with his notes referencing the books of
Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes).50 The tension between metaphors of compelling
aridity and hoped-for fecundity will continue to mark the whole poem. The
desert sun links symbolic and material concerns about the effects of mod-
ernity and colonisation. Harrison asserts in Forests that “The Waste Land”
depairs over civilisation’s spiritual decay but also registers the physical ef-
fects of changing climate by focussing on desertification.51 Laurence Buell,
in stressing the literary tradition of apocalypse, sees “The Waste Land” as
largely focused on this sense of crisis, even going so far as to maintain that Eliot had written “one of the first canonical works of modern Anglo-American literature to envision a dying society.”

David Trotter also points out that this tension is intimately linked to late nineteenth and early twentieth century fears about the apocalyptic tendencies of empires, which “decay from the heart outwards, unless they can be reinvigorated by contact with the colonial periphery, the frontier-zone where civilisation meets barbarism.” London’s stagnant decadence required a shot of undomesticated energy to its dead heart and a journey from there to the frontier at least offered the chance of regeneration. Eliot’s original desire to use Kurtz’s final words as the epigraph to his poem makes perfect sense in these terms; the poem’s mixture of frontier-myth and spiritual autobiography mirrors Marlow’s voyage, which also attempted to tell of the dangers involved in blindly accepting the stultifying routines of urban life and the revivifying energies available in the rituals of those still intimately associated with the nonhuman, natural world around them. Eliot’s allusions to the Fisher King of Grail legends shows that he had an interest in “at least [attempting to] set my lands in order” (l. 424-26). In this sense we may agree with David Gilcrest’s estimation that “The Waste Land” is “a prototype of the remedial or therapeutic poem,” maintaining an optimism against all odds that “derives ultimately from Eliot’s faith in poetry” to “make a difference” to all members of the human community.

The urbanite, however, is for now offered relief only in the shadows (of this “red rock,” l. 27), where we may enter a liminal space that offers no hope or help: “I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (39-41). Just like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, we are surrounded by water, water everywhere, but without a drop to drink; the next line, written in German, translates to “Empty and waste the sea” (42). While the tarot cards in the poem may presage some kind of transformation, with their Shakespearian allusion to the seachange that will turn thy father’s eyes to pearls (48), such hopes are marked throughout the poem by indication of their ultimate emptiness in terms of each of us in our individuality. Who cares what gems may come of my dead body, Eliot insinuates we will cry, when I am no longer enjoying it? Of course impersonal regeneration is one of the central themes of vegetation ritual and hence his reference to Jessie L Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* in his copious notes to the poem. Sacrificing the king may well ensure another year completes its rounds without catastrophe, but this can only reassure if we are also capable of putting our own individual desires aside at some stage, because the laws of vegetation obey no sense of the personal. In order to be truly a part of vegetation ritual, we must accept our own inevitable demise.
as part of the composting process. This is easier said than done in an age of increasing individuality.

When Eliot cites the “Unreal City” (60), then, he indicates that he means the one wherein the living dead now trudge along, eyes down and sighing, for all the world like they were crossing the River Styx rather than the Thames. The poet’s note indicates that he is citing Baudelaire from Les Fleurs du Mal of 1857 (and the opening lines to “The Seven Old Men”): “Swarming city, city filled with dreams / Where the specter in broad daylight accosts the passerby.” The dazzling light of the city “accosts” its captives, moths to a ravenous flame that is perhaps energising Blake’s “dark Satanic mills,” spewing out pollution and products for the modern consumer. We have already mentioned the way that many Enlightenment philosophies defined the universe as a clockwork mechanism (with the added caveat that those who did probably became more influential, due to the profitability of their views in accord with the industrial complex that employed them, than those who saw a more “vital” or living nature with which we may enjoy better relations). As Lee Rozelle points out, disintegration of the urban space results from the “loss of a unifying organicism” that results from such a vision, and this stultification of nature continues to influence flawed “modernist approaches to the natural environment that interpret those places as replicable and disposable parts.”

Eliot recognises in the machinations of modern productivity a depersonalising force that can crush the poet’s spirit just as it transforms nature; both inner potential and the outer world become so much grist to the mill of profitability and empire.

The second section of “The Waste Land” equates our mating games, meanwhile, with chess – and thereby sex with death, as is evidenced in Eliot’s notes about Cleopatra and Dido. The imagery is filled with light; burnished thrones glow, jewels glitter, candelabra hang from the ceiling to banish the night... yet suicidal tendencies are predicted as the outcome of all this lascivious display of wealth. Eliot’s asceticism makes its first appearance here, a hopeful path upon which we may avoid the endless excesses of our desires – which lay awake with “lidless eyes” (138) – and instead find consolation in the predestined, ultimate victory of death. But Eliot has some advice for us and, in this context, calling him the high priest of Modernist poetry may not be so far from the truth, whether we like his advice or not.

In section III, “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot’s commitment to some kind of minimalist response is deepened when he cites the Buddha and Augustine as “two representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism” who may be able to guide us better to overcome our lusts and be plucked, like Joshua, out of this fire in which we burn (308-11). Eliot’s sermon promises that otherwise all our sins will be met with a pox, if not a plague, that again looms
in Biblical proportions. Exiled from our true home (152), our bones are destined to be gnawed upon by rats, as the ritual killing of the king fails due to the degraded nature of its scapegoat, the new Actaeon Sweeney. Not only is our offering insufficient, but it is not purified, and only one man can see through the aporia to the ancient rites of Sacred Marriage that may undo our failed rites of the Sacrificial King. This is Tiresias, master of paradox, the blind man who sees more than any other, the only prophet capable of walking “The Waste Land” without being defeated by its propensity towards doom, who sees the substance of the poem in something like Virginia Woolf’s androgynous mind (from *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929):

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,

Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see

At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives

Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,

The typist home at teatime...  

The Greek seer unites opposites by recourse to his capacity to understand both sexes, as we recall his adventure in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when he becomes a woman for several years after striking a pair of mating snakes. But he also represents a meltdown in differentiations between night and day here, inhabiting the twilight between worlds but also, crucially, representing the night into which all individuated beings of the universe are reunited at the end of day. “Evening, bringing all that light-giving dawn has scattered,” wrote Sappho (whom Eliot cites at 221), reminiscent of the fishermen (or today the typists) at the end of their day, falling back into the cosmic soup or web of the universe, that great night out of which they came.\(^58\) Death is the ultimate unity and night is its great reminder, just as Novalis saw in his hymns to the great mother darkness.\(^59\) Meanwhile, as Tiresias foresuffers all (243), the pimply youth visiting the typist gropes his way out of her untidy abode with an Oedipal limp (247-48). While the Theban king might well wish to be plucked from the fires of life due to the enormity of his crimes, however, we modern spiritual cripples, according to Eliot, are merely broken. At a beachside resort we fumble, accosted by desire and incapable of making any connection at all, broken, sinful and scattered: “I can connect / Nothing with nothing. / The broken fingernails of dirty hands” (301-03). Isaiah’s people in the Old Testament desert were likewise reminded of their spiritual inabilities and Augustine is again cited, this time with allusion to a recollection of the fallen nature of Carthage, “where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears” (Eliot’s note).
chance have we moderns, in the face of not a cauldron but an information superhighway of temptation? The peace that surpasses all understanding – composed in Eliot’s closing mantra of the Sanskrit “Shantih” – is not a strong message on the electronic waves of the digital revolution, and would remain a mystical hope at odds with the dominant modes of production and consumption even if it were. Furthermore, Eliot’s ascetic advice offers no hope to we physical beings attempting to find sustainable relations with the earth in a postmodern age of ecological crisis. It is only with a turn beyond the material conditions of modern urban existence – either to exoticised cultures or to ancient rites – that reconciliation can be found. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” represents twentieth century western civilisation as a light that is dimmed by its excesses and one that is foreshadowed by an almost complete brokenness and aridity. Regeneration remains an almost forlorn hope in this composition of the perennial power of light, which is seen in the poem rather to threaten the future of human life due to its burning intensity and lack of relief. In response, the darkness of death provides new life, but the modern individual can take no solace in this, as they must sacrifice their own sense of self in order to ensure the anonymous regeneration of the cycles of life. Possibly this is exactly the insinuation Eliot meant us to take from the poem.

**Conclusion**

Modernist authors such as Eliot and Conrad recognise the duplicitous way that the symbol of light is co-opted by political and economical groups identifying with the values of civilisation. They also see that amongst the many and varied victims of this association, the very capacity of the earth to provide regeneration is compromised by the rapacious appetites of cultures with advanced technologies at their behest. In an age where colonisation was proceeding apace even as its evils were becoming apparent, the desertification of the earth’s virility threatened all life, even that of the masters who profited from the pillage. The light of civilisation promises much but cannot forever avoid the shadow it also throws. Nature, when considered as the nonhuman world outside the city walls (or urban law), is held away from the light and authority of the city, as a realm of relative darkness to be consumed while its agency is denied. In a way that became influential due to its profitability, nature has often been defined as a mechanical mass available for the purposes of civilisation, made “dead” so that it cannot threaten the imperial throne of human hubris. But when authors, or their protagonists, journey away from the seat of authority into “The Waste Land” at the *Heart of Darkness*, they find the shadow cast before them by the light.
they seek to escape. Civilisation is its own enemy, casting nature as the foe in this perennial psychodrama.

Both Conrad and Eliot recognise the disconnectedness of a stance that defines the earth as dead or inert matter, which could be controlled and transformed by technologically advanced cultures, in turn eroding the possibilities of a deeper relationship with the natural world for the modernised urbanite. Further they both see that we suffer from our alienation from nature, immured by privilege within the city walls both physically and symbolically, and that this alienation will ultimately prove to be self-(perhaps world-)defeating. Yet as artists both authors maintain hope in creativity. The almost parallel journeys from the London they describe as the heart of civilisation, towards a darkness intuited at the end of the light, could still hold some redemptive power for either an arid or decadent society. Further, both authors reveal the ultimately paradoxical nature of both states of light and darkness. While we are intuitively drawn to the light – of consciousness, of goodness and order and truth and abundance – we are also repelled by its voracious appetite for more. Yet in turning away towards hopes for regeneration and vigorous health – the kinds of energies we generally associate with the body, the vitality of nature, the jungle that stands so virile against the desert lands – the modern urbanite looks into the darkness and are unsettled. For Conrad this darkness is the earth unshackled from its civilised form so that it becomes “a thing monstrous and free;” from his early Modernist perspective, it is our instinctive kinship with a nature he defined as “untamed,” as well as with the rituals that accompany its rhythms, which truly disturb the white traders.  

Conrad’s Marlow leaves Africa with the feeling that nature remains threatening beyond the laws of the city but he problematises, rather than supports, the associated idea that Europe’s “acts of mastery and will in (or about) Africa” are necessarily preferable to the “black and incomprehensible frenzy” witnessed from aboard the steamer. As Conrad plaintively points out, the whites on board with the tale’s narrator are “cut off from the comprehension of [their] surroundings;” the African dancers seem mad because the European witnesses “could not understand” the “terrible frankness of that noise” due to their having become “so remote from the night of the first ages.” Marlow may claim that technology and the discipline it requires can provide “improving knowledge” to the “savage;” but Conrad makes it clear that such “improvements” come at a high cost to the European soul cut off from “remote kinship” with “this wild and passionate uproar.”

Just as Conrad follows the jungle upstream to a ritualistic unravelling of reason and its ideals, Eliot likewise finds an ambiguous darkness beneath the surface veneer of modernity. In a broken world of aridity and li-
centiousness, he asks, where do we find the key to regeneration? His answer is of course ambiguous – it is a poem after all, even with its copious notes – but aside from his mood of asceticism, Eliot, like Romantic poet Novalis, seems to find solace in the night, when all the things separated by the light of day are drawn back together. It is here, where even the differentiation experienced when we are individuated into a gendered human form is dissolved – where Tiresias as the androgynous seer envisions a great beyond without yearning to escape this embodied world – that a path to wisdom is suggested. Eliot, like Conrad before him, seeks the light beyond what can be seen in conventional human terms. Yet his Modernist yearning to retain faith in transcendental regenerative forces leads him to seek his Grail in death and the dissolution of form. This is the place where the mysteries of ritual revivify, such that we regain some sense of a relationship with nature beyond the civilised and alienating habits of mastery, consumption and profit. Blinded by the dazzling brilliance and corruption of civilisation, then, both authors capture the Modernist dilemma of a peopleironically divorced from regenerative forces by their very success. And hence we hear Tiresias once again, this time via Sophocles, warning Oedipus that his talent is at once his misery, that the light of truth he will discover when he solves his puzzle may be the worst thing he ever found, just as the Grail of modernity – the eternal feast within the city walls – may be leading the entire planet towards the nightmare in civilisation’s shadow.

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NOTES


4 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 18, 20.
5 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20, 23.
7 Robert Hampson, note 45 to *Heart of Darkness*, in regards to King Leopold II of Belgium, 132.
12 For Adorno and Horkheimer, reason is unified for the Enlightenment philosophers, such that “the distinction between God and man is reduced to an irrelevance … In their mastery of nature, the creative God and the ordering mind are alike.” Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment; Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 5-6. Isaiah Berlin wrote in a similar vein: “The eighteenth century is perhaps the last period in the history of Western Europe when human omniscience was thought to be an attainable goal.” Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment; the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 14. But against this idea that Enlightenment philosophy represented a singular front of mechanical mastery and the perfection of reason, Peter Hanns Reill notes that “during the late Enlightenment a significant number of intellectuals felt the need to vitalize nature in order to meet the problems that had been raised and not solved by mechanism’s definition of matter as inert and the conclusions that this assumption supported” (*Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) 235-36. Definitions of contested terms such as reason, culture and nature are necessarily complicated by variety; my point remains that they are aligned, in their most powerful versions, with the dominant mode (separation of culture from nature on behalf of a profit motive) of a society.
15 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993); and see note 58 below.
28 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 64.
29 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 70.
34 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 84, 92.
40 Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.”
46 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 120, 121.
While we must hesitate to take Eliot’s notes to the poems too seriously in terms of their actual usefulness for the purposes of academic analysis, I cite them when the allusions made therein are clearly relevant. This is the case here, with the influence of Old Testament prophets on Eliot’s style, and in the next instance where the idea of the Grail king’s health is associated with the land’s fecundity.

Harrison, *Forests*, 149.


David W. Gilcrest, “Rhetorical Redemption, Environmental Poetics, and the Case of the Camperdown Elm” *ISLE* 8.2 (Summer 2001) 169-180 (170).


Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 63-64.