Tidal Conrad (Literally)

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Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) begins and ends with the tide. Its first paragraph, related by the unnamed narrator whose words bracket Marlow’s, reads: “The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide” (103). As the novella continues, so, too, does the silent movement of the tidal cycle, so that by the last paragraph readers learn that the water has reversed direction and flows out to sea again:

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (186–87)

These two passages chronicle a specific series of events by means of precisely denotative language: “cruising yawl,” “flood,” “come to,” “turn of the tide,” “the ebb,” “the offing.” With few exceptions, however, the standard critical practice when it comes to these and similar moments in Conrad’s fiction has been to elide the apparently

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**Abstract:** Surface reading and similar developments in literary study advocate a turn away from symptomatic reading toward the superficial and self-evident. Arguing for the productivity of these approaches despite the contradictory language in which they have sometimes been formulated, this essay develops a related form of analysis: literal or denotative reading. Denotative reading does not reject deep or figurative interpretive possibilities. Rather, it insists they must be pursued in close connection with the facticity of fictional worlds, particularly in the case of maritime and other fiction deploying a specialized, technical lexicon. The essay treats Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as an exemplary instance of such fiction, contending that its precise articulation of tidal currents, nautical maneuvers, and ship design signals the key role of “restraint” not only in this novella but throughout Conrad’s corpus.
irrelevant minutiae of ship design, wind speed or direction, and tidal
current in favor of a focus on narrative structure, ideology, prose style,
characterization, and so forth—which is to say, on anything at all
except what is literally taking place. On those occasions where scholars
have found it worthwhile to elucidate a nautical maneuver—as, for
instance, when eminent Conradian Cedric Watts includes a lengthy
(1910) explaining how the young captain keeps his ship from running
aground after giving Leggatt a chance to escape (Typhoon and Other
Tales 230–32n), or when Denis Murphy, in the Norton Critical Edition
of The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897), provides a thoroughgoing gloss
on the novel’s densely technical third chapter—there is little sugges-
tion that such knowledge might be crucial to interpretation.3 Like gloss-
saries defining potentially unfamiliar words such as “gharry” (the
horse-drawn carriage in which the disgraced captain of the Patna is
last seen in Lord Jim [1900]) or “tuan” (a Malay term translated as
“lord” in the title of the same text), most discussions of seamanship in
Conrad’s work seem premised on making that work more readable.
Explaining nautical details in this way amounts to explaining them
away: once they become comprehensible or visualizable, they may be
passed over. The key data for analysis are assumed to lie elsewhere.

Conrad himself encourages neglect of the literal with his
penchant for motif and metaphor as well as his frequent insistence on
necessary inscrutability, most notably in Heart of Darkness itself, where
readers are told that for Marlow “the meaning of an episode was not
inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it
out only as a glow brings out a haze” (105). Evidently, knowledge of the
number and placement of masts on a yawl or the exact location signi-
fied by “the offing” can prove of little use to an interpretive project
faced with deciphering meaning metaphorized as a radiant penumbra.
Just this Conradian predilection for the fathomless and obscure is
Virginia Woolf’s target in the brief send-up of Heart of Darkness to be
found early in her first novel, The Voyage Out (1915). Describing Mr.
Pepper, she writes: “Drawn up there, sucking at his cigar, with his arms
encircling his knees, he looked like the image of Buddha, and from
this elevation began a discourse, addressed to nobody, for nobody had
called for it, upon the unplumbed depths of the ocean” (22). Pepper,
like Marlow, assumes the posture of one who would elucidate spiritual
mysteries; for Woolf, however, his teachings seem at once undesired
and as inhumanly irrelevant as the unplumbed depths they take as their occasion.

But Conrad also made a number of contrasting pronouncements stressing the necessity of deploying terms of art with exactitude and, by implication, the necessity of deciphering them with exactitude as well. In *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), he savages journalists’ typically sloppy appropriations of maritime terminology with the claim that “to take a liberty with technical language is a crime against the clearness, precision, and beauty of perfected speech” (13). In the same work he deflates the propensity to read shipboard life symbolically, asserting the accuracy of seeing things for what they are: “From first to last the seaman’s thoughts are very much concerned with his anchors. It is not so much that the anchor is a symbol of hope as that it is the heaviest object that he has to handle on board his ship at sea in the usual routine of his duties” (15). Sheer, literal weight rather than the burden of figuration keeps anchors in the sailor’s mind.

The definitive impediment to treating his fictional tides and winds as if they mattered has not been Conrad himself, then, but a critical tradition that, as if taking its cue from Marlow or his avatar Pepper, values the deep and the figurative over the shallow and the literal. Because of the difficulty of distinguishing much of Conrad’s work from maritime adventure fiction, often seen as the very incarnation of a popular and therefore frivolous nineteenth-century subgenre, those who have wanted to take him seriously have often had to create two Conrads, elevating one while demoting the other. Thus Fredric Jameson has called Conrad’s corpus “unclassifiable, spilling out of high literature into light reading and romance, reclaiming great areas of diversion and distraction by the most demanding practice of style and écriture alike, floating uncertainly somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson” (206). Despite the use of “reclaiming” in connection with “great areas of diversion and distraction,” Jameson here speaks for an entire literary-historical enterprise for which the real reclamation involves rescuing Conrad from sea schlock in order to award him a place in the modernist pantheon. The slighting reference to Stevenson—unjust even to the children’s novels and seriously wrong-headed in connection with the late Pacific fiction—makes clear that, for Jameson and others, specifically the maritime aspects of Conrad’s corpus partake of the degradations of mass culture. All this has meant, as an almost inevitable corollary, turning away in embarrassment from
sailing terminology and meteorological conditions, defining literary meaning in opposition to anything nautical that Conrad’s ships and sailors might actually be doing.

While this situation has special force in Conrad criticism, its guiding assumptions have been shared by much literary scholarship produced in the last few decades. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it in the introduction to their special issue of *Representations, The Way We Read Now*, that scholarship has defined its task as discerning a “meaning” understood to be “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (1). Eschewing this construction of texts, meanings, and the critical enterprise, they and the contributors they gather together propose an alternative in the form of an approach called “surface reading.”

In what follows I consider the rewards and difficulties of such an approach, which mandates in the first instance a refusal to read through the manifest details of a text to some sort of veiled or latent level of significance. Canvassing important recent work in this vein, I make two claims: first, that the reasons its advocates provide for why surface reading is needed render it oddly similar to the depth reading it is supposed to oppose; but, second, that the specific tenet of surface reading deserving more development is the one mandating unwonted attention to the literal in literary texts. To demonstrate the productivity of such attention, as well as to suggest what it might tell us about the representation of the sea in Conrad’s fiction, I will then return to the place of the tide in *Heart of Darkness*.

**I. Immersion in Surfaces and Other Impossibilities**

Multiple genealogies for surface reading might fairly and illuminatingly be traced. In its commitment to scrutinizing textual givens, for instance, may be heard an echo of American formalisms past, such as Cleanth Brooks’s rejection of forays into “psychology and the history of taste” (74) in favor of “a criticism of the work itself” (75). Its celebration of the sensuous particulars of literary texts repeats a key precept of the Russian formalists: that, as Viktor Shklovsky maintained, “Poetic [that is, literary] language is distinguished from practical language by the perception of its structure. The acoustical, articulatory, or semantic aspects of poetic language may be felt” (qtd. in Eichenbaum 114). But the most pertinent and proximate precursor would be Marcus’s own
Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England. In that book Marcus introduces a practice called “just reading,” which she explains as follows:

Just reading strives to be adequate to a text conceived as complex and ample rather than as diminished by, or reduced to, what it has had to repress. Just reading accounts for what is in the text without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation. Finally, just reading recognizes that interpretation is inevitable: even when attending to the givens of a text, we are always only—or just—constructing a reading. (75)

These three sentences go some way toward clarifying the essential elements of the method being proposed. To begin with, in them we witness a resolute turn away from conceiving of the literary text on the lines of either a Freudian dream, split between manifest and latent content, or a Marxist commodity, giving the appearance of being one thing while in reality being something quite different. Paul Ricoeur dubbed such conceptualizations the result of “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (30); licensed by symmetry, we might call the ample, legible text posited by just reading the product of a hermeneutics of trust.4 Just readers trust texts to say what they mean—and trust to the sufficiency of an interpretive endeavor that just reads, that rejects aspirations to finding in a text that which it does not know about itself. The latter sort of trust in particular forms part of a characteristic insistence, among those devoted to just reading and its cognates, on the essential modesty of the critical enterprise.5 In lieu of discerning beneath what a text includes that which it has excluded, or of transforming what a text says into what it refuses to say, just reading takes stock of what a text is supposedly transparently about—the phrase “the givens of a text” suggests scant analytical or perceptual work at this stage, since whatever is being noted is precisely “given” or provided in advance—and proposes an interpretation.

Procedural and dispositional modesty may seem to dictate modest results as well. In the case of Between Women, just reading eventuates in the conclusion that the range of women’s relationships depicted in the Victorian novel and nineteenth-century British culture more generally actually represents . . . yes, the range of women’s relationships. Out of context, this assertion surprises only because of its status as a remarkably explicit tautology. Marcus demonstrates, however, that the recent critical history of reading such relationships...
either as unimportant and therefore beneath notice or as veiled instances of transgressive sexuality has resulted in a specific critical situation in which that tautology can amount to a transformative and controversial interpretive claim. Indeed, the need for the tautological, and for defining the tautological as non-tautological, underwrites many of the rationales for just reading and its congeners. It is as though we are so accustomed to straining our ears for faint whispers of the non-dit beneath or behind the obvious, the loudly dit, that affirming that texts say what they mean and mean what they say takes on the force of a revelation.

In *Between Women*, Marcus articulates part of the rationale for just reading as inhering in the recent critical history of a particular discipline, studies of gender and sexuality, as brought to bear on a particular era of literary and cultural production in Britain, 1837–1901. But she also invokes the wider context of the dominance of symptomatic reading in contemporary literary studies, a form of reading that “show[s] how the marginal and the invisible are central to narratives that apparently occlude them” (74). In Best and Marcus’s introduction to *The Way We Read Now*, such reading is synecdochically represented by Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. It was in that book that Jameson dismissed what he called the “inert givens” of literary texts, insisting that textual surfaces always require rewriting in terms of the master code of dialectical Marxism before their constitutively occluded meanings can be grasped (75). For Best and Marcus, this insistence figures as one instance, perhaps the founding one for our critical moment, of the widespread practice of reading that conceives of texts as split between presences and absences, manifest and latent meanings, and above all surfaces and depths—the second term in every pair (absence, latency, depth) being privileged, and the concomitantly privileged work of the critic being, in a repeated aqueous metaphor, that of “plumb[ing] hidden depths” (18, my emphasis).6

Against this activity, Best and Marcus offer the corrective of “surface reading.” Like just reading in *Between Women*, surface reading presumes the existence of textual “givens” (5) and the possibility of “tak[ing] texts at face value” (12). Nonetheless, it expands significantly on the scope of just reading, as is most evident in an ambitious typology of various kinds of surface reading, organized according to the various kinds of surfaces to be read: material, linguistic, figurative, and so forth (9–13). The reasons for and particulars of the practices necessary
to the interpretation of these surfaces are manifold and not always commensurable with one another. But one constant stands out, and it takes the form of a valorization of the obvious. Exemplary in this regard is Best and Marcus's remark that “as Edgar Allan Poe's story ‘The Purloined Letter’ continues to teach us, what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it” (18). This allusion to “The Purloined Letter” (1844) casts symptomatic readers in the role of the dull-witted prefect of police and his team of inept detectives, unable to locate what they are looking for despite literally microscopic investigations. Surface readers, by contrast, display the sophisticated straightforwardness of C. Auguste Dupin, who finds the titular letter where anyone could see it (but no one does).

“What lies in plain sight is worthy of attention”: the first half of what “The Purloined Letter” teaches constitutes the forthright credo of just and surface readers, one in line with Dupin’s programmatic pronouncement in an earlier story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). “Thus there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial” (131). If we look again at what follows in Best and Marcus’s sentence, however, we learn still more about how they conceive of this method: “What lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation.” On this view, especially the obvious escapes notice, since the skill symptomatic readers display in their paranoid excavation of textual depths is precisely what blinds them to that which displays itself for all (or, rather, everyone else) to see.

Which goes to show that just reading can never really be, somehow, just reading, and surface reading can never simply read what’s on the surface. Consider again the non-tautological tautology of Between Women, that the range of Victorian women’s relationships depicted in Victorian novels represents the range of Victorian women’s relationships: the claim is specific but can also fairly stand in for a class of claims in which the value and necessity of seeing what lies in plain sight is given force by the assertion that what lies in plain sight has been overlooked or cannot easily be seen—has been obscured by habits of mind fostered by a certain critical approach and cannot be perceived without the aid of another, countervailing approach. The obvious must be attended to because the obvious is, paradoxically enough, so difficult to discern. We
must work to take surfaces seriously, Best and Marcus aver, because they have been, if not repressed by texts themselves, then suppressed by an enduring critical fascination with what lies beneath. Understanding close reading in search of textual secrets as misreading, surface reading offers by way of a corrective still closer reading: reading so close that it only perceives what’s actually there, reading nearly indistinguishable from looking—in Heather Love’s formulation, reading that is “close but not deep” (371).

Construed thus, surface reading names a kind of marvelous impossibility—and not because, as Bruce Holsinger has written, “like the surface itself, [it] is as illusory and elusive as Heaven” (606). Rather, it is impossible insofar as the reasons for doing it so closely resemble the reasons for deep or symptomatic reading: in a quite specific way, surface readings are not about surfaces at all, cannot be about surfaces until they have been reconstructed as hidden from view or, alternatively, possessed of their own peculiar recesses (like the surface of a mirror, flat to the touch but opening up depths to sight). Especially instructive in this connection are Best and Marcus’s brief comments on the putative political implications of the practice. “Surface reading,” they write, “which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietest, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim . . . the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork as itself a kind of freedom” (16, my emphasis). Much might be said about the surprising appearance of Kantian aesthetics signaled by the embrace of the freedom that inheres in disinterested attention to the work of art. But I’d like to call attention, instead, to the implied metaphor of immersing oneself in textual surfaces. The awkwardness of the preposition “in” as applied to the noun “surface” tells the whole story: surfaces being surfaces by virtue of their two-dimensionality (if not absolute then at least relative, as contrasted with the more capacious three-dimensionality of depths), one cannot, by definition, immerse oneself in them.

Of course it takes a certain kind of plodding literalism to point this out, for it’s easy enough to ascertain what is meant: focused attention to textual details that are significant in their own right rather than in what they omit or repress. Nonetheless, such literalism proceeds according to the dictates of surface reading itself. What emerges is not a clandestinely split text—what “Surface Reading: An Introduction”
purports to say versus what it really says, an inert facade covering over repressed depths—but a contradiction, as it were, on its face: the need to promise revelations of what had been hidden (even if in plain sight) while simultaneously refusing the search for the absent or latent; the use of metaphors of immersion while insisting that surfaces, not depths, are our appropriate concern. This is what I mean to suggest when I claim, hyperbolically, that surface reading is impossible. For such a method simultaneously posits the interpretability of textual surfaces and the exhaustion of a certain notion of reading as interpretation. But “to read,” in the sense in which literary scholars use the term, always signifies, even for just and surface readers, something synonymous with “to interpret,” and “to interpret,” in turn, signifies clarifying the unclear, making plain the abstruse. From this vantage, the imperative to attend to the surface seems more a shift in how we describe what we do than in our activity itself. The surface is the new depth—which is to say not only that surface reading asks us to relocate our interpretive activity from the depth to the surface but also and more significantly that surface reading understands the surface as promising what depths used to promise: the surprise attendant on an unveiling.

In the work of Marcus and others, surface reading amply delivers on that promise. To do so, however, it need not proceed along the lines of a polemical either/or: either surface or depth, either the obvious or the oblique. Embraced for its refusal to consider any aspect of a text “inert,” and for its insistence on the interpretive value of what texts display as well as what they conceal, surface reading can provide new critical purchase with specific relevance to texts that, like Conrad’s in particular and maritime fiction generally, are characterized by frequent deployment of technical terms and painstakingly realized depictions of events and settings. The pertinent binary in this instance is less surface/depth than literal/figurative; accordingly, the name for this critical enterprise would not be surface reading but literal or denotative reading. Denotative reading would not aspire to replace symptomatic reading but would, rather, force interpretation to account for what is hidden in texts in conjunction with what is plain to see (if one would only look), mandating in particular a more sustained consideration of the literal than is usually undertaken. The figurative, repressed, or ideological resonances of texts would not be abandoned; rather, they would be understood as incomplete if not worked out in close relation to the sheer facticity of fictional worlds.
Elaine Freedgood has developed a version of such a procedure in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, another important antecedent to and inspiration for surface reading. Rescuing fictional instantiations of mahogany, calico, and tobacco from critical evanescence, Freedgood insists on what she terms a “strong” rather than “weak” form of metonymic reading. The latter takes the deployment of novelistic things as a shorthand form of characterization—so that, for instance, Jane Eyre’s penchant for mahogany furniture “signifies that [she] is newly rich but not possessed of nouveau riche taste” (2). The “strong metonymic” reading, by contrast, proceeds from the contrary assumption that mahogany in Charlotte Brontë’s novel “figures . . . itself” (3, my emphasis). Only after an exhaustive detour outside the pages of fiction to recapture the sensuous qualities and checkered histories of things that figure themselves does Freedgood return to those pages and place the resulting object narrative “alongside and athwart the novel’s manifest or dominant narrative—the one that concerns its subjects” (12).

Such an out-and-back movement looks to me like the most productive itinerary for literal reading, which does not refuse the moment of the deep or figurative so much as it defers that moment in the interests of gathering more, and different, data. But if the overlap is instructive, so, too, is the difference, for the kind of literalism I propose cannot proceed by way of strong metonymic reading. In the case of maritime fiction, it cannot do so because the things in that fiction most in need of being taken literally are not things at all in Freedgood’s sense of the term. Some—like prevailing winds, inclement weather, the tide, or navigational maneuvers—are phenomena that we refer to offhandedly as “things” when we, like Ginevra Fanshawe in Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), can’t be bothered to designate them properly. Others, like ships, masts, or sails, are indeed *choises*, to borrow Ginevra’s catch-all designation (115–16), and their significance might well be limned by historical research on what they were made of, who made them, and where they came from. But they are also discrete elements of a diegesis, and what they denote is instantaneously clear to readers possessed of specialized knowledge. The task is to make them clear to all readers and then consider their function or effect in light of that clarity. I’m uncertain whether this means my literalism is more or less literal than Freedgood’s. What it does mean is that this literalism is not a materialism: its trajectory does not move from text to objects in history and back again; rather, it traces a textual circuit that begins
and ends with fiction but dwells between times among dictionaries, nautical charts, and tide tables.

II. Heart of Darkness (Littorally)

To begin a literalist reading of Heart of Darkness I’d like to return to the brief first paragraph of the novella: “The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.” The work of ascertaining just what is happening here is made easier by a phenomenon that, if not unique to current editions of Conrad’s works, is at least unusual in the context of reprints of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels, which is to say the inclusion of terminological help in the form of glossaries. (Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, Bram Stoker, W. H. Hudson, Oscar Wilde—none regularly moves editors to explain what certain words mean, and to explain at length, in the way that Conrad does.) In the glossary at the back of the 2002 Oxford University Press edition of Heart of Darkness, Watts judges three of these first fifty-one words to merit explanation: “come to,” which he glosses as “anchor” (219), and “yawl,” which he defines as a “two-masted sailing vessel, rigged fore-and-aft, with a large main-mast and a small mizzen-mast (rear mast)” (225).

To move from text to glossary and back again is to trace precisely the out-and-back trajectory that literal reading demands. In this instance, however, the glossary in question proves helpful but insufficient. For one thing, “anchor” is wrong or at best partial, since “come to” means, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “to come to a standstill, rest, or fixed position” and may be achieved by anchoring or in other ways (securing a boat to a mooring, for example). Similarly, the definition of “yawl,” although basically correct, itself begs additional explanation, since “fore-and-aft” might need clarification (it refers to sails oriented along the line of the keel rather than, as in a square-rigged vessel, perpendicular to it). Furthermore, in order to distinguish a yawl from another common two-masted, fore-and-aft rigged sailing vessel, a ketch, one has to know that on the former the mizzen-mast is stepped abaft of (that is, more toward the stern or rear of the ship than) the rudder post (see fig. 1).

Finally, and in its way most tellingly, a great deal of the paragraph remains unglossed: “cruising” to modify yawl, meaning that the
boat in question is used for pleasure and not work; “the flood,” which is
to say the incoming or rising tide, the period between low water and the
succeeding high water; “swung to her anchor,” turned so that the bow or
front of the boat faces the anchor (which, in the case of a rising tide
pushing the boat inland, would mean the bow faces roughly in the direc-
tion of the sea); “bound down the river,” in this case a generally easterly
direction out to the North Sea; and “the turn of the tide,” the moment
when flood becomes ebb and the water heads seaward once more.

Having pieced all this together, we can envision with precision
what happens in the first paragraph of *Heart of Darkness*: a two-masted
sailboat (we don’t need to worry about the position of the mizzen-mast for
the moment—although, strange to say, it will be important later) must
anchor in a river (the Thames, as it happens). It must do so because those
sailing it wish to make their way out to the sea but lack wind. Without any
other source of power, they also lack the ability to make headway against
the flood or incoming tide. They must therefore wait for the tide to begin
to run back out again before they can proceed on their journey.

Without doubt there is something mind-numbing about such
a painstaking reconstruction of Conrad’s opening paragraph—
intimating that extinguishing the interest of audiences or readers is
one of the chief dangers a literalist critical approach must contend
with. But I have taken that risk in order to demonstrate how specific,
and specifically articulated, are the events taking place at the outset of
*Heart of Darkness*, and to suggest that it is crucial for our understanding
of the novella in its entirety to grasp such particulars.

Before proceeding, however, I should note that passages like
this one have already been subjected to something like a literal reading
by Margaret Cohen, a contributor to the *Representations* special issue on
surface reading and to my mind the scholar now at work doing some of the most interesting thinking on the question of the novel and the sea. In an article titled “Traveling Genres,” Cohen claims about maritime fiction in general that it focuses on work, and that the way it does so provides an alternative to the degraded status of work under industrial capitalism. Such fiction, in short, offers up an imaginary solution to the real-life problem of alienated labor. In spite of this recognizably symptomatic claim (indeed, the general formulation repeats Jameson’s in *The Political Unconscious*), several aspects of the treatment of maritime fiction in “Traveling Genres” anticipate the kind of literalism I am proposing. Specifically, for Cohen maritime fiction renders work utopian by way of an emphasis on “know-how”: not what things are or where they come from (“knowing that”) but rather how they function, and specifically how to make them function to get something done (486–87). This know-how is rendered on the page by means of a distinct narrative mode that Cohen calls “active description.” Active description, she writes, “abolishes the traditional distinction between description and narration. . . . While filled with terms of art, these terms are introduced as if they were obviously known to readers, with no gesture towards their possibly specialized status. The reader’s familiarity with them is assumed, as if she, too, followed the sea” (489).

For Cohen, such description serves two purposes in works of fiction: it contributes to the verisimilitude of the story at hand and bolsters the authority of the writer in question to tell that story. While I don’t disagree with this estimation, I believe nonetheless that it misses an opportunity to attend to active description in a more scrupulously literal-minded way. Instead of dissolving the facticity of such description into the Barthesian reality effect to which it gives rise or estimating its impact on authorial credibility, we could dwell on its banal actuality. If the terms of art deployed in active description are unfamiliar to us, what if we were to learn them and then reread the description in order to ascertain precisely what’s being described? This endeavor would begin by what I’ve referred to above as making the text more readable but would then have to press beyond readability, to prolong the moment of interrupted sense long enough to register interpretive consequences.

Looking back at the opening paragraph of *Heart of Darkness*, which can now be recognized as a characteristic instance of active description, we might note that heretofore its essential element has been understood to be the speaker or writer of the words in question:
the unnamed frame narrator who introduces Marlow’s internal narration and whose pro-imperialist stance stands as a foil for the atrocities of empire as revealed in Marlow’s account of his sojourn in the thinly disguised Congo Free State. But the more crucial presence in that paragraph may be the nautical details provided without explanation or comment: the yawl setting out on a pleasure cruise, the absence of wind, the need to anchor, and above all the incoming tide referred to by the words “the flood.”

To explain just how attention to these details and what they denote might result in a particular reading of *Heart of Darkness*, however, requires skipping from the novella’s first paragraph to consider once more its last, which reads in its entirety:

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. “We have lost the first of the ebb,” said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (186–87)

Again, although assuming that we know “the ebb” refers to a falling or outgoing tide, Watts in the Oxford World’s Classics edition does include one of these seventy-four words in his glossary, defining “offing” as the “part of the sea that is visible from the shore” (223). But, again, this omits something worth knowing, which we can see from the OED definition of “offing”: “The part of the visible sea at a distance from the shore beyond anchorages or inshore navigational dangers.”

That black clouds bar the offing presumably reinforces the possibility that, having heard Marlow’s tale in its entirety, the frame narrator now questions the glibly jingoistic appreciation with which he loaded the Thames early on. That appreciation was itself expressed by way of the tide in the frame narrator’s preliminary comments:

The tidal current [of the Thames] runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. (104)

Such tidal nationalism seems to have been standard fare. The anonymous author of *The Tides* (1857), for instance, accounts for the necessity...
of understanding tidal phenomena in part because “the tides upon our coasts have had a very large share in making us as a nation what we are” (2). By the end of Heart of Darkness, however, the river that at the outset appeared perfectly suited to imperial ends “seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness,” as though the Thames were now part of or indistinguishable from the Congo, as though Drake and Franklin were to be conflated with the rapacious El Dorado Exploring Expedition or the “faithless pilgrims” who do nothing but mutter about ivory, and as though the tidal current might not provide “unceasing service” but rather a periodic impediment to the men and ships it bears. Even the offing, by definition beyond impediments and dangers, is “barred by a black bank of clouds.” Darkness has become a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose heart is everywhere.

This, however, is to read if not symptomatically then at least figuratively. If we force ourselves to be more literal, it is the unglossed “ebb” that assumes special significance. A look at the tide tables for the lower reaches of the Thames reveals two high and two low tides per day, with a bit more than six hours separating the lowest point of the ebb from the highest point of the flood (“Tilbury”). Knowing this, we may place the final paragraph of Heart of Darkness up against its first paragraph and reach at least two conclusions: 1) that Marlow’s tale lasts six hours or less, since he begins to speak at some point during the flood and continues just past the beginning of the ebb; 2) that (and here’s the key, I think) the occasion for the tale Marlow tells is that of enforced inactivity. Because the Nellie is a sailboat and not a steamer, because there is no wind, and because the tide runs up- rather than downriver at the outset, there is nothing for it (or for us) but to wait. During the waiting—“within the tides,” to quote the title of a collection of Conrad’s stories—the narrative that is Marlow’s contribution to Heart of Darkness unfolds.

One is immediately put in mind of Walter Benjamin’s pronouncement, “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.” He goes on: “A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places—-the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well” (91). These sentiments appear in “The Storyteller,” and storytelling is the sort of activity associated with boredom Benjamin has in mind. Conrad grafts his fictional practice onto the lost and, significantly, strongly maritime tradition of storytelling or yarning not only by casting Heart of Darkness as the transcription of an
oral narrative but also by constructing the conditions of possibility for Marlow’s relation of that narrative as an enforced period of waiting (for the turn of the tide) and near-imprisonment (on board a ship anchored in the river). In this novella, we might say, the tide is the dream bird that hatches Marlow’s story.

To go further: although much has been said about Conrad’s deployment of frame narrators, including the nameless one who begins and ends *Heart of Darkness*, no one seems to have noticed that the indispensable frame for this novella is provided not by a character but by water moving irresistibly contrary to its characters’ desires. So that although of course everything represented in the text comprises the diegesis strictly speaking—the tide, that is, cannot be called heterodiegetic—accurately naming the role it plays suggests the necessity for enlisting a term such as para- or semodiegetic insofar as the tide is both in the narrative, as given to us by the frame narrator, and provides the occasion for the narrative, makes the narrative possible (and not just Marlow’s but the frame narrator’s as well, since he relates that which was related to him only because of the time made available by the recalcitrant tidal current).

What are the entailments of this observation about what lies in plain sight but, to recall Best and Marcus on Poe, has so far eluded notice? Most narrowly, the properly formal characteristic signaled by a story the telling of which is predicated on humans’ subjection to a force beyond their control, a force that cannot be changed or wished away but must be endured, finds a thematic counterpart in Kurtz, who exemplifies the fate of the human in a world believed to be without such forces. When Marlow discovers Kurtz has crawled away from the steamer in an attempt to rejoin the Africans on shore, he intercepts and argues with him. The difficulty is, Marlow says, that he was talking to someone “to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low”—just “himself” (174). The accusation goes beyond that of narcissism or solipsism. The whole problem of Kurtz is the problem of a person who discovers or thinks he has discovered that he lives in a world without external limits, a world without restraint.

“Restraint”: the word constitutes an insistent refrain in *Heart of Darkness*. Musing on the unaccountable failure of the cannibal crew of the steamer to kill and eat their European overseers, for instance, Marlow exclaims: “Restraint! What possible restraint? . . . But there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of
the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma” (145–46). This passage might confirm Marlow as a symptomatic reader insofar as he likens his and the other Europeans’ continued existence outside the bellies of their crew to a disturbance on the surface of depths that cannot be plumbed. But those depths, if genuinely enigmatic, are relatively unimportant in relation to what is superficially evident, the “dazzling” “fact” of realized restraint. Again, of the African helmsman killed in an attack on the steamer, Marlow observes: “Poor fool! If he had only left that shutter alone. He had no restraint, no restraint—just like Kurtz” (156). The observation at once repeats the emphasis on restraint and connects the lack of restraint to Kurtz, a connection solidified with additional instances of the word “restraint,” of which I’ll mention only two. Of the severed heads on stakes ringing Kurtz’s compound, Marlow notes: “There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (164). Finally, later on in the passage in which Marlow diagnoses Kurtz as someone to whom he could appeal in the name of nothing but himself, he concludes: “I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear” (174).

We can begin to find our way back to the literal and the tide by noting that it is in connection with Kurtz, too, that the single figurative invocation of the tide in Heart of Darkness occurs. Here is Marlow on the steamer’s voyage back down the river with Kurtz on board: “The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz’s life was running swiftly too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time” (176). In the approach of death Kurtz at last encounters something that restrains him against his wishes, a something metaphorized, not coincidentally, as water running downriver to the sea. But more: this figurative ebbing as well as the literal downriver progress of the steamer in the inner or framed narration finds its echo in another ebbing, as well as some slight downriver progress on the part of the Nellie, in the outer or frame narration. Ten pages on, the frame narrator reports the words of the Director of Companies: “We have lost the first of the ebb.” As those on board the Nellie hear of Kurtz’s ebbing life, they themselves begin literally to ebb, physically and inexorably moving toward the sea.

In fact, since we know exactly where Marlow sits, and we know approximately where his audience is positioned, and we know, too,
approximately where the Nellie rides at anchor, it is possible to go a step further in our literalism. In the fourth paragraph of the novella the frame narrator notes: “Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast” (103). At the outset, since the yawl swings to her anchor on an incoming tide, the bow, and Marlow with it, faces out to sea. But because the Director says in the last paragraph that they have “lost the first of the ebb,” it is clear that during the telling of his tale the Nellie has swung downriver, so that by its last words her bow, and Marlow too, faces upriver, looking inland to London. (We can even say more or less where: the frame narrator mentions Gravesend, so the cruising yawl might be placed on a chart just downriver. See fig. 2.) Thus not only are Marlow’s last words, “too dark altogether” (186), uttered with brightly illuminated London spread out before him, but the familiar contention that his story in its entirety invites us to apply what he has seen in Africa to Europe finds literal confirmation in the semicircular movement of his gaze from outward and seaward to inward and landward. Marlow begins where the frame narrator ends, gazing out toward the North Sea; he ends where the frame narrator began, gazing in toward Britain’s capital.

If Heart of Darkness condemns Belgian imperialism, which seems evident, and if it implicates British imperialism in that condemnation,
which seems less certain but probable, such judgments are best understood as local applications of a more global insistence on the necessity for restraint in human affairs. Imperial acquisitiveness and cynosural self-importance have frequently been identified as Conrad’s targets in *Heart of Darkness*. Certainly the textual evidence exists to bear this out, as for example when we read of Kurtz: “‘My ivory.’ Oh yes, I heard him. ‘My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my’—everything belonged to him” (153). But this egotism, conveyed elsewhere by an image of Kurtz as an all-consuming mouth, is but one manifestation of the problem of a lack of restraint. The refrain of “restraint”—much more frequent in the novella than the phrase “heart of darkness” itself—suggests as much. And the suggestion is confirmed above all by the place of the tide, a force that shapes humans but that doesn’t allow itself to be shaped by them. The outer and inner narration are connected in *Heart of Darkness* in part by the jingoism of the frame narrator, with Marlow’s tale a sardonic comment on it, but more intimately by the thematic predicament of a man without restraint and the formal function of the tide as a source of restraint. Like Marlow himself, the concern with restraint is transtextual. Here, for instance, is Conrad in *The Mirror of the Sea* personifying ships: “they are faithful creatures, as so many men can testify. And faithfulness is a great restraint, the strongest bond laid upon the self-will of men and ships on this globe of land and sea” (111).

On this reading, a host of otherwise obscure details in *Heart of Darkness* are illuminated—such as why, to take one example, a manual of seamanship with its “repulsive tables of figures” and earnest inquiry into the “breaking strains of ships’ chains and tackle” should be a fetish object for both the Russian who attends Kurtz and for Marlow himself (141). Even if those tables are not tide tables (and they may be), they are nonetheless similarly indispensable to the sailor, along with detailed knowledge of the “breaking strains of ships’ chains and tackle.” All stand as confirmation of the nonhuman forces in the world that restrict the scope of human action, that must be grasped and negotiated with, that cannot simply be overcome or ignored. Moreover, for Conrad an essential part of that negotiation involves proper nomenclature, an ideal shared by sailor and fiction writer alike. Commenting in *The Mirror of the Sea* on the duties of a chief mate, Conrad observes:

He is the man who watches the growth of the cable—a sailor’s phrase which has all the force, precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade, achieves...
the just expression seizing upon the essential, which is the ambition of the artist in words. (20–21)

The prose of the modernist novella finds its unlikely beau ideal in repulsive tables of figures and the utterly functional maritime lexicon. Further afield, in connection with the rest of Conrad’s corpus, a literalist reading of the tide in Heart of Darkness sheds light on why Conrad should have preferred sail to steam, which now looks less like the futile nostalgia it is often diagnosed as being and more like dedication to a mode of sea travel that does not give the illusion of human omnipotence. So in The Mirror of the Sea he writes that the essence of a steamer is that its “life is not so much a contest as the disdainful ignoring of the sea” (64). Or again, in the same book he complains (complains!): “The modern [steam]ship is not the sport of the waves” (72). As Cohen has argued in connection with novelistic representations of life under sail, the necessity for creative struggle against wind, waves, and tide allows this sort of shipboard labor to be imagined as non-alienated, the opposite of industrialism’s mindless repetition. We can thus also begin to understand why it is that when Conrad does write about steamers, he usually stages their encounter with obstacles that threaten their progress or their continued existence: the submerged mass, never identified, that rips open the bottom of the Patna in Lord Jim; the typhoon in the story bearing that word as its title; or the endlessly threatening “snags” about which Marlow obsesses in the upriver sections of Heart of Darkness (see, for example, 137 and 149).12

Ultimately, though, the most interesting conclusion to be drawn from this instance of literalism may be its usefulness in making precise the nature of Conrad’s modernism—a satisfying irony, given how maritime adventure fiction and high modernism are frequently opposed to one another, as in Jameson’s placement of the unclassifiable Conrad “between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson.” Provisionally and in connection with prose fiction, we may take the term “modernism” to refer to that sort of writing that exploded the conventions of realism in the service of what was seen to be a higher verisimilitude and that simultaneously intensified realism’s moments of self-reflexiveness until they became coterminous with the modernist text itself. In many modernist novels, each of these countervailing aims is accomplished via its own technique. Free indirect discourse in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925), for instance, replaces the unitary viewpoint of a single, extra-diegetic

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narrator with multiple characters’ fleeting impressions, while the deployment of an elaborate architecture of motifs (involving birds, to take the most obvious example) insistently calls attention to the novel as a made thing through and through. But in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad achieves both the verisimilitude of humans’ subjection to forces beyond their control and the self-reflexiveness that marks the novella as artifice via the same technique, incorporating into the narrative its own enabling occasion, which is, again, the contrary tide.

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**NOTES**

1The first paragraph of the serialized version of the novella, titled “The Heart of Darkness,” differs in only one word: “us” rather than “it” follows “the only thing for” (Conrad, “Heart” 193).

2The final paragraph of the serialized version has “I looked around” for “I raised my head” and the word “also” before “to lead” (Conrad, “Heart” 657).

3For a notable exception, see Larabee.

4It is not always remembered that Ricoeur himself insisted on both suspicion of and trust in the text: “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience” (27).

5Compare this to Andrew H. Miller’s concept of “implicative” versus “conclusive” criticism (26–32): while Miller’s terms do not line up neatly with “just” versus “suspicious” readings, the provisional and inviting stance of the implicative critic finds an echo in the modesty of the just reader.

6See also Best and Marcus 1–2, as well as the first sentence of Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood’s afterword to *The Way We Read Now*: “If the essays in this special issue of *Representations* are any indication, then thirty years of plumbing textual depths has returned us to the surface” (139).

7Starting out from a similar dissatisfaction with literary interpretation as currently practiced, Franco Moretti proposes an opposite solution: “distant reading,” a mode of scholarship by means of which “literary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, without a single direct textual reading” (“Conjectures” 57; see also *Atlas and Graphs*).

8Best and Marcus briefly touch on literal reading as one variant of surface reading (12–13).

9For the rest of Cohen’s substantial and provocative body of work on maritime fiction, see her “Narratology”; “Fluid States”; “The Chronotopes of the Sea”; “Literary Studies”; and *The Novel and the Sea*.

10In Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), Martin Decoud makes the identification between English privateers and money-grubbing imperialists explicit: “There used to
be in the old days the sound of trumpets outside that gate. War trumpets! I’m sure they were trumpets. I have read somewhere that Drake, who was the greatest of these men, used to dine alone in his cabin on board ship to the sound of trumpets. In those days this town was full of wealth. Those men came to take it” (168).

11 Compare this to the claim of the captain-narrator of Conrad’s “Falk” (1903), who states flatly: “Natural forces are not quarrelsome. You can’t quarrel with the wind” (116).

12 Alternatively, he assimilates steamers to other oppositional, potentially destructive forces with which ships under sail must contend, as in Chance (1914), in which a steamer runs down Captain Anthony’s ship, resulting in his drowning: “She cut half through the old Ferndale and after the blow there was a silence like death” (324). The steamer as agent of destruction is a recurrent feature of turn-of-the-century maritime fiction. See also, for instance, Jack London’s The Sea-Wolf (1904), which opens with two steamers colliding in San Francisco Bay, and Rudyard Kipling’s Captains Courageous (1897), the seventh chapter of which centers on the sinking of a ship in the cod-fishing fleet by a steam-powered ocean liner.

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