

CONRADIANA

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David Leon Higdon

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CONRADIAN "DARKNESS" IN JOHN PRATT'S *THE LAOTIAN FRAGMENTS*

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Even though Joseph Conrad did not receive any screen credit, film reviewers in 1979 were well aware that *Heart of Darkness* had helped to shape the production of Francis Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*.¹ There was certainly no attempt by Coppola to hide the parallels with Conrad, or he would have re-named Colonel Kurtz who, like Conrad's "Mistah" Kurtz, exceeds his authority in waging a private, jungle war. If Coppola intended his film to be a judgment against the war in Southeast Asia, whose futility had become clear with withdrawal by the United States in 1975, the film's transfer of Conrad's location from the Congo to the Mekong River inside Cambodia was a rhetorical masterstroke. For film watchers aware of the Conrad parallels, Coppola was implying a critique of the war because, as one critic has wryly observed, "it is a truth universally acknowledged" that *Heart of Darkness* is an indictment of colonialism (Singh 41). Coppola's equivalent of colonial "darkness" in *Apocalypse Now* is, of course, the geopolitical system which provides similarly noble-sounding motives for an ignoble war in his own time.

What critics have not noticed is that John Clark Pratt's 1974 war novel, *The Laotian Fragments*, employs the same rhetorical strategy as Coppola's film: Pratt uses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a pattern for his narrative about the war in Southeast Asia.² It is possible that Pratt had heard about the Milius script for *Apocalypse Now*, written in 1969 (Hagen 295), but it is equally possible that Pratt, an English professor and Air Force officer at the time he wrote the book, independently noticed the rich analogies between Marlow's experiences and Pratt's own experiences in Vietnam and Laos from 1969-1970, when he had been assigned there.³ For example, Pratt updates Conrad's image of military ineffectuality rendered as a French man-of-war off the coast of Africa, "shelling the bush" with its cannons, "firing into a continent" (17). Pratt borrows this image to describe a campaign "where we'd been bombing for weeks without visible results. The bombs would disappear under the jungle canopy, sucked in it

seemed, like the shells from a lone patrol boat firing into a jungle shoreline."⁴ Further evidence indicates, however, that Pratt used Conrad's book as more than a source of images and ideas. *Heart of Darkness* is an extended parallel text to *The Laotian Fragments*, and for a reader aware of Conrad's presence behind the immediate scene, Pratt's novel can evoke a response similar to what one feels watching *Apocalypse Now* with Conrad in mind: a sense that something mysteriously wrong is going on in Southeast Asia. As with Coppola's film, Pratt's book does not acknowledge the debt to Conrad; indeed, for reasons I will go into, Pratt may have deliberately obscured the connection.⁵

Like *Heart of Darkness*, *The Laotian Fragments* begins with a narrative frame, supposedly written by a political science professor named York Harding, who has acquired the personal papers of a former student named William Blake after he disappears on a flying mission over Laos. The papers include some tape recordings but are mostly documentary. There are a few "real" articles quoted with permission from 1970 issues of *Time* magazine and the *Washington Post* and various pseudo-documents made up by Pratt to sound like cables, memos, letters, and intelligence messages found in the belongings of his Blake character. These documents constitute the "fragments" of a mysterious whole picture of clandestine activity—in all, a book which reads less like a war novel than like *The Pentagon Papers*.⁶ As editor of these materials, Professor Harding resembles the anonymous narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, sitting on a boat anchored on the Thames, the one who says he feels "fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (11). One reason Marlow's story seems inconclusive, like Harding's (or like *The Pentagon Papers*, for that matter), is that it re-presents the narrator's impressions of Kurtz as he listened to Marlow's tale, based on puzzling bits of evidence mentioned by Marlow but never made completely clear by him to the narrator.

Pratt's novel is equally impressionistic and inconclusive, providing only fragments of information which we try to integrate and to understand. For example, the first chapter describes how Major Blake's journal records his first-hand impressions of Southeast Asia. Professor Harding notes that earlier pages of the journal contain notes from an undergraduate philosophy course called "Asian Thought," which end "with an entry in heavy pencil, underlined and apparently retraced many times. . . . Approximately two inches in height, spanning five or six lines, and followed by eleven

exclamation points, this two-word entry reads, 'FUCK IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'" (7). Although a first-time reader might never guess, this is the Laotian "fragment" equivalent in *Heart of Darkness* to the pamphlet by Kurtz which contains seventeen pages of high-minded rhetoric on the suppression of savage customs, annotated later with the scrawled expression of disillusion: "Exterminate all the brutes" (51).

Like Conrad's novel, Pratt's novel has little conventional plot, although there is a psychological progression similar to Marlow's by William Blake, the central character, from innocence to experience. The literariness of the name may affect some readers who are unable to avoid thinking of the English poet (like some moviegoers who are unable to forget that Colonel Kurtz is being played by Marlon Brando). Blake is by no means the only character in *The Laotian Fragments* with a literary name; even York Harding's name is evidently an homage to Graham Greene, who mentions the writings of a fictional York Harding in *The Quiet American*.⁷ Less literary names might have promoted the illusion that Pratt's "fragments" are genuine documents instead of fictions. Pratt chose to undercut this kind of realism by playing literary games—perhaps in the spirit of postmodernism that views traditional realism as a trifle naïve. Surely having a character named William Blake read *Catch-22* on his flight from the United States to Vietnam is a cue for readers that this novel is to be read as a self-consciously literary journey, full of allusions and literary names, whose meanings are intertextual.

A more important literary aspect of *The Laotian Fragments* than that constituted by the names, however, is the book's relation to *Heart of Darkness*. When, for example, Blake arrives at Tan Son Nhut Airport, Vietnam, he compares the reception room to "a Toonerville railroad station" (9). The word *station* is an echo from Conrad, and Saigon is Pratt's equivalent of Conrad's "outer station" in *Heart of Darkness*, with "Vietnamese clustered quietly" much like the black slaves at the coastal station in the Congo (20-21). Blake proceeds six months later to the counterpart of Conrad's "central station," to Vientiane, Laos. In an homage to Conradian details such as grass growing through the ribs of Fresleven (13) or "a boiler wallowing in the grass" along with other "pieces of decaying machinery" (19), Pratt describes the Vientiane airport with "grass growing through cracks in the concrete and what looked like old hulks of airplanes sagging off to the sides—C-46s and C-45s, some without wings—in the weeds" (28). In a military crisis several

months later, Blake assumes duties at the "inner station" of Long Tieng, near the Plain of Jars in north-central Laos, from where Major General Vang Pao and his army of Meo tribesmen are resisting an offensive by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces in fighting that threatens to go beyond the traditional, seasonal exchange of territory.

This struggle is the one which became known in the news media as the CIA's "Secret War" in Laos. *The Laotian Fragments* never mentions the CIA directly, but it does contain several references to "the Company," a phrase which is the traditional euphemistic nickname for the CIA. Kathleen Puhr assumes in her article that these references to "the Company" are indeed references to the CIA (116), and a 1989 review in the *New York Times* of the book *The CIA and American Democracy* was titled "The Company We Keep"—without explanation. This meaning of "the Company," then, is part of American mass consciousness; serendipitously for Pratt's purposes, the phrase is also used by Belgian traders in *Heart of Darkness* to refer to their colonial headquarters in Brussels (61). Pratt may signal his awareness of this ironic coincidence when, in a discussion of how CIA employees behave differently from military personnel, Blake mentions the rumor that the Laotian ambassador had once been "a Company man in the Congo" (69). As an honorary Raven FAC, or Forward Air Controller, who had flown on missions directing strikes in support of CIA operations in Laos, Pratt could hardly have failed to note this irony when he re-read *Heart of Darkness* with his Air Force Academy students in the early 1970s; perhaps Conrad's use of the term *company* gave Pratt the original idea of translating the heart of darkness from Africa to Southeast Asia.

Unlike most war novels, *The Laotian Fragments* is deliberately anticlimactic. Pratt tells about how the Communist forces moved farther than ever before into territory traditionally held by Vang Pao and his forces, only to withdraw mysteriously when they have an opportunity to overrun his headquarters and deal a significant defeat to the American war effort in Laos. In a supposed draft of a summary for the Defense Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Air Attaché writes, "there is an air of deepening mystery infusing the entire operation" (223). Blake has earlier noted, with reference to books about Laos, that "no one really has access to all the facts, anyway" (137). The idea that truth is inaccessible, if it even exists, is an important theme in Pratt's book, as it is in Conrad's. Marlow interrupts his narrative to express similar concern that the

fragmentary impressions he is providing do not mean anything, as he asks his listeners, "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (27). Pratt acknowledges the inadequacy of language in other ways. He includes as one of the "fragments" an excerpt, "The Tiger in the Pagoda," from *Time* magazine, which Blake deconstructs line by line, revealing hidden or invalid assumptions as well as inaccuracies, concluding that "no matter who's telling the story, you've got to read between the lines" (88). Other "facts" seem deliberately distorted, as when the targets described as six trucks and a tank (81) become in the bomb damage report "14 trucks and 3 tanks destroyed" (93). And one of Blake's last statements in the novel is a rambling speech into a tape recorder, where he comments on his own commentary: "What could I really say? The truth? The facts, ma'am? The way it really was? Or is my goddamn drunk and heat-oppressed brain conjuring up another fucking fiction on this tape?" (214). The literal last word of Pratt's book is "truth," which has been conspicuous by its elusiveness in the novel—in spite of the novel's claim to a certain nonfictional status for much of what it reports. It seems that for Blake, the more he learns about the war, the less he feels he knows. Like Marlow, as Blake moves psychologically to an increasing awareness of how noble-sounding policies are being carried out, he feels a decreasing confidence that any meaning underlies the discussions, military activities, and policy disputes—in short, the fragments. The absence of cosmic purpose which Marlow glimpses in the colonial scheme of *Heart of Darkness* parallels the absence sensed by Blake of a geopolitical vision informing the inconclusive military activity in *The Laotian Fragments*.

Pratt does not follow Conrad's model systematically, however. It is not even obvious who the Kurtz figure is in *The Laotian Fragments*. In one of the most obvious departures from Conrad's script, Pratt gives attributes of Kurtz to several of his characters. A reader conscious of the presence of Conrad in Pratt's novel might expect to find the Kurtz figure at Long Tieng, the Laotian "inner station." In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz is instigating tribal wars or, less charitably, raids on other villages in an effort to acquire a mass of ivory. In Pratt's novel, even if General Vang Pao is involved in the smuggling of opium, as the Air Attache's daughter tells Blake "everybody knows" that he is doing (57), Vang Pao's status as one of the local chieftains prevents him from carrying the kind of moral weight an American would have as the equivalent of Kurtz, the European running amok at the heart of the Belgian colonial empire.

Abraham Horowitz, evidently the CIA station chief, is "directing the scenario" (131) and has a name which echoes the word *horror*, associated with Kurtz. However, Horowitz is normally back at the central station of Vientiane. Pratt's American base commander at the inner station of Long Tieng on the other hand, Major Dante Hamilton, is a strong candidate. Besides being found at the center of the war effort, Hamilton's "unorthodox manner" (42) suggests Kurtz's use of "unsound method" (63). Hamilton is to be replaced by Blake, as other traders assume that Kurtz is to be replaced by Marlow. Also like Kurtz, Hamilton has "gone native" to the extent that he "can eat Lao food regularly, and he even has a 'wife' who has been given him by Vang Pao" (42). Hamilton is not a clear parallel to Conrad's Kurtz either, however, because Pratt has assigned other attributes of Kurtz clearly to Blake himself, including the relationship with a distant, white female. Kurtz has his Intended in Europe and a concubine in Africa; Hamilton may have a Laotian concubine, as Kurtz does, but the female we hear about back in civilization is not Hamilton's but Blake's wife. In a letter Blake does not mail, he refers to her as a "princess" and as a woman who cannot understand what he is doing—not unlike Kurtz's fiancée, who must be protected from the truth. In sum, Pratt seems to have given characteristics of Kurtz to Horowitz, Hamilton, and Blake—a move which requires Blake, in turn, to be a composite figure, part Kurtz as well as part Marlow.

When Blake apparently dies, as Kurtz certainly does in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator must take the news back to Blake's wife at the end of the novel. Indeed, the last few pages of *The Laotian Fragments* contain the most obvious parallel with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Blake has sent Harding a letter asking him to give his wife a call and to "let her know that I'm still alive and well in Indochina" (240). Of course, by the time Harding pays this visit, Blake has been declared Missing in Action. Even Harding's thoughts as he decides to make the visit are word-for-word the same as Marlow's (except for the first *that*): "I had no clear perception of what it was that I really wanted. Perhaps it was an impulse of unconscious loyalty, or the fulfilment of one of those ironic necessities that lurk in the facts of human existence. I don't know. I can't tell. But I went" (241; cf. Conrad 71-72). As the episode develops, Pratt continues to borrow from Conrad for the setting and dialogue. In *Heart of Darkness*, as Marlow arrives at the house of Kurtz's Intended, "dusk [is] falling." Marlow observes "the tall marble fireplace." He places a package Kurtz has asked him to give

her on a table. She comments, "It was impossible to know him and not to admire him." When asked what Kurtz's last words were, Marlow can hear them: "The last word he pronounced was—your name" (72, 75). In *The Laotian Fragments*, as Harding arrives at Mrs. Blake's house, it is "growing dark." He observes "the red brick hearth." He thinks about how Blake's "voice had spoken to me after a silence of many years, but nowhere had he given me the slightest hint of the dangers he had experienced or the horrors he would only too shortly undergo." Mrs. Blake begins the conversation with Harding by remarking, "I admired him so." When Harding places Blake's letter on the table, she asks,

"Did he say anything about me?"

"No," I lied. "I'm sorry." I replaced the letter in my inside jacket pocket.

"Ironic," she said. "The last thing he wrote was your name on the envelope."

Pratt has his own sense of irony, for the lie does not protect frail womanhood, as Marlow's does; indeed, in a reversal of Conrad, Mrs. Blake has initiated divorce proceedings, is a fiancée in reverse, an "intended" non-wife (241-43).

These parallel passages indicate that John Pratt's writing of *The Laotian Fragments* was deeply involved in his reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. And if we read *The Laotian Fragments* with Conrad's text in mind, our interpretation is inevitably affected. Read without awareness of this intertextuality, Pratt's novel might seem to be an elegy for some mute, inglorious pilot lost over Laos, rather than a critique of the war. After all, Pratt dedicates his novel to the Raven FACs with whom he flew. And the book's dust jacket shows a rugged-looking Pratt in the cockpit (of an OV-10) and identifies him as a subsequently-promoted lieutenant colonel as well as "a former pilot in the clandestine war over Laos." I infer that he feels proud of his flying career and feels comradeship with the Ravens. I further imagine that some of Pratt's own attitudes emerge through the voice of Blake, who writes to his wife, "Regardless of *why* we're here, I am a military officer and I'm doing my job" (37).

Individual Ravens must have felt genuine concern for the Meo tribesmen, who depended on the Ravens to direct American aircraft against their enemies—the same aircraft which the increasing American emphasis on interdiction would divert away from Meo battlegrounds in northern Laos to the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos, bombing trucks enroute from North to South Vietnam. A reader can sense a tendency for Pratt to see policy through Western eyes when Blake refers to the Meo tribesmen as

"the little guys" and the NVA as "the bad guys" (208), or when Blake delights in telling the legendary story about the North Vietnamese soldier overheard on acoustic sensors making love to a nurse, or the one about a soldier who tries to recover a sensor hanging in a tree and is monitored cutting off the limb he's sitting on (149-50). Pratt's sympathies seem unlikely to extend so far as those of his character Colonel Lunderberg, however, who wants to "nuke" Hanoi until it is a deep-water port (233). Pratt's views probably align themselves fairly closely with the dutiful skepticism of his character Blake, who notes, "I see no overall sense of purpose reflected in the daily actions of the men, yet they do their jobs—and some die doing them—it's only when a *lack* of purpose from above starts shining through that the guys start fidgeting" (209).

As an English professor at the time he wrote the book, Pratt might be expected—as an academic and author—to have played literary games with a canonized text like *Heart of Darkness*. One outcome of this approach needs to be contemplated, however: by constructing Blake as a composite of both Marlow and Kurtz, he implicates Blake in "darkness" more fully than Conrad does Marlow. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow says that he was able to pull back from the void and cling to his saving illusions. When Pratt's Blake disappears, he becomes literally lost in the heart of Laotian darkness, as Kurtz loses his moral bearings in the Congo. It is possible, then, to see the death of Blake either as a parallel event to the death of Kurtz, or as a submission of the Marlow character to the powers of darkness, as if Conrad's Marlow had gone ashore for a howl and a dance and never returned. By situating Blake as he does, Pratt invites any reader aware of the Conrad parallels to see the whole Southeast Asian war effort as the moral equivalent of colonialism.

This equivalence is close to the classic Marxist critique of the American war effort as capitalist imperialism, and I find it difficult to imagine that *Major* John Pratt thought of himself as a writer on the anti-war left. On the other hand, *Professor* John Pratt must have recognized the implications of what he was doing. I consider his book to be a working out of his own ambivalent feelings about the war in Southeast Asia, an ambivalence perhaps related to a view he once expressed that to be an Air Force officer and an English professor at the same time requires a kind of "creative schizophrenia." Pratt was something of a conundrum when he taught at the Air Force Academy, an officer with a keen sense of military professionalism and an equally keen sense of intellectual

cynicism, a maverick who relished administrative subversions such as refusing to stop wearing his coat and tie to class after the Dean prescribed a less-formal dress code.⁸ Pratt's attitude toward duty and the mission was not so different from the attitude expressed above by his character Blake, which might be paraphrased, "Do your duty well, even if the system is screwed up." I can see Pratt's "schizophrenic" ambivalence in his combining of Marlow and Kurtz into the dual personality of the character Blake, who expresses Professor John Pratt and Major John Pratt, humanist and warrior. Part of Pratt's attraction to *Heart of Darkness* may have been Conrad's recognition that Kurtz is a psychological double of Marlow, a subversive aspect of his personality or, to use phrases important to Conrad, a "secret sharer" or a "secret agent." This last phrase is particularly appropriate, of course, in that Pratt's association with the CIA makes him a literal secret agent.

It is tempting to imagine that Pratt saw himself as a secret agent literarily as well as literally, for *The Laotian Fragments* may have constituted a sort of publishing "conspiracy." On the surface, it is a story about a dutiful military officer and a skeptical civilian professor—both of whom are "cover" identities, personae which mask the true identity of the author, whose negative assessment of the war is further disguised by imbedding his critique in an intertextual relation with a literary classic. Discerning the biographical John Pratt behind the masks and the "cover story" is as difficult as trying to figure out who is working for which side in a spy novel. If Pratt had not been subtle with his critique of the war, his book might have been suppressed or his Air Force career jeopardized. As it turns out, no one penetrated the conspiracy.

According to Malcolm Cowley's endorsement on the rear dust jacket, Pratt's novel was "invented with such knowledge of the facts as to convince the Pentagon, for a time, that the documents had been taken from its files." Inside the dust jacket, a "high-ranking source" reports that Pratt's manuscript was considered "so classified in Washington that the author was not allowed to see his own manuscript." I suspect that the government reviewers were so concerned over the possibility that Pratt had used classified sources (less than three years after that other "conspiracy" to publish *The Pentagon Papers*) that they overlooked Pratt's key, unclassified source: *Heart of Darkness*. I doubt that the official reviewers would finally have released the manuscript for publication if they had realized that it contained an antiwar sub-text, the Conradian inter-text; for the novel's connection with Conrad makes *The Laotian*

Fragments into as much a critique of American government policy as Conrad's novel is a critique of colonialism. Since the American government's own reviewers and security monitors failed to recognize and "break" this political code, thus uncovering Pratt's "double agency," it is time for textual critics to do so.

NOTES

1. William M. Hagen explains how the film came to omit any reference to Conrad in his article "Heart of Darkness and the Process of *Apocalypse Now*," written for a special issue of *Conradiana* in 1981, and since reprinted in the 1988 Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*. The film's connection with Conrad was standard in magazine reviews of the film.

2. The only critical essay on Pratt's novel appears in Kathleen M. Puhf's "Four Fictional Faces of the Vietnam War," *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.1 (1984): 99-117. Puhf calls *The Laotian Fragments* "perhaps the most stylistically unusual of the Vietnam War novels" (115). She has nothing to say about Conrad.

3. Jack M. Shuttleworth, one of Pratt's colleagues at the Air Force Academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, recalls that Pratt was assigned to Project CHECO (Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations) in Vietnam. Pratt evidently obtained some material for *The Laotian Fragments* when he flew several missions over Laos.

4. Besides this seeming echo of Conrad on page 208, there are other references to ineffectual bombing as "blowing up all those trees" (79), "blowing up trees" (139), and "pounding every tree in sight" (161). Conrad elsewhere refers to the pilgrims' response to the attack on Marlow's steamer as "simply squirting lead into that bush" (46). Skeptical references to U.S. bombing as destruction of trees and monkeys were commonplace during the air war in Southeast Asia (in which I served as an intelligence officer), but Pratt's other references to Conrad will make clear that such similarities to Conrad are more than coincidental.

5. In his "Bibliographic Commentary" to "Reading the Wind": *The Literature of the Vietnam War*, Pratt comments on his own novel without mentioning Conrad (146).

6. Pratt may have been inspired by *The Pentagon Papers* to present his story as a collection of documents. Neil Sheehan, editor of *The Pentagon Papers*, similarly chose not to shape official materials into a conventional, historical narrative but instead to let them speak for themselves, even though, as he explains in his introduction, "the very selection and arrangement of facts, whether in a history or in a newspaper article, inevitably mirrors a point of view or state of mind" (xvii). Pratt's editor-character York Harding concludes the novel's epilogue with a similar justification for presenting the "fragments" as he found them: "This method is, after all, the only objective way, even though any selection and arrangement of facts, whether in a newspaper article, a tape recording, or a private document, inevitably mirrors someone's point of view or state of mind" (245). The identical phrasing would seem to constitute a discreet homage to Neil Sheehan.

7. Although both York Hardings are political scientists, Pratt's character is struggling to understand what Greene's character is an expert on: Southeast Asia. Greene's "quiet American" admires Harding and owns all of his books: *The Advance of Red China*, *The Challenge to Democracy*, and *The Role of the West* (21, 28). Kathleen Puhf has noted Pratt's "respect for literary figures" and points out the

origin of the name York Harding. She also notes that Air Attache Jake Barnes "hasn't got any balls" and Captain Robert Browning is killed early in his career. Other literary names include Major Dante Hamilton who, like the Italian poet, reaches the center of the war in Laos (and "war is Hell," as everyone knows). Like the author of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Pratt's Lieutenant Colonel Vonnegut has previous experience in strategic bombing (151). Some names are selected for their religious implications: Blake's wife, Mary Joseph, is Catholic (56); Colonel Gabriel gives intelligence briefings (151); Lieutenant Colonel Raphael is "an Army man" (131). One name seems historical rather than literary: like William Jennings Bryan, advocate of the gold standard, Pratt's, W. J. Bryan, requests that the Laos attache get him a four seasons bracelet, an item of black-market Laotian gold jewelry. Pratt is also fond of allusions to literary works: *Slaughterhouse Five* (185), "Dover Beach" (180), "Ozymandias" (234), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (126), *Dombey and Son* (51), *Hamlet* (38), *Catch-22* (9, 20, 37), and a double allusion to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (213). The walk in the rain at the end (219) recalls *A Farewell to Arms*, and the "fragments" of Pratt's title recall the end of *The Waste Land* (431).

8. Pratt was my colleague during his last two years in the Air Force and my first two years at the Air Force Academy Department of English, 1973-75.

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