A Conquest Foretold

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Ranajit Guha

> For years we could not talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to spin around a single common anxiety.
> —Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

A Small Victory Called Conquest

Whenever I read or hear the phrase *colonial India*, it hurts me. It hurts like an injury that has healed and yet has retained somehow a trace of the original pain linked to many different things—memories, values, sentiments. For pain, says Wittgenstein, "is characterized by very definite connexions." The phrase he uses here in the German original is in fact more inclusive than mere connections: *Zusammenhänge*. What it connotes is not only linkages, but also a sort of aggregation of the linked entities to form a loosely gathered context.[1] The context of the pain that niggles us, shadows every reference to us as the colonized or once colonized, is part of a legacy that dates back to the early years of British rule in South Asia and was passed on, through successive generations, eventually to us whose passage from infancy to youth coincided with the last two decades of the Raj. The turmoil and sensitivities of that difficult transition not only added to the intensity of the pain but taught us at the same time to contextualize it in history.

We learned, for instance, to trace it back to its source in an event which had come, by this time, to epitomize the British conquest of India. That event was the battle of Plassey, fought between the Nawab of Bengal and the English East India Company, in which the latter won a decisive victory on 23 June 1757. As an armed conflict, it was a relatively minor affair—less of a Waterloo than one of those regional clashes in which Europe's mercantile operations in South Asia had been routinely involved since the seventeenth century. It impresses us, in retrospect, not so much for its military outcome brought about by a prearranged defection of the Nawab's commander in chief as for its foundational importance in the history of conquest. For India was not conquered in a nine-hour battle on one single day.[2] Even the company's acquisition of Bengal, which was to prepare the ground for its further expansion, had to wait another seven

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years for the battle of Buxar (1764) and the grant of Diwani (1765) before it could be said to have emerged finally as victor and ruler in a corner of eastern India. Indeed, it would take nearly one hundred more years of war, intrigue, and piecemeal annexation—region by region and often locality by locality—for conquest to be consummated in British paramountcy over the subcontinent as a whole.

Yet a conquest was already foretold in the first colonial histories produced within less than two decades of the victory at Plassey. The victory, it was claimed, had invested the company with a sort of right, designated somewhat hastily as a "right of arms." As Alexander Dow, a near contemporary of that event and one of the first colonial historians, was to write in his monumental work, *The History of Hindostan*, "The provinces of Bengal and Behar are possessed by the British East India Company, in *reality*, by the *right of arms*, though in *appearance*, by a grant from the present emperor."[3] The "reality" invoked in this observation, dated 1772, was precisely what guided the so-called founders—that is, the first generation of the company's officials who gave its mercantile-militarist apparatus the semblance of a civilian administration—in their approach to the question of power. Warren Hastings spoke for all of them when he characterized "the sword which gave us the dominion of Bengal" as a "natural charter."[4]

Statements such as these registered all too explicitly the buccaneer's faith in his sword. He relied on the sword to cut through the constitution of a well-established Asian monarchy and to deal with a fiscal grant of three large and fertile provinces as a mere "appearance." It was not the Mughal emperor but brute force that, he believed, "gave" the victors "the dominion of Bengal"—a gift which owed little to political arrangements and issued directly from the belief that man's violence against fellow human beings was "natural." One more step and conquest would be consecrated as predestination and providence would take over from both man and nature.

However, a closer look should make it clear that there was more to all this than a simple-minded brutality striving for mystical effect. For a buccaneer's sword requires no right or charter to justify it. It takes its stand on an instant of quintessential aggression, that is, on an absolute present, and has little use for futurity ex post facto. By contrast, a charter always looks ahead and derives its validity from the entitlement it confers on its beneficiaries for rights to be enjoyed in time to come. The conquistador must, therefore, move forward from the *Augenblick* of his flashing sword to history, from instantaneous violence to law, before he can even begin to talk of charters and rights. And the moment he does so he ceases to be conqueror and sets himself up as ruler, although the habits of thought and speech may still continue to designate him by the terms of his erstwhile project.

The future-directedness of this process which converts conquest into rulership is clearly acknowledged in classical political philosophy. Hobbes considers it significant enough to make it the defining principle of what he calls "a *Common-wealth by Acquisition* . . . where the Soveraign Power is acquired by Force."[5] Dominion, he argues, can never follow directly from conquest. All that conquest and victory in war do is invest the victor with the power of life and death over the vanquished. They don't yet establish a relationship between the two. For that to happen, captor and captive must relate as master and servant by a covenant which enables the latter "to evade the present fury of the Victor, by Submission" and which secures his survival by allowing futurity to prevail over the immediacy of force. "And this Dominion," writes Hobbes,

> is then acquired to the Victor, when the Vanquished, to avoyd the present stroke of death, covenanteth either in expresse words, or by sufficient signes of the Will, that so long as his life, and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the Victor shall have the use thereof, at his pleasure. And after such Covenant made, the Vanquished is a SERVANT, and not before. . . . It is not therefore the Victory, that giveth the right of Dominion over the Vanquished, but his own Covenant.

The importance of this argument can hardly be overstated. It leaves the notion of a pure and unmediated entitlement acquired by conquest nothing to stand on. "To demand of one Nation more than of [any] other, from the title of Conquest, as being a Conquered Nation," says Hobbes, pulling no punches, "is an act of ignorance of the Rights of Soveraignty."

The severity of this observation appears, however, to have done little to prevent historians from confounding conquest with rulership. Even when, in the rare instance, an author happens to recognize the need for discrimination, he goes no further than to discuss the question merely as one that concerns the victor's urge to acquire legitimacy without asking how such an urge makes for a temporal shift transforming conqueror into ruler. Indeed, interpreting this process in terms of a positive legality amounts to an untoward hastening of its pace. For the conqueror of the post-Columbian era belonged to a demimonde where distance from metropolitan seats of power and exigencies of adventure made invocation of the law rely less on the rigor of statutes than on loosely constructed ceremonies and ad hoc rituals. As Patricia Seed observes in her important work on the ceremonial aspects of the conquest of America (the mightiest conquest of our age):

> At the heart of European colonialisms were distinctive sets of expressive acts—planting hedges, marching in ceremonial processions, measuring the

stars—using cultural signs to establish what European societies considered to be legitimate dominion over the New World. Englishmen held that they acquired rights to the New World by physical objects, Frenchmen by gestures, Spaniards by speech, Portuguese by numbers, Dutch by description.[6]

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In other words, it requires a symbolic mediation for the moment of conquest to be assimilated into law as a right. Insofar as this symbolization is the work of "cultural signs," these signs act in each instance as carriers of agreed meanings which bring the past to bear on a present collapsed into the future. Historicization of this kind is nowhere more explicit than in the urge that makes an expansionist project fall back on some tradition or other in order to justify itself. Most of those European powers—the English, the French, the Portuguese, and the Spanish—which acquired dominion in the Americas invoked the name of Rome as the source of an imperial tradition reactivated in their respective colonial enterprises.[7]

In some instances, however, the emphasis would shift significantly from tradition and past glories to the importance of conquest for the future of the conquering powers themselves, as witness Dow's claim, made for Britain, that with the East India Company's victory "an ample field lay open before us, but we have appropriated revolution and war to history."[8] He connected the actuality of the clash between the English and the Nawab thus to a prospect—"an ample field" of opportunities opening up to the victors—as well as to a past that contextualized it in terms of all those other victories which had preceded it. Assigned to history, the battle of Plassey would henceforth stand out as an eminently datable event inaugurating the 190-year-long career of the Raj.

A Datable Victory

Datability is distinguished in this particular case by a clearly identifiable mark on the calendar—23 June 1757. But it is not, in essence, different from what makes so much of our ordinary experience datable in everyday discourse, such as an Indian woman saying, "That was when my daughter was sent back to us by her in-laws," or a peasant, "Now that the river is rising . . ." The misery of the present out of which the mother speaks in the first sentence straddles a past and a future. Laden with the grief of a woman's life shattered already by a marriage for dowry, it looks ahead with apprehension to the stigma (of social failure) and the hardship (of an extra mouth to feed) with which the poor family is condemned to live for years to come. Again, the farmer's anxiety about a swelling river looks back to the labor and resources that have gone into tilling and sowing the fields and at the same time fears the harm it will do if the flood makes its

way into the standing crops. The "now" of the speakers implies, in these utterances, a "when" corresponding respectively to the "when" markers of past and future.

According to Heidegger, datability denotes precisely "this relational structure of the now as now-when, of the at-the-time as at-the-time-when, and of the then as then-when." Even if one "can no longer determine exactly and unequivocally the when of an at-the-time-when" by pointing to a calendar, events such as the discarded wife's return to her parental home and the threat of a river bursting its banks are no less datable than the battle of Plassey. For they all belong equally "to the essential constitution of the now, at the time and then" with each of these predicated on "when" as now-when, at-the-time-when, and then-when.[9]

Of course, not all of what is datable is written up as history. But that does not take away from the truth of its temporal constitution. It only goes to show how little the demand of historicalness is met by historiography. The intentionalities and ideologies which guide the latter in its selective strategies are as much a measure of this inadequacy as they are its instruments. They make it possible and, thanks to an almost universally statist bias, necessary that the story of a marriage ruined by dowry or of a farm ruined by flood finds no place in history, but that the battle of Plassey does. And even for that battle it is selectivity which endows it at once with the glory of past triumphs and the promise of more to come. The ruse of a colonialist writing seems to have manipulated the datability of a relatively minor conflict to foretell the conquest of an entire subcontinent.

Yet it is important to notice how hesitant such manipulation has been in a manner quite uncharacteristic of this genre. Consider, for instance, what William Hunter, an eminent historian who was also a high-ranking official, has to say about Plassey in *The Indian Empire*, a work which did more than most other books to influence the production of curricular histories of the Raj for all levels of public education since its publication in 1882:

> The battle of Plassey was fought on June 23, 1757, an anniversary afterwards remembered when the Mutiny of 1857 was at its height. *History has agreed to adopt this date as the beginning of the Empire in the East.* But the immediate results of the victory were comparatively small, and several years passed in hard fighting before even the Bengalis would admit the superiority of the British arms.[10]

What we have here is a rare instance of historiography's doubt about its ability to control a sequence of events it has undertaken to narrate. Chronology, the basic mechanism for that control, appears to have broken down, giving conquest an anachronistic precedence in a series where it

occurs, in fact, only as the final and cumulative outcome of years of armed conflict. Hence the embarrassment of its admission about the somewhat unhistorical character of this dating as a mere convention with nothing to it except a simple agreement "to adopt this date as the beginning of the Empire in the East." Intended to uphold the past as the only and essential concern of historical discourse, this explanation seeks to keep the latter unmistakably apart from any kind of foretelling.

Conquests Foretold

To recoil from foretelling was of course proper for Hunter's way of thinking and telling the past. He was simply being faithful to a tradition of historiography committed to a linear concept of time with the past figured in it as a segment defined by its severance from the future. The historian stands in this tradition in direct contrast to the oracle and has as little to do with the future as the latter with the past. In Sophocles' tale, Oedipus discovers this at the cost of some discomfort. As he recalls in a dialogue with Jocasta:

> One day at table, a fellow who had been drinking deeply
> Made bold to say I was not my father's son.
> That hurt me; but for the time I suffered in silence
> As well as I could. Next day I approached my parents
> And asked them to tell me the truth. They were bitterly angry
> That anyone should dare to put such a story about;
> And I was relieved. Yet somehow the smart remained;
> And a thing like that soon passes from hand to hand.
> So, without my parents' knowledge, I went to Pytho;
> But came back disappointed of any answer
> To the question I asked, having heard instead a tale
> Of horror and misery: how I must marry my mother,
> And become the parent of a misbegotten brood,
> An offence to all mankind—and kill my father.

The tragic outcome of that Delphian reticence is known well enough. Its relevance for our argument lies in the fact that by refusing to play historian to Oedipus in answer to queries about his origin, that is, about his past, and prophesying his future instead, the oracle laid the ground for a man's encounter with his fate and for some important questions to be asked about the nature and function of history. It makes one wonder, for instance, whether there is nothing to historiography other than a simple reversal of that prophetic stance and whether the historian should therefore be concerned as little with fate and foretelling as the priestess was with the past and its recall in that ancient tale.

Let us consider these doubts in the light of an important class of narratives that belongs to our time—namely, the narratives of empire. What enables us to speak of empire and fate together in this context is that both are distinguished by a certain traffic between past and future in such a way as to make their trajectories intersect occasionally in history. For fate is man's encounter with himself in a field of possibility stretched to the limit. So in a certain sense is the modern empire, as the narrator Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* indicates when he speaks of his African voyage as an obscure and yet illuminating experience in which distances and destinations were uncannily collapsed. "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience," he says. "It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light."[12] The navigation he mentions is of course as geographical as it is existential, and the light it throws on everything around him and into his thoughts is the luminosity of self-realization in a project where, to quote Kierkegaard, "the possible corresponds exactly to the future"—a correspondence easily recognizable, in this context, as fate.[13]

What enables us to speak of empire and fate together in this context is that both are distinguished by a certain traffic between past and future in such a way as to make their trajectories intersect occasionally in history. For fate is man's encounter with himself in a field of possibility stretched to the limit.

It is important to note, however, that this journey into a future of fateful possibility does not have an absolute and abrupt "now" as its point of departure. On the contrary, it connects with some determinate pasts, in one of which the narrator doubles back on that statement about sailing to "the farthest point" of his outward voyage to revisit his childhood. "Now when I was a little chap," he says, "I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there" (*HOD*, 33).

These words, a faithful echo of Conrad's own sentiments as an infant visionary, document a characteristic moment of that age.[14] It was a moment of wonder which had vast areas of the earth inhabited by Africans, Asians, Australians, and South Americans as its object. Grasped only insufficiently yet by European knowledge, hence left unmarked on maps, these were popularly regarded in the West as mere voids. Insofar as the little chap—it was always a male child emulating three generations of male forebears—had already learned to fill in that void with fantasies about "glories of exploration," he was on his way to having his sense of wonder transformed into curiosity.

Wonder, a primordially forward-looking disposition, which beckons the child into the world unfolding before his gaze as a field of indefinite possibility, translates as *vismaya* in Sanskrit. The radical *smi* underlying

that word testifies to such indefiniteness as a state of confusion where intelligence, far from being a guide to action, is still groping for something to focus on. In circumstances of danger, says a verse in the *Hitopadesa* (1.31.32), an ancient book of moral fables, *vismaya* leads to a failure of decisiveness that is symptomatic of cowardice (*vipatkale cha vismayah kapurushalakshanam*).[15] The heroism of exploration and conquest requires on the contrary that curiosity should take over from wonder, dispel indecisiveness, and bring possibility within the horizon of well-defined projects working on particular goals.[16] The child who could admire such projects and point at the uncharted regions on a map to say, "When I grow up I will go there," had already been educated by curiosity. The determinations of an imperial "there" would prepare him soon for an adulthood destined to take him, charmed like some bird by a snake (to use Conrad's own imagery), on voyages along a snakelike river to the very edge of the jungle where civilization stopped. And there, at the heart of darkness, he would meet Kurtz in the throes of his deadly encounter with fate.

Conquest Redeemed in Idea

That meeting at the very end of the story refers to the enigma of conquest mentioned at its beginning. Marlow spoke there of conquerors as men of "brute force" which was of course "nothing to boast of," since it was "just an accident arising from the weakness of others." According to him, what they did amounted simply to "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale." "The conquest of earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves," he said, generalizing the sum of all such cruelty, "is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." However, this was by no means the full picture. "What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . ." (*HOD*, 31–32).

At issue here is apparently a distinction made between conquest as a practice and that as an idea. Little more is said about the latter except that it is "not a sentimental pretence" and calls for "an unselfish belief." Presumably such unselfishness consists in regarding the idea as "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . ." In other words, the idea demands, first, elevation to a pedestal so that the self can express its faith in a lowering gesture, and second, a sacrifice of the self itself. The idea of conquest, as against its practice, thus transcends the mere political and assumes a spirituality not unlike that of some devotional cults.

It would be easy, henceforth, for the culture of conquest to invest a

purely secular and brutish dominance with an aura of providentiality and to invest empire with something of the allure of a sacred and mystical fate. This was precisely what had lured Kurtz into the vast and indefinite possibility known as empire. The plans of which he went on speaking until his dying day, and which his "Intended" continued to speak of after his death, made up a project that had reached "the culminating point" of his experience. There at the very limit of civilization and with the self exerted to its utmost, he came to confront his ultimate adversary in fate which, according to Hegel, "is just the enemy, and man stands over against it as a power fighting against it."[17] In that fight, we know, Kurtz lost out. His last utterance, "The horror! The horror!" was as far as language would take him in voicing his sense of defeat in that unequal combat.

No individual is completely alone in this combat. For he comes face to face with his destiny only so far as destiny is a condition of his being in the world. That is why its representation in its noblest form, the tragic drama, is distinguished by the intersection of many semantic fields. "In the language of tragic writers there is a multiplicity of different levels," says Vernant, and this imparts, according to him, "a singular depth to the text and makes it possible for it to be read on a number of levels at the same time."[18]

The story of Kurtz's rendezvous with fate too has been read at many different levels. Some have regarded it as typical of that era which was seized from time to time by rumors about white men "gone native," "gone fantee."[19] Others have read in it a wide variety of contemporary concerns ranging from blatant racism through liberal sympathy to an almost radical anticolonialism.[20] Conrad himself had situated *Heart of Darkness* in that age as he defined its theme by saying, "The subject is of our time distinctly."[21] That was the time of the scramble for Africa when European explorers, traders, interlopers, and fortune hunters of all kinds (a few of whose real-life personalities blended to make up the composite figure of Kurtz) were often caught up in the adventures of Western powers jostling for their place in the sun.[22] The fate of individuals would get entangled on such occasions with the destiny of empires and the temporal structure of narratives concerned with the one approximate that of the other, blurring generic distinctions between the novelistic and the historical.

It is appropriate therefore that, with all its forward thrust, the tale in *Heart of Darkness* should not be indifferent to the past. On the contrary, it allows the now of the actual narration to fade into "the august light of abiding memories" and "evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames" (*HOD*, 28). It is, in short, contextualized as the most recent moment of a long tradition, so that the story of one man's adventure slots easily into a series made up of "other conquests," other empires. Says Marlow:

> Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of common-wealths, the germs of empires. (*HOD*, 29)

Dreams, seeds, germs: the indices of futurity are significantly skewed in their distribution in these phrases, the last two of which speak of the future of state systems and the first of individual expectations. We are in an epoch when it is obviously necessary that the three should be thought together conflating the fate of characters like Kurtz and that of powers like Belgium and Britain, and assimilating, in effect, the rogue to the herd, the story of the interloper, settler, or explorer to the history of the nation. In that ethos of ambiguity with individual projects and their corresponding anxieties and values mixed up inextricably with corporate ones, it is left to metaphors to do all the blending and transposing, as when "hunters for gold or pursuers of fame" who had "gone out," on their own, "bearing the sword, and often the torch," are allowed almost imperceptibly to move into a very different, should we say, national register as "messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire."

The maverick's dream merges here with the much larger entities of *commonwealth* and *empire*, with the *race* served so well by the venerable river Thames and with the *nation* proud of its ships and men—the former "like jewels flashing in the night of time" and the latter "titled and untitled—the great knight-errants of the sea" (*HOD*, 29). Lifted by the rhetoric of this grand and aggrandizing idealization, the sword—more often than not an instrument of senseless murder used against the conquered—acquires the dignity of an envoy sent out by the conquering state, and the torch—more often than not the cause of that smoke from burning villages which Marlow had noticed with horror—becomes the bearer of "a spark of the sacred fire." Transpositions of this kind work not for fiction alone. They contribute to quick shifts of register in historical discourse as well, so that a factual statement about the past may project the future in a manner more appropriate to Pythian foretelling. One such shift of particular relevance to us is that of the incendiary's torch into "sacred fire." A purely secular—and indeed sinister—aggression turns holy in this instance thanks to a moral twist. Not only does this enable individual adventures to be monumentalized into national achievements; it enables history, too, to be spiritualized as destiny.

To regard such idealization as nostalgia would be to drain it of all significance. Its function is not to bring about a recurrence of the past and its achievements, but to go back into the possibility of what has been there and repeat it for future projects which are an individual's or a generation's

own. The past does not come into such repetition as time gone dead but rather as something handed down as a living heritage strong in its knowledge of the possibility of what has been. In repetition the latter makes itself available to that other possibility—the possibility of what is to come—for adoption in projects which critically affirm as well as disavow it for the future. The process concerned with such a critical engagement is what historicizing is about, and it works closely with destiny understood as the extension of the possibility of what has been to the horizon of the possibility of what is to come.

History and fate, past and future interpenetrate thus in the narrative of all that has been and will be. The tangle of temporalities which follows from this cannot but upset historians committed to structuring their narratives exclusively in linear time. No wonder that William Hunter, as one of them, found it hard to explain the datability of Plassey in terms of the conquest of India or even Bengal and shrugged it off as an aberration justified, if at all, merely as a convenient agreement to mark a beginning. What he seems to have missed is that the event had jumped the boundary of a narrowly chronological history and merged metonymically and providentially into the conquest to come. In other words, he failed to acknowledge that the beginning he wanted for the story of Britain's South Asian empire had already been there for it to be told at all. As a part of that story projected well into the future, the battle of 1757 takes its place in historical discourse, appropriately enough, as a conquest foretold. When Alexander Dow, writing of that event as a near contemporary, boasted about "appropriat[ing] revolution and war to history," he, unlike Hunter, appears to have sensed how the history he saw in the making had already hitched its wagon to fate.

The Other Story

"We have appropriated war and revolution to history." A statement such as this about the battle of Plassey could only be made by the victors. The triumphant tone leaves no doubt that the destiny in which history has already merged in anticipation carries the promise of more victories to come and a local "revolution" to develop into British paramountcy in the subcontinent. It would not be long before the exploits of conquering men and ships celebrated in the preamble to Marlow's yarn and the values which dignified conquest into an idea standing above the sordidness of those exploits were to ensure the datability of 1757 in the sacred calendar of a manifest destiny as the year when the biggest of empires was born of the smallest of battles. And all the instruments of colonial discourse rang-

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ing from school manuals and learned dissertations to fiction and film would be at work to keep the story of that providential victory in circulation for the next two hundred years.

However, there is no conquest that has only one story to it. It is made up of at least two—one narrated by the conquerors and the other by the conquered. Foil to the story of that steamship sailing into darkness, there is another being told beyond the point where the civilization of hunters, traders, explorers, and colonizers stops and the jungle begins. We have no clue to its content. The most a narratology of the civilized can do, using all the sophistication of its craft, is to acknowledge it by a rhetoric of incomprehension: eyes which glow in the bush as evidence of a numerous but unseen presence; the gathering and dispersal of shadows there after the logic of some mysterious movement; voices which drone like chants, rise like cries, and die back into silence signifying nothing; and the drums: "At night sometimes the roll of distant drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day. *Whether it meant war, peace or prayer we could not tell*" (*HOD*, 68; my emphasis).

Not one of those sights and sounds—"a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling"—not one word or gesture of that theater staged at every bend of the river on a set of rush walls and peaked roofs under drooping foliage made sense. But why didn't it? That is a question which it is difficult to avoid in view of the claims made by the conquerors themselves for their record of empire building. It is they who emphasized over and over again the importance of understanding the conquered in order to train them into a subjecthood that would accord best with the management of modern empires. An elaborate structure of knowledges, institutions, and policies had indeed been devised and put in place over the centuries since Hernán Cortés and Vasco da Gama precisely to enable colonizers to understand the colonized and, by understanding, to control them. And all imperial agencies were unanimous in their claim to success in this regard. The failure on which the uncomprehending alienation of Marlow's account turns so critically calls therefore for some explanation. And he has this to offer: "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories" (*HOD*, 69).

Not much help here for those who have been waiting to hear the other story. They are simply being told that the unknown is altogether unknowable. If what was seen and heard in the bush could be said to constitute a language, it was, according to this explanation which explained nothing, a hieroglyph that had lost its code irretrievably. In

other words, there was a chasm separating the jungle from Central Station, the farthest reach of civilization, and no bridge to take us across to the other side and *its* yarns.

What passes as the story of conquest is therefore only half a story pretending to be the whole. Which goes to show, among other things, that the idea of a conquest redeemed by devotion and martyrdom—an idealism approximating religiosity—stands only for a false, because partial, religion. It has no claim to the latter's universality. For conquest is necessarily predicated on defeat, the conqueror's faith on defiance by the conquered, his self-sacrifice on his victim's urge to defend his life and all else he has. Consequently, for every narrative of triumph and hope told in the conqueror's voice there is a counternarrative of defeat and despair told by the conquered.

The latter is distinguished by a pervasive sadness. For it arises from a deep and inescapable pain as the very condition of telling, not unlike those discourses that are both stimulated and sustained by trauma. Freud demonstrates that intimate connection between pain and story in some of his case histories. One of the lessons these have for us as students of another kind of history concerns the dechronologization of events in narratives produced under analysis. For it is not unusual for a patient abruptly to deviate from the line of an ongoing recital and get into a loop confounding end and beginning. In the case of Katharina, for instance, her account had been developing progressively, incident by incident, with one of the latter taken as the first of traumatic moments from which others followed in an ordered sequence until, on reaching a certain point, it suddenly changed its course. "After this . . . to my astonishment," writes Freud, "she dropped these threads and began to tell me two sets of older stories, which went back two or three years earlier than the traumatic moment."[23] Much in the same way the pain of defeat turned the order of events back on itself in popular recollection among the conquered as the trauma of the Mutiny of 1857 appears to have done by a direct referral to the ignominy of Plassey a hundred years ago.

The consequence of such temporal twists and reversals is of course to threaten, and even nullify, the advantages of linear thinking. One such advantage is the control exercised on events by ascribing meanings to them. However, as Lacan has observed, "trauma is an extremely ambiguous concept, since it would seem that, according to all the clinical evidence, its fantasy-aspect is infinitely more important than its event-aspect. Whence, the event shifts into the background in the order of subjective references."[24] It is precisely the displacement of the event and its signifying structures thus by ambiguity that clears the ground for pain to posit itself in its fantasy-aspect at the classic site of fate.

History too is caught up in this ambiguity. Overdetermined by destiny, the order of events on which it relies for support gives a little here and there, and telling tends occasionally to slip into foretelling. And the story of conquest—that half of it which it is not for conquerors to tell—is taken up by the conquered and told again and again in order to overcome pain by the sheer force of reiteration. Informed by an alternative idea of conquest, it spiritualizes subjugation by calling upon its victims to immolate themselves in a different kind of fire from the one lit by the subjugators to celebrate and sacralize their triumphs. It is the fire of an equally sacred but adversary and flawed religiosity with its own universalist pretensions. Known as nationalism, its function has historically been to promote and perpetuate one of the most powerful cults of our time—the cult of mourning. Little would be left of that cult in South Asia if the conquest told long before its time were to be taken out of it. For that would decontextualize and thereby dissolve the pain so essential to nationalism if it were to keep itself in play, "just as in chess," says Wittgenstein, "a move with the king only takes place within a certain context, and it cannot be removed from this context."[25]

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 2:150.

2. See Jadunath Sarkar, *The History of Bengal*, vol. 2 (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1948), 485–95, for what still remains the most authoritative account of the battle of Plassey and the circumstances that led to it.

3. Cited in Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 25–26, where this question is discussed at some length; emphasis added.

4. Hastings' Minutes, 12 October 1772, cited in *Cambridge History of India*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 597.

5. The source of this and other citations from Hobbes is Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), chap. 20.

6. Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 178.

7. Ibid., 180–84.

8. Cited in Guha, *Rule of Property*, 25.

9. Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, rev. ed., trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 262–63.

10. W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Empire: Its History, People, and Products* (London: Trübner and Co., 1882), 285; emphasis added.

11. Sophocles, *King Oedipus* (781–94), in Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 47.

12. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul O'Prey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 32. Hereafter cited in the text as *HOD*.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 91.

14. See the editor's introduction (*HOD*, 11) for Conrad's own recollection on this point in *A Personal Record*: "It was in 1868 when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa at the time and putting my finger on the blank space [the Stanley Falls region] then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: 'When I grow up I shall go there.'"

15. Diacritical marks have been omitted for purely technical reasons from some of the Sanskrit phrases used in this sentence.

16. For the notion of wonder see Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), chap. 5, esp. secs. 36–38.

17. G. W. F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 229.

18. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy* (New York: Zone, 1988), 42.

19. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 144. Watt cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* to show that the phrase *gone fantee*, based on the name of a Gold Coast tribe, came into English usage in 1886 meaning "to join the natives and conform to their habits."

20. For some of these readings see Robert D. Hamner, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Third World Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1990), especially Chinua Achebe's "Image of Africa" (119–29) and responses to it.

21. Cited in Watt, *Conrad*, 139.

22. A good deal of Conradiana has been devoted to the question of Kurtz's identity. Some of the best discussion is to be found in Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, and Watt, *Conrad*.

23. Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 195.

24. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1988), 34–35.

25. Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 2:150.