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A Practical Reader in
Contemporary Literary Theory

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Chapter 6

Joseph Conrad:
Heart of Darkness

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) was born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Russian Poland. He joined the merchant marine in 1874, learned English three years later, and in 1886 became a British subject. He began writing fiction in London in 1889. His first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), was followed by – amongst other works – *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898), the 'Preface' of which contains an important artistic credo; *Lord Jim* (1900); *Nostramo* (1904); *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). In 1890 Conrad travelled to the Congo Free State, ruled by King Leopold II of Belgium, to take charge of a steamer 230 miles up river for a Belgian trading company. He kept a diary of his short visit (between mid-June and August 1890) and drew on the experience for the story 'An Outpost of Progress' (1897) as well as for the *Heart of Darkness*. This was serialized in 1899 and published in a single edition in 1902.

The following four essays present quite marked differences in styles of reading and commentary as well as both underlying and explicit differences in moral, philosophical and political perspective. One way of assessing these differences is to see how their authors understand a common feature or theme. As we suggest in the Headnotes below, the references to 'emptiness' in these arguments provide a revealing instance of this. A further difference is that these critics are in turn British, French, American-Palestinian and Nigerian. They therefore offer a set of international perspectives upon a canonic author and text and show how the status and meanings of this text have altered as new critical and ideological positions have come to assert themselves – while reminding us that Conrad's story was never perhaps taken for granted. Try in assessing the essays to identify these differences in perspective and to track the changing valuations of the story.

If, at the same time, some of the critical methods and cultural assumptions at work in these essays are quite different, they are all noticeably by male critics. Does this mean that they to any extent share a perspective? Fairly clearly, the question of gender is of interest, 'internally', in Conrad's story itself. Thus, readers of *Heart of Darkness* have often acknowledged the important role of Kurtz's 'intended' and noted the pairing of this white woman and the African who appears to be his mistress in the Congo. The essays sometimes refer along these lines to the 'intended', or to both women. But generally they refer to neither.

6.1 F. R. LEAVIS: FROM THE GREAT TRADITION (1948)

For further details on F. R. Leavis see Ch. 4, p. 146.

In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis argues that the work of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad comprises a tradition sharing 'a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity' (p. 17). He introduces his reflections on the *Heart of Darkness* – which form part of a chapter on the 'Minor Works and *Nostramo*' – with an observation, supported by remarks by E. M. Forster on Conrad's misleading philosophical manner: 'that the greatness attributed to him tended to be identified with an imputed profundity and that this "profundity" was not what it was taken to be, but quite other, and the reverse of a strength' (p. 192). Since Leavis begins the discussion below with an illustration of 'strength', it is worth considering what meaning and value this term holds for him and what might be meant by its opposite.

Above all, this judgement rests on the matter of Conrad's phrasing (his use of terms such as 'inscrutable', 'unfathomable' and 'inconceivable'). What is Leavis' objection to this vocabulary and what does this reveal of his sense of literary value or 'strength'? At one point he accuses Conrad of 'borrowing the arts of the magazine-writer'. How do you think later critics might choose to think of this 'borrowing', and how might they view the relation of presence and absence (Conrad's 'insistence on the presence of what he can't produce') which Leavis detects? The air of mystery in the story, he says finally, applies not only to Kurtz and the wilderness but to the sea and to 'Woman'. What is Leavis' point here, and how, in relation to the question raised in the General Introduction above, might a feminist critic explore these associations and their treatment, in both Leavis and Conrad?

Readers will also note the extent to which Leavis depends on direct and lengthy quotations from Conrad's story. This practice was characteristic of his method and of the American-based 'new criticism' and, as such, highly influential upon Anglo-American literary teaching and study (see Ch. 2, pp. 69–71). What attitudes and assumptions (towards literature and the reader) does this suggest, and how is it related, do you think, to the aesthetic and moral values which otherwise direct Leavis' commentary?

Compare Leavis' discussion of George Eliot, Ch. 4, pp. 146–51. Does this support your findings on the present essay?

The following extract is taken from *The Great Tradition* (Chatto & Windus, 1948), pp. 193–202.

The Great Tradition

Heart of Darkness is, by common consent, one of Conrad's best things – an appropriate source for the epigraph of *The Hollow Men*: 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead.' That utterance, recalling the particularity of its immediate context, represents the strength of *Heart of Darkness*:

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath –

'The horror! The horror!'

I blew the candle out and left the cabin. 'The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room, and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance,

Is this a significant omission? Would it require a fundamentally different approach to rectify it? Also, if we were to consider questions of gender and sexuality, as well as, or along with, imperialism – which is the major ideological theme these essays address – would this produce a different perspective not only upon women characters but the relation of Kurtz to Marlow or the male company aboard the *Neille*? Again, would the essays by the present company of male critics need to shift their ground radically to accommodate this aspect of the story?

Further Reading

Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1960).
Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).
Wilson Harris, 'The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands', in *Explorations. A Selection of Talks and Articles* (Dagmar Press, 1981).
Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism* (Macmillan, 1983).

Useful study aids

Heart of Darkness: Text Plus. Introduction by Craig Raine. Notes by Jim Porteus (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), includes relevant statements from letters and Conrad's Congo diary as well as biographical, historical and critical material.
D. Tallack (ed.), *Literary Theory at Work* (Batsford, 1987) contains three essays demonstrating structuralist, dialogic and Marxist readings of Conrad's tale.
Ross C. Murfin, *Heart of Darkness* (Macmillan 'Case Studies' in Contemporary Criticism, 1992) contains the text of Conrad's story and five essays representing different critical perspectives.

Francis Ford Coppola's film of the Vietnam war, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), draws consciously on Conrad's story. For further related viewing and commentary, see *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Eleanor Coppola's documentary on the making of *Apocalypse Now*), directed by Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper, USA, 1991; Cesare Casarino, 'Historical Critique in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*', *Polygraph* (Duke University Press) Nos. 2/3 (1989), pp. 94–113 and Anthony Easthope, 'Realism and its Subversion', in Louvre and Walsh, eds, *Tell Me Lies* (Oxford University Press), 1988.

which I successfully ignored. He leaned back, serene, with that peculiar smile of his sealing the unexpressed depth of his meanness. A continuous shower of small flies streamed upon the lamp, upon the cloth, upon our hands and faces. Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent face in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt –

'Mistiah Kurtz – he dead.'

All the pilgrims rushed out to see. I remained, and went on with my dinner. I believe I was considered brutally callous. However, I did not eat much. There was a lamp in there – light, don't you know – and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark.

This passage, it will be recognized, owes its force to a whole wide context of particularities that gives the elements here – the pilgrims, the manager, the manager's boy, the situation – their specific values. Borrowing a phrase from Mr Eliot's critical writings, one might say that *Heart of Darkness* achieves its overpowering evocation of atmosphere by means of 'objective correlatives'. The details and circumstances of the voyage to and up the Congo are present to us as if we were making the journey ourselves and (chosen for record as they are by a controlling imaginative purpose) they carry specificities of emotion and suggestion with them. There is the gunboat dropping shells into Africa:

There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of inglorious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives – he called them enemies! – hidden out of sight somewhere.

We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in the still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb. ...

There is the arrival at the Company's station:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass, then found a path leading up the hill. It turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly. I blinked, the path was steep. A horn tooted to the right, and I saw black people run. A heavy, dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.

A slight clanking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib,

the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals....

There is the grove of death:

At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment, but no sooner within it than it seemed to me that I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound – as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat beneath the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine of the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.... These moribund shapes were free as air and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. There, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly.

By means of this art of vivid essential record, in terms of things seen and incidents experienced by a main agent in the narrative, and particular contacts and exchanges with other human agents, the overwhelming sinister and fantastic 'atmosphere' is engendered. Ordinary greed, stupidity, and moral squalor are made to look like behaviour in a lunatic asylum against the vast and oppressive mystery of the surroundings, rendered potently in terms of sensation. This means lunacy, which we are made to feel as at the same time normal and insane, is brought out by contrast with the fantastically secure innocence of the young harlequin-costumed Russian ('son of an arch-priest... Government of Tambov'), the introduction to whom is by the way of that copy of Tower's (or Towson's) *Inquiry into Some Points of Seaman'ship*, symbol of tradition, sanity, and the moral idea, found lying, an incongruous mystery, in the dark heart of Africa.

Of course, as the above quotations illustrate, the author's comment cannot be said to be wholly implicit. Nevertheless, it is not separable from the thing rendered, but seems to emerge from the vibration of this as part of the tone. At least, this is Conrad's art at its best. There are, however, places in *Heart of Darkness* where we become aware of comment as an interposition, and worse, as an intrusion, at times an exasperating one. Hadn't he, we find ourselves asking, overworked 'inscrutable', 'inconceivable', 'unspeakable' and that kind of word already? – yet still they recur.

Is anything added to the oppressive mysteriousness of the Congo by such sentences as:

It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention – ?

The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors; to magnifying a thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul. The actual effect is not to magnify but rather to muffle. The essential vibration emanates from the interaction of the particular incidents, actions, and perceptions that are evoked with such charged concreteness. The legitimate kind of comment, that which seems the inevitable immediate resonance of the recorded event, is represented here:

And then I made a brusque movement, and one of the remaining posts of that vanished fence leaped into the field of my glass. You remember I told you I had been struck at the distance by certain attempts at ornamentation, rather remarkable in the ruinous aspect of the place. Now I had suddenly a nearer view, and its first result was to make me throw my head back as if before a blow. Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. Those round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing – food for thought and also for the vultures if there had been any looking down from the sky, but at all events for such ants as were industrious enough to ascend the pole. They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. I was not so shocked as you may think. The start back I had given was really nothing but a movement of surprise. I had expected to see a knob of wood there, you know. I returned deliberately to the first I had seen – and there it was, black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids – a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and, with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber.

I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact, the manager said afterwards that Mr Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in those heads being there. They only showed that Mr Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last, but the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core.... I put down the glass, and the head that had appeared near enough to be spoken to seemed at once to have leaped away from me into inaccessible distance.

– That the 'admirer of Mr Kurtz', the companion of the narrator here, should be the fantastically sane and innocent young Russian is part of the force of the passage.

By such means as it illustrates we are given a charged sense of the monstrous hothouse efflorescences fostered in Kurtz by solitude and the wilderness. It is a

matter of such things as the heads on posts – a direct significant glimpse, the innocent Russian's explanations, the incidents of the progress up the river and the moral and physical incongruities registered, in short, of the charge generated in a variety of highly specific evocations. The stalking of the moribund Kurtz, a skeleton crawling through the long grass on all fours as he makes his bolt towards the fires and the tompons, is a triumphant climax in the suggestion of strange and horrible perversions. But Conrad isn't satisfied with these means; he feels that there is, or ought to be, some horror, some significance he has yet to bring out. So we have an adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on 'unspeakable rites', 'unspeakable secrets', 'monstrous passions', 'inconceivable mystery', and so on. If it were only, as it largely is in *Heart of Darkness*, a matter of an occasional phrase it would still be regrettable as tending to cheapen the tone. But the actual cheapening is little short of disastrous. Here, for instance, we have Marlow at the crisis of the episode just referred to:

I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, towards the gleam of the fires, the thrub of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head – though I had a very lively sense of that danger too – but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. ... I've been telling you what we said – repeating the phrases we pronounced – but what's the good? They were common everyday words – the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. ... But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had – for my sins, I suppose – to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself too, I saw it – I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself.

– Conrad must here stand convicted of borrowing the arts of the magazine-writer (who has borrowed his, shall we say, from Kipling and Poe) in order to impose on his readers and on himself, for thrilled response, a 'significance' that is merely an emotional insistence on the presence of what he can't produce. The insistence betrays the absence, the willed 'intensity' the nullity. He is intent on making a virtue out of not knowing what he means. The vague and unrealizable, he asserts with a strained impressiveness, is the profoundly and tremendously significant.

I've been telling you what we said – repeating the phrases we pronounced – but what's the good? They were common everyday words – the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.

– What's the good, indeed? If he cannot through the concrete presentment of incident, setting and image invest the words with the terrific something that, by themselves, they fail to convey, then no amount of adjectival and ejaculatory emphasis will do it.

I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul – etc.

– That, of course, is an ambiguous statement. I see that there is a mystery, and it remains a mystery for me; I can't conceive what it is; and if I offer this inability to your wonder as a thrilling affair of 'seeing an inconceivable mystery', I exemplify a common trait of human nature. Actually, Conrad had no need to try and inject 'significance' into his narrative in this way. What he shows himself to have successfully and significantly seen is enough to make *Heart of Darkness* a disturbing presentment of the kind he aimed at. By the attempt at injection he weakens, in his account of Kurtz's death, the effect of that culminating cry:

He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – 'The horror! The horror!'

– The 'horror' there has very much less force than it might have had if Conrad had strained less.

This final account of Kurtz is associated with a sardonic tone, an insistent irony that leads us on to another bad patch, the closing interview in Brussels with Kurtz's 'Intended':

The room seemed to have grown darker, as if all the sad light of the cloudy evening had taken refuge on her forehead. This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo from which the dark eyes looked out at me. Their glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful. She carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I – I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves.

It is not part of Conrad's irony that there should be anything ironical in this presentment of the woman. The irony lies in the association of her innocent nobility, her purity of idealizing faith, with the unspeakable corruption of Kurtz; and it is developed (if that is the word) with a thrilled insistence that recalls the melodramatic intensities of Edgar Allan Poe:

I felt like a chill grip on my chest. 'Don't,' I said in a muffled voice.

'Forgive me, I – I – have mourned so long in silence – in silence. ... You were with him – to the last? I think of his loneliness. Nobody near to understand him as I would have understood. Perhaps no one to hear. ...'

'To the very end,' I said shakily. 'I heard his very last words. ...' I stopped in a fright. Repeat them, she murmured in a heart-broken tone. 'I want – I want – something – something to live with.'

I was on the point of crying at her 'Don't you hear them?' The dark was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly, like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! the horror!'

'His last words – to live with,' she insisted. 'Don't you understand I loved him – I loved him – I loved him!'

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.
'The last word he pronounced was – your name.'

I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, and of an unspeakable pain.

I knew it – I was sure! ... She knew. She was sure.

Conrad's 'inscrutable', it is clear, associates with Woman as it does with the wilderness, and the thrilling mystery of the Intended's innocence is of the same order as the thrilling mystery of Kurtz's corruption: the profundities are complementary. It would appear that the cosmopolitan Pole, student of the French masters, who became a British master-mariner, was in some respects a simple soul. If anyone should be moved to question the propriety of this way of putting it, perhaps the following will be found something of a justification:

Woman and the sea revealed themselves to me together, as it were: two mistresses of life's values. The illimitable greatness of the one, the unfathomable seduction of the other, working their immemorial spells from generation to generation upon my heart at last: a common fortune, an unforgettable memory of the sea's formless might and of its sovereign charm in that woman's form wherein there seemed to beat the pulse of divinity rather than blood.

This comes from a bad novel, one of Conrad's worst things, *The Arrow of Gold*. It is a sophisticated piece of work, with a sophistication that elaborates and aggravates the deplorable kind of naivety illustrated in the quotation. Not that the author's talent doesn't appear, but the central theme – and the pervasive atmosphere – is the 'unfathomable seduction' of the 'enigmatic' Rita; a glamorous mystery, the avocation of which (though more prolonged and elaborated) is of the same order as the evocation of sinister significance, the 'inconceivable' mystery of Kurtz, at the close of *Heart of Darkness*. If any reader of that tale had felt that the irony permitted a doubt regarding Conrad's attitude towards the Intended, the presentment of Rita should settle it.

6.2 TZVETAN TODOROV: 'HEART OF DARKNESS' (1978, TRANS. 1990)

Tzvetan Todorov is known chiefly for his contribution to the structuralist theory of narrative (see *A Reader's Guide* 3/e, pp. 109–13). He was born in Bulgaria and has lectured extensively in the USA and in France – he has held posts at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, where he is currently Director of Research. His works in publication include *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975), *The Poetics of Prose* (1977) and *Mikhail Bakhtin. The Dialogic Principle* (1984).

Todorov's chapter on Conrad appears in *Genres in Discourse*, which consists of a group of theoretical essays on narrative and reading, followed by studies on texts exemplifying the genres of the poetic novel, prose poetry and short story. Conrad's novella he considers in relation to the conventions of the adventure story. Its action, he concludes, however, is disappointing; its 'mythological' narrative a pretext for a 'gnoseological' narrative of the search for truth. The *Heart of Darkness*, that is to say, emerges, in his terms, as less an adventure story than a narrative of interpretation and about interpretation. How does this mean Todorov views the 'inscrutability', emptiness and absence other critics comment upon? Is his own reading a 'structuralist' or 'poststructuralist' one? How does it comment on the search for meaning by other critics here and how do their more expressly evaluative and political readings comment in turn upon his own approach?

'*Heart of Darkness*' is from Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (1978, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 103–12.

Heart of Darkness

On the surface, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* resembles an adventure story. As a little boy, Marlow daydreams about the blank spaces on a map. When he grows up he decides to explore the largest of these spaces: the heart of the dark continent, reached by a serpentine river. He is assigned the task of reaching Kurtz, an agent of an ivory-collecting company. He is warned of dangers. This conventional beginning does not keep its promises, however. The risks suggested by the Company's doctor are internal: he measures the cranium of those who set out to travel and asks if there is madness in the family. Similarly, the Swedish captain who takes Marlow to the first station is pessimistic about the future, but he has in mind a man who went off alone and hung himself. Danger lies within; adventures are played out in the explorer's mind, not in the situations he encounters.

What follows only confirms this impression. When Marlow finally reaches the Central Station, he is condemned to inactivity by the shipwreck of the steamboat he is supposed to command. Long months go by during which his only activity is waiting for the arrival of some missing rivers. Nothing happens. And when something finally does happen, the narrative neglects to tell us about it. Kurtz's departure for the station, his meeting with the manager of the Central Station, Marlow's return and his relations with the 'pilgrims' after Kurtz's death – all these go un narrated. During the decisive scene in which Kurtz is found, Marlow remains

on board the boat in conversation with a peculiar Russian fellow, we never do find out what happened on land.

Or let us take the traditionally climactic moment in adventure stories, the battle scene: here it takes place between blacks and whites. The only death deemed worthy of mention is the helmsman's, and Marlow speaks of it only because the dying man's blood fills his shoes, which he then flings overboard. The outcome of the battle is derisory: the whites' fire reaches no one and only produces smoke ('I had seen, from the way the tops of the bushes rustled and flew, that almost all the shots had gone too high' [52-3]).¹ As for the blacks, the mere sound of the boat's whistle sends them flying: 'The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly ... The retreat ... was caused by the screeching of the steamwhistle' (47, 53).

The same is true of the one other culminating moment in the story: the unforgettable image of the black woman emerging from the jungle while Kurtz is being lifted into the boat: 'Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid about her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky ...' (62). The gesture is powerful but finally just an enigmatic sign, not an act.

If there is adventure in this story, it is not where we expected to find it. The events that ought to have gripped our attention cannot do so for, contrary to all laws of suspense, their outcome is announced well in advance, and repeatedly. At the very beginning of the voyage, Marlow forewarns his listeners: 'I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly' (17). We are reminded on several occasions not only of Kurtz's death but also of Marlow's subsequent destiny ('as it turned out, it was to have the care of his memory' [51]).

The facts are unimportant; only their interpretation will count. Marlow's voyage had but one goal: 'I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with ...' (48). Talking in order to comprehend, not to act. That is doubtless why Marlow goes looking for Kurtz after Kurtz has fled from the pilgrims, though Marlow disapproves of the pilgrims' kidnapping: it is because Kurtz has escaped from sight, from earshot, has not allowed himself to be known. The trip up the river is thus a way of approaching truth. Space symbolizes time; the story's adventures foster understanding. 'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world ...' (34). 'We were travelling in the night of first ages ...' (36).

The 'mythological' narrative (of action) is present only to allow the deployment of a 'gnoseological' narrative (of knowledge). Acts are insignificant here because all efforts are focused on the search for *being*. (As Conrad noted in a 1918 article on British seamen: 'There is nothing more futile under the sun than a mere adventurer'.²) Conrad's adventurer – if we want to keep on calling him that – has transformed the direction of his search: he no longer seeks to win but to know.

Countless details strewn throughout the story confirm the predominance of knowing over doing, for the overall design has its repercussions on an infinite number of specific acts that all tend in the same direction. The characters never stop meditating on the hidden meaning of the words they hear, the impenetrable

signification of the signals they perceive. The manager ends all his sentences with a smile that resembles 'a seal applied on the words to make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely unscrutable' (*Heart of Darkness*, 22). The message from the Russian, which is supposed to help the travelers, is for no obvious reason written in a telegraphic style that renders it incomprehensible. Kurtz knows the language of the blacks, yet to the question: 'Do you understand this?' he merely produces 'a smile of indefinite meaning' (68), a smile as enigmatic as the words spoken in an unknown language.

If words require interpretation, the nonverbal symbols exchanged need it even more. During the boat trip up the river, 'at night sometimes the roll of 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' (35-6). Other symbolic nonintentional phenomena – events, behavior, situations – are just as hard to decipher. The steamer sank to the bottom of the river: 'I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once' (21). The pilgrims strolled about aimlessly at the Central Station: 'I asked myself sometimes what it all meant' (23). Moreover, Marlow's profession – steering a boat – is nothing but an ability to interpret signs: 'I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones ... I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality – the reality, I tell you – fades. The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily' (34). Truth, reality, essences remain intangible; life wears itself out in the interpretation of signs.

Human relationships can be summed up as hermeneutic research. The Russian, for Marlow, is 'inexplicable,' 'an insoluble problem' (55). Yet Marlow himself becomes an object of interpretation for the brickmaker. And the Russian in turn, speaking of the relationship between Kurtz and his wife, has to admit defeat: 'I don't understand' (63). The jungle itself appears to Marlow 'so dark, so impenetrable to human thought' (56; note that the reference is to the mind and not the body) that he thinks he detects in it the presence of a 'mute spell' (67).

Several emblematic episodes add to the evidence that we are dealing with a narrative in which the interpretation of symbols predominates. At the beginning, at the gates of the Company, in a European city, two women are found: 'Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes' (11). The one seeks (passively) to know; the other directs inquirers toward a knowledge that eludes her: these two figures of knowledge announce the unfolding of the narrative to come. At the very end of the story, we find another symbolic image: Kurtz's intended dreams of what she could have done if she had been with him: 'I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance' (78); she would have made a collection of signs.

Marlow's narrative opens, moreover, with a parable featuring not Kurtz and the dark continent but an imaginary Roman, conqueror of England-in-the-Year One. The

Roman encounters the same savagery, the same mystery, what he confronts is beyond comprehension. 'He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also deceivable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him' (6). The tale that follows, illustrating the general case, is thus a tale of apprenticeship in the art of interpretation.

The ample and obvious metaphors of black and white, light and dark, is clearly not unrelated to the problem of knowing. In principle, and in keeping with the metaphors inscribed in the English language, darkness is equivalent to ignorance, light to knowledge. England in its obscure beginnings is summed up in the word 'darkness.' The manager's enigmatic smile produces the same effect. 'He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping' (22). Conversely, Kurtz's story illuminates Marlow's existence: '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' (7).

The title of the story has the same metaphorical resonance. The expression 'heart of darkness' recurs several times in the text: it designates the interior of the unknown continent where the steamer is headed ('We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness' [35]) or from which it is returning ('The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness' [69]). It also is used in a restrictive sense to designate the man who embodies the continent's untouchable core – Kurtz as he lives in Marlow's memory while Marlow is crossing the threshold of the Intended's house (75). It appears again in the last sentence of the text, referring by generalization to the place of unconsciousness toward which another river flows: 'into the heart of an immense darkness' (79). In its metonymic usage, darkness also symbolizes danger or despair.

The status of darkness is actually more ambiguous than one might think at first, for it becomes an object of desire; light, in turn, is identified with presence in all its frustrating aspects. Kurtz, the object of desire of the entire narrative, is himself an 'impenetrable darkness.' He identifies to such an extent with the darkness that, when there is a light beside him, he does not notice it: "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death." The light was within a foot of his eyes' (70). And when a light is on in the night, Kurtz cannot be present: 'A light was burning within, but Mr. Kurtz was not there' (65). This ambiguity of light is best revealed in Kurtz's death scene. Watching him die, Marlow blows out the candles: Kurtz belongs to darkness. Yet immediately afterward, Marlow takes refuge in the lighted cabin and refuses to leave, even though the others may accuse him of insensitivity: 'There was a lamp in there – light, don't you know – and outside it was so beastly, beastly dark' (71). Light is reassuring when darkness escapes.

The same ambiguity characterizes the division between black and white. In harmony, once again, with the metaphors of the language, the unknown is described as black. We have already observed the two women at the entrance to the Company knitting with black wool. The unknown continent is black ('the edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black' [13]), as is the skin of its inhabitants.

Significantly, those blacks who enter into contact with whites are contaminated: inevitably, they have some spot of whiteness. This is the case with the paddlers who go in small boats between the continent and the steamer: the boats were 'paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening' (13–14). Or those who work for the whites: 'It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas' (18). Danger is black, too, even to the point of comedy: a Danish captain gets killed because of two hens. 'Yes, two black hens' (9).

And yet whiteness is not a straightforward object of desire, any more than light is: blackness is desired, and whiteness is only the disappointing result of a desire that proclaims itself satisfied. Whiteness will be disavowed, as a truth that is either deceptive (as with the white spaces on the map, which hide the black continent) or illusory: the whites think that ivory, white, is the ultimate truth; but Marlow exclaims: 'I've never seen anything so unreal in my life' (23). Whiteness may be an obstacle to knowledge, as with the white fog, 'more blinding than the night' (40), which impedes the approach to Kurtz. White, finally, is the white man confronting the black: and all Conrad's paternalistic ethnocentrism (which could pass for anticolonialism in the nineteenth century) cannot keep us from seeing that his sympathy lies with the indigenous inhabitants of the black continent: whites are cruel and stupid. Kurtz, ambiguous with respect to light and darkness, is equally so with respect to white and black. For on the one hand, believing that he possesses the truth, he advocates white domination of the blacks, in his report; and even the head of this tireless ivory hunter has become 'like a ball – an ivory ball' (49). On the other hand, he flees from whites, and wants to stay with the blacks; it is not a coincidence that Marlow, speaking of his meeting with Kurtz, alludes to 'the peculiar blackness of that experience' (66).

The narrative is thus impregnated with black and white, obscurity and clarity, for these shades are coordinated with the process of acquiring knowledge – and with its converse, ignorance, with all the nuances that these two terms can include. It all comes down to knowing, even colors and shadows. But nothing reveals the power of knowing better than Kurtz's role in the story. For the text is in fact the account of the search for Kurtz: the reader learns this little by little, and retrospectively. Knowledge of Kurtz provides the gradation on which the story is constructed. Just after the transition from the first chapter to the second, Marlow says: 'As for me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time' (32); and the transition from the second chapter to the third is marked by Marlow's encounter with the Russian, of all the characters in the book the one who knew Kurtz best. Moreover, Kurtz is far from being the only subject of the first chapter: whereas he dominates the second; in the third, finally, we encounter episodes that have nothing to do with the river voyage but that contribute to our knowledge of Kurtz, for example Marlow's subsequent encounters with Kurtz's next of kin, and the inquiries of all those who are trying to find out who he was. Kurtz is the pole of attraction of the narrative as a whole; however, it is only after the fact that we discover just how this attraction works. Kurtz is darkness, the object of desire of the narrative; the heart of darkness is 'the barren darkness of his

heart' (69). As we might have guessed, when he takes up painting, he paints darkness and light: 'a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre – almost black' (25).

Kurtz is indeed the focal point of the narrative, and knowledge of Kurtz is the driving force of the plot. Yet Kurtz's status within the story is quite peculiar. We have virtually no direct perception of him at all. Throughout most of the text his presence is anticipated, like that of a creature one is striving to reach but cannot yet see. After Marlow first hears about him, several sequential narratives describe him – the accountant's, the manager's, the bricklayer's. These narratives, whether they are grounded in admiration or terror, all make us want to know Kurtz, but they do not tell us much beyond the fact that there is something to be told. Then comes the trip upriver, supposed to lead us to the real Kurtz. Obstacles proliferate, however, darkness first of all, the attack by the blacks, the thick fog that prevents the travelers from seeing anything. At this point in the text, specifically narrative obstacles compound those thrown up by the jungle: instead of pursuing his tale of progressive knowledge of Kurtz, Marlow interrupts himself abruptly and sketches in a retrospective portrait, as if Kurtz can only be present in the tenses of absence, past and future. This is made explicit, moreover, after Marlow, who has just seen Kurtz, declares: "I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man," the manager responds: "he was" (63). When we return from portrait to narrative, new disappointments await us: in place of Kurtz we find the Russian, the author of a new story about the absent hero. Even when Kurtz finally appears, we do not learn very much. In the first place, he is dying, already partaking more of absence than of presence. Furthermore, we see him from afar, and fleetingly. When we are finally allowed into his presence, he is reduced to mere voice – thus to words, which are just as subject to interpretation as were the stories others had told about him. Yet another wall has arisen between Kurtz and ourselves. 'Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the last' (69). It is hardly surprising that this voice is particularly impressive: 'The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the trouble of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper' (61). But even this enigmatic presence does not last, and soon a 'veil' descends over his face, rendering it impenetrable. Death changes almost nothing, so impossible had knowledge proved during Kurtz's life. We have merely moved from speculating to remembering.

Thus not only does the process of coming to know Kurtz dominate Marlow's narrative, but the knowledge sought is unattainable; Kurtz has become familiar to us, but we do not know him, we do not know his secret. Conrad expresses this frustration in dozens of different ways. In the end, Marlow has only been able to pursue a shadow, 'the shade of Mr. Kurtz' (50): 'a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence' (75). The heart of darkness is 'Nowhere,' and it cannot be reached. Kurtz fades away before it is possible to know him ('all that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. There remained only his

memory ...' [74]). His name, Kurtz, 'short,' is only superficially misleading. When Marlow sees him for the first time, he remarks: 'Kurtz – Kurtz – that means short in German – don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long' (60). Kurtz is not small, as his name might suggest, it is our knowledge of him that falls short, remains forever inadequate, and it is no accident that he resists the whites' efforts to drag him out of his obscurity. Marlow has not understood Kurtz, even though he becomes his confidant at the end ('this ... wraith ... honoured me with its amazing confidence' [50]); similarly, after Kurtz's death, Marlow's efforts to understand him come to nothing: 'even the cousin ... could not tell me what he had been – exactly' (73).

Kurtz is the heart of darkness and his heart is empty. One can only dream about the ultimate moment, at the threshold of death, when one acquires absolute knowledge ('that supreme moment of complete knowledge' [71]). What Kurtz actually utters at that moment are words that express the void, canceling out knowledge: 'The horror! The horror!' (ibid.). An absolute horror whose object we shall never know.

Nothing is better proof of the derisory nature of knowledge than the final scene of the story, Marlow's meeting with the Intended. It is she who says "I knew him best" (76); yet we know that her knowledge is hopelessly incomplete, even illusory. Nothing remains of Kurtz but his memory, and this memory is false. When the Intended exclaims: "How true! How true!" (ibid.), it is in response to a lie. "His words, at least, have not died" (78), she says to console herself; and a moment later she extracts from Marlow another lie, about Kurtz's last words: "'The last word he pronounced was – your name' ... 'I knew it – I was sure!'" (79), the Intended replies. Is that why, in the course of the conversation, 'with every word spoken, the room was growing darker' (76)?

Knowledge is impossible: the heart of darkness is itself obscure; this is the burden of the text as a whole. The voyage takes us indeed to the very center, the interior, the bottom, the core: 'I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth' (13); Kurtz's station is appropriately called the Inner Station; Kurtz himself is indeed 'at the very bottom of there' (19). But the center is empty: 'An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest' (34). According to the manager, "'Men who come out here should have no entrails'" (22); this rule proves to be followed to the letter. Marlow says of the brickmaker: 'It seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside ...' (26). The manager himself, as we recall, stamps everything with an enigmatic smile; but perhaps his secret is impenetrable because it does not exist: 'He never gave that secret away. Perhaps there was nothing within him' (22).

The interior does not exist, any more than does ultimate meaning, and Marlow's experiences are all inconclusive. In this context, the very act of knowing is called into question. 'Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets' (71). The machine

functions perfectly – but it is empty, and the fullest knowledge of others tells us only about ourselves. That the process of acquiring knowledge unfolds in an irreproachable matter in no way proves that the object of this knowledge may be reached; one is tempted to say indeed that just the opposite is true. E. M. Forster failed to understand this, for he remarked about Conrad, in perplexity: 'What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophical statement about the universe, and then refraining in a gruff disclaimer ... There is a central obscurity about him, something noble, heroic, inspiring half-a-dozen great books, but obscure! Obscure!' ³ We already know what to make of this obscurity. And Conrad himself wrote elsewhere: 'The aim of art ... is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature.' ⁴

Speech, as we have seen, plays a decisive role in the process of acquiring knowledge: that is the light that ought to dispel darkness but in the end fails to do so. This we learn from Kurtz's example. 'Of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness' (*Heart of Darkness*, 48). But Kurtz only exemplifies something much more general, which is the possibility of constructing a reality, of stating a truth by means of words: Kurtz's adventure is at the same time a parable of narrative. It is no coincidence that Kurtz is also, as the occasion warrants, a poet, painter, and musician as well. It is not an accident that countless analogies are set up between the two narratives, the embedded tale and the framing tale, between the two rivers, finally between Kurtz and Marlow the narrator (the only two characters that have proper names in this story; all the others, such as the manager and the accountant – whom we meet moreover both in the framing story and in the embedded one – are reduced to their functions), and, correlatively, between Marlow the character and his listeners (whose role is played by ourselves, the readers). Kurtz is a voice. 'I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discouraging. I didn't say to myself, "Now I will never see him," or "Now I will never shake him by the hand," but "now I will never hear him." The man presented himself as a voice' (ibid.). But is not the same thing true of Marlow the narrator? 'For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice' (28). 'The artist ... is so much of a voice that, for him, silence is like death,' Conrad wrote in a 1905 article on Henry James. ⁵ Marlow does the job of making the relation between the two series explicit in an interruption in his narrative: 'Kurtz ... was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?' (27). Both explorer and reader are concerned only with signs, on the basis of which they have to construct, respectively, the referent (the reality that lies all around) or the reference (what the story is about). The reader (any reader) desires to know the object of the story just as Marlow desires to know Kurtz.

And just as this latter desire will be frustrated, so readers or listeners will never be able to reach the reference of the narrative, as we would have liked; its heart is quite absent. Is it not revealing that the story, begun at sunset, coincides in its development with the deepening dusk? 'It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another' (28). And just as knowledge of Kurtz is impossible in Marlow's account, so too is any construction on the basis of words, any attempt to grasp things through language. 'No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible' (ibid.). The essence, the truth – the heart of the story – is inaccessible, the reader will never reach it. 'You can't understand' (50). Words do not allow us even to transmit other words: 'I've been telling you what we said – repeating the phrases we pronounced – but what's the good? They were common everyday words – the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares' (67). This aspect of words can never be reproduced.

It is impossible to accede to the reference: the heart of the story is empty, just as is the heart of man. 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, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine' (5). The story's light is the hesitant light of the moon.

Thus Kurtz's story symbolizes the fact of fiction, construction on the basis of an absent center. Let us make no mistake: Conrad's writing is indeed allegorical, as numerous details attest (if only the absence of proper names, a way of generalizing), but not all allegorical interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* are equally welcome. To reduce the trip up the river to a descent into hell or to the discovery of the unconscious is an assertion for which the critic who utters it must take full responsibility. Conrad's allegorism is intertextual: if the search for Kurtz's identity is an allegory of reading, this allegory in turn symbolizes every quest for knowledge – knowledge of Kurtz being one example. The symbolized becomes in turn the symbolizer for what was formerly symbolizing; the symbolization is reciprocal. A final meaning, ultimate truth is nowhere to be found, for there is no interior and the heart is empty. What was true for things remains so, and more so, for signs; there is only referral, circular and nonetheless imperative, from one surface to another, from words to words.

Notes

1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). All passages cited are from this edition.
2. Joseph Conrad, 'Well Done' (*The Daily Chronicle*, 1918), in *Notes on Life and Letters* (Garden City, NY and Toronto: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921) 190. Cited in *Heart of Darkness* (Kimbrough ed.) 138.
3. E. M. Forster, cited in *Heart of Darkness* (Kimbrough ed.) 164.

4. Joseph Conrad, Preface, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, in *The Works of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 3 (London: William Heinemann, 1921) xi–xii.
5. Joseph Conrad, 'Henry James: An Appreciation' (North American Review, 1905), in *Notes on Life and Letters*, 14. Cited in *Heart of Darkness* (Kimbrough ed.) 148.

6.3 CHINUA ACHEBE: 'AN IMAGE OF AFRICA: RACISM IN CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*' (1988)

Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian-born writer best known for his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). He was one of the first graduates of the University College of Ibadan and became Director of External Broadcasting in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation before embarking on a career of teaching and writing. He is currently Professor at Bard College, New York. His other novels include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *Aniella of the Savannah* (1987). For further reading, see Lynn Innes, *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

As suggested above, the question of (emptiness) is a consistent theme of the essays collected here, whether in relation to Conrad's story itself or to its criticism – in the sense of what this discusses, or fails to discuss. Achebe responds to the assumption that it is Africa which is empty, 'that African history did not exist' (p. 262, below.) Conrad's story, by contrast, he sees as being about the 'fullness' of Western presuppositions. He quotes a passage from the middle of the story in illustrating this point (pp. 263–4, below). What is your reading of this passage? Would you find the 'meaning of *Heart of Darkness*' here? Achebe goes on to emphasize Conrad's wanting to see things 'in their place'. Compare this with other accounts of the 'inscrutability' and 'mystery' engendered by the story.

There are other points of comparison (on the significance given to the narrator and narrative structure, for example) but, above all, students will need to consider Achebe's negative criticism of the story. What is his charge? That Conrad (or Marlow?) is an example, as Achebe puts it, of 'those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition' (but to what extent is this an ironic description?), or that he 'was a thoroughgoing racist' (p. 267, below)? Is either view, and the second in particular, convincing? Achebe is led finally to ask another important question: whether a novel which 'celebrates' the dehumanization of Africa and Africans can be considered a 'great work of art'. His own answer is clear. How would you respond to this question?

Achebe's essay appears in his *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1–13.

An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

In the fall of 1974 I was walking one day from the English Department at the University of Massachusetts to a parking lot. It was a fine autumn morning such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man going the same way as I turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain community college not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. 'Oh well,' I heard him say finally, behind me: 'I guess I have to take your course to find out.'

A few weeks later I received two very touching letters from high-school children in Yonkers, New York, who – bless their teacher – had just read *Things Fall Apart*. One of them was particularly happy to learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe.

I propose to draw from these rather trivial encounters rather heavy conclusions which at first sight might seem somewhat out of proportion to them. But only, I hope, at first sight.

The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things.

The other person being fully my own age could not be excused on the grounds of his years. Ignorance might be a more likely reason; but here again I believe that something more wilful than a mere lack of information was at work. For did not that erudite British historian and Regius Professor at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, also pronounce that African history did not exist?

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful inexperience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire – one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

This need is not new, which should relieve us all of considerable responsibility and perhaps make us even willing to look at this phenomenon dispassionately. I have neither the wish nor the competence to embark on the exercise with the tools of the social and biological sciences but do so more simply in the manner of a novelist responding to one famous book of European fiction: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which better than any other work that I know displays that Western desire and need which I have just referred to. Of course there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose but most of them are so obvious and so crude that few people worry about them today. Conrad, on the other hand, is undoubtedly one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story-teller into the bargain. His contribution therefore falls automatically into a different class – permanent literature – read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. *Heart of Darkness* is indeed so secure today that a leading Conrad scholar has numbered it 'among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language'.¹ I will return to this critical opinion in due course because it may seriously modify my earlier suppositions about who may or may not be guilty in some of the matters I will now raise.

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully 'at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks'.² But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River

Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that 'going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world'.

Is Conrad saying then that these two rivers are very different, one good, the other bad? Yes, but that is not the real point. It is not the difference that worries Conrad but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry. For the Thames too 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'. It conquered its darkness, of course, and 'in daylight and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing grotesque echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings.'

These suggestive echoes comprise Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration his method amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. We can inspect samples of this on pages 103 and 105 of the New American Library edition: (a) 'It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention' and (b) 'The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy'. Of course there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of 'inscrutable', for example, you might have 'unspeakable', even plain 'mysterious', etc., etc.

The eagle-eyed English critic F. R. Leavis³ drew attention long ago to Conrad's 'adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery'. That insistence must not be dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw; for it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well – one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

The most interesting and revealing passages in *Heart of Darkness* are, however, about people. I must crave the indulgence of my reader to quote almost a whole page from about the middle of the story when representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo encounter the demizens of Africa:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of the black and

incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. 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.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend.⁴

Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours ... Ugly.'

Having shown us Africa in the mass, Conrad then zeros in, half a page later, on a specific example, giving us one of his rare descriptions of an African who is not just limbs or rolling eyes:

And between whiles I had to look after the savage who was fireman. He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. He squinted at the steam gauge and at the water gauge with an evident effort of intrepidity – and he had filed his teeth, too, the poor devil, and the wool of his pate shaved into queer patterns, and three ornamental scars on each of his cheeks. He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.⁵

As everybody knows, Conrad is a romantic on the side. He might not exactly admire savages clapping their hands and stamping their feet but they have at least the merit of being in their place, unlike this dog in a parody of breeches. For Conrad things being in their place is of the utmost importance.

'Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place,' he tells us pointedly. Tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place, like Europe leaving its safe stronghold between the policeman and the baker to take a peep into the heart of darkness.

Before the story takes us into the Congo basin proper we are given this nice little vignette as an example of things in their place:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of

movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.⁶

Towards the end of the story Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr Kurtz and now presides (if I may be permitted a little liberty) like a formidable mystery over the inexorable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent ... She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose.

This Amazon is drawn in considerable detail, albeit of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfils a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning ... She took both my hands in hers and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming' ... She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.⁷

The difference in the attitude of the novelist to these two women is conveyed in too many direct and subtle ways to need elaboration. But perhaps the most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa. In place of speech they made 'a violent babble of uncouth sounds'. They 'exchanged short grunting phrases' even among themselves. But most of the time they were too busy with their frenzy. There are two occasions in the book, however, when Conrad departs somewhat from his practice and confers speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when cannibalism gets the better of them:

'Catch 'im,' he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flash of sharp white teeth – 'catch 'im. Give 'im to us.' 'To you, eh?' I asked; 'what would you do with them?' 'Eat 'im!' he said curtly.⁸

The other occasion was the famous announcement: 'Mistah Kurtz – he dead'.⁹

At first sight these instances might be mistaken for unexpected acts of generosity from Conrad. In reality they constitute some of his best assaults. In the case of the cannibals the incomprehensible grunts that had thus far served them for speech suddenly proved inadequate for Conrad's purpose of letting the European glimpse the unspeakable craving in their hearts. Weighing the necessity for consistency in the portrayal of the dumb brutes against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouth Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr Kurtz's death by the 'insolent black head in the doorway', what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who wilfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and 'taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land' than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

It might be contended, of course, that the attitude to the African in *Heart of Darkness* is not Conrad's but that of his fictional narrator, Marlow, and that far from endorsing it Conrad might indeed be holding it up to irony and criticism. Certainly Conrad appears to go to considerable pains to set up layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his story. He has, for example, a narrator behind a narrator. The primary narrator is Marlow but his account is given to us through the filter of a second, shadowy person. But if Conrad's intention is to draw a cordon sanitaire between himself and the moral and psychological malaise of his narrator his care seems to me totally wasted because he neglects to hint, clearly and adequately, at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters. It would not have been beyond Conrad's power to make that provision if he had thought it necessary. Conrad seems to me to approve of Marlow, with only minor reservations – a fact reinforced by the similarities between their two careers.

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition, which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever.

Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were all dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.¹⁰

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary, Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which has often been quoted Schweitzer says: 'The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother.' And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lambaréne, on the edge of the primeval forest.

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word 'brother' however qualified; the farthest he would go was 'kinship'. When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart he gives his white master one final disquieting look:

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory – like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.¹¹

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is concerned not so much about 'distant kinship' as about someone *laying a claim* on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, 'the thought of their humanity – like yours ... Ugly.'

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that while racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. They will point out to you that Conrad is, if anything, less charitable to the Europeans in the story than he is to the natives, that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa. A Conrad student informed me in Scotland that Africa is merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr Kurtz.

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments:

The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return.

Its exploration of the minds of the European characters is often penetrating and full of insight. But all that has been more than fully discussed in the last fifty years. His obvious racism has, however, not been addressed. And it is high time it was!

Conrad was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.¹²

Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description: 'A black figure stood up, stride on long black legs, waving long black arms'¹³ – as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in *A Personal Record* what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him 'my unforgettable Englishman' and describes him in the following manner:

[his] calves exposed to the public gaze ... dazzled the beholder by the splendour of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory ... The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men ... illumined his face ... and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth ... his white calves twinkled sturdily.¹⁴

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, MD. In his lengthy book Dr Meyer follows every conceivable lead (and sometime inconceivable ones) to explain Conrad. As an example he gives us long disquisitions on the significance of hair and hair-cutting in Conrad. And yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. Not even the discussion of Conrad's antisemitism was enough to spark off in Dr Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as 'among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language'. And why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English departments of American universities?

There are two probable grounds on which I have said so far may be contested. The first is that it is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How

could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, 'notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history'.¹⁵

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad's savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides megalomaniacal imperialism. They were not the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

Gauguin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences, but it was only about 1904–5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable: it is a mask that had been given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze ... The revolution of twentieth century art was under way!¹⁶

The mask in question was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo. They have a name too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form. The event Frank Willett is referring to marked the beginning of cubism and the infusion of new life into European art that had run completely out of strength.

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad's picture of the peoples of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold's International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa.

Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind. Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled *Description of the World* his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. But there were at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He said nothing about the art of printing, unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or, if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever the reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China, nearly four thousand miles long and already more than one thousand years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it, but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon!¹⁷ Indeed travellers can be blind.

As I said earlier Conrad did not originate the image of Africa which we find in his book. It was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination, and Conrad merely brought the peculiar gifts of his own mind to bear on it. For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. If Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's jeopardsous integrity. Keep away from Africa, or else! Mr Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But the foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out.

In my original conception of this essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people – not angels, but not rudimentary souls either – just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the wilful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart; when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in its schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was in any case something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word 'wilful' a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, a paper more enlightened than most, once carried an interesting article written by its Education Editor on the serious psychological and learning problems faced by little children who speak one language at home and then go to school where something else is spoken. It was a wide-ranging article taking in Spanish-speaking children in America, the children of migrant Italian workers in Germany, the quadrilingual phenomenon in Malaysia and so on. And all this while the article speaks unequivocally about language. But then out of the blue sky comes this:

In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.¹⁸

I believe that the introduction of 'dialects', which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let's give them dialects!

In all this business a lot of violence is inevitably done not only to the image of despised peoples but even to words, the very tools of possible redress. Look at the phrase 'native language' in the *Science Monitor* excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer means something else – something appropriate to the sounds Indians and Africans make!

Although the work of redressing which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin. Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth. But the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any casual visitor, even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad.

Notes

1. Albert J. Guerard, introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, New York, New American Library, 1950, p. 9.
2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*, New York, New American Library, 1950, p. 66.
3. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1948; second impression 1950, p. 177.
4. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, op. cit., pp. 105–6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
12. Conrad, quoted in Jonah Raskin, *The Mythology of Imperialism*, New York, Random House, 1971, p. 143.
13. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, op. cit., p. 142.
14. Conrad, quoted in Bernard C. Meyer, MD, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 30.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
16. Frank Willett, *African Art*, New York, Praeger, 1971, pp. 35–6.
17. About the omission of the Great Wall of China I am indebted to 'The Journey of Marco Polo' as recreated by artist Michael Foreman, published by *Pegasus* magazine, New York, 1974.
18. *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, 25 November 1974, p. 11.

6.4 EDWARD SAID: 'TWO VISIONS IN HEART OF DARKNESS' (1994)

Edward Said was born in Palestine and educated there and in Egypt before moving to live and work in the United States, where he is Parr Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York. His first critical work was *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), followed by *Beginnings* (1973) and *The World, The Text and The Critic* (1983), which also contains a discussion of Conrad. These studies show an influential move, inspired in part by the writings of Michel Foucault, towards an accessible, politically located form of literary study and intellectual work. Said's reputation was chiefly established, however, by *Orientalism* (1978), a study of the West's ideas and ideology of the East. This and related essays have given a lead to the field of studies known in the late 1980s and 1990s as postcolonialism. (See *A Practical Guide* 3/e, Ch. 7, 'Postcolonialism', especially pp. 190–3, and essays in Chs 9 and 10 in the present volume.)

Said is concerned in the following discussion primarily with the theme of imperialism. He describes a 'many-sided imperial experience' and includes several contemporary literary and political references in his account (to Naipaul, Rushdie, the Islamic revolution, the Gulf war). What is the relevance of this discussion to Conrad's story and to the 'two visions' of Said's chapter title? Consider the meaning he gives to 'emptiness' in this connection and how this differs from the meanings and attributes this term has in Leavis and others. Said's perception, secondly, of the 'conjunctures' of 'politics with culture and aesthetics' leads him to see the modern writer or intellectual as adopting a necessarily committed cultural and political role. Does Said's own evident partisanship make his approach more, or less, appropriate to literary study? Chinua Achebe (see above) is an equally political critic (whom Said refers to in his essay). How would you summarize their differences?

'Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*' is from Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp. 20–35.

Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*

Domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society. But in today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism, its history, its new forms. The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers. On the one hand, this is the consequence of self-inflicted wounds; critics like V. S. Naipaul are wont to say: *they* (everyone knows that 'they' means coloureds, wogs, niggers) are to blame for what 'they' are, and it's no use *drohning* on about the legacy of imperialism. On the other hand, blaming the Europeans sweepingly for the misfortunes of the present is not much of an alternative. What we need to do is to look at these matters as a network of interdependent histories that it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand.

The point here is not complicated. If while sitting in Oxford, Paris, or New York you tell Arabs or Africans that they belong to a basically sick or unregenerate

culture, you are unlikely to convince them. Even if you prevail over them, they are not going to concede to you your essential superiority or your right to rule them despite your evident wealth and power. The history of this stand-off is manifest throughout colonies where white masters were once unchallenged but finally driven out. Conversely, the triumphant natives soon enough found that they needed the West and that the idea of *total* independence was a nationalist fiction designed mainly for what Fanon calls the 'nationalist bourgeoisie', who in turn often ran the new countries with a callous, exploitative tyranny reminiscent of the departed masters.

And so in the late twentieth century the imperial cycle of the last century in some way replicates itself, although today there are really no big empty spaces, no expanding frontiers, no exciting new settlements to establish. We live in one global environment with a huge number of ecological, economic, social, and political pressures tearing at its only dimly perceived, basically uninterpreted and uncomprehended fabric. Anyone with even a vague consciousness of this whole is alarmed at how such remorselessly selfish and narrow interests – patriotism, chauvinism, ethnic, religious, and racial hatreds – can in fact lead to mass destructiveness. The world simply cannot afford this many more times.

One should not pretend that models for a harmonious world order are ready at hand, and it would be equally disingenuous to suppose that ideas of peace and community have much of a chance when power is moved to action by aggressive perceptions of 'vital national interests' or unlimited sovereignty. The United States' clash with Iraq and Iraq's aggression against Kuwait concerning oil are obvious examples. The wonder of it is that the schooling for such relatively provincial thought and action is still prevalent, unchecked, uncritically accepted, recurrently replicated in the education of generation after generation. We are all taught to venerate our nations and admire our traditions: we are taught to pursue their interests with toughness and in disregard for other societies. A new and in my opinion appalling tribalism is fracturing societies, separating peoples, promoting greed, bloody conflict, and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group particularity. Little time is spent not so much in 'learning about other cultures' – the phrase has an inane vagueness to it – but in studying the map of interactions, the actual and often productive traffic occurring on a day-by-day, and even minute-by-minute basis among states, societies, groups, identities.

No one can hold this entire map in his or her head, which is why the geography of empire and the many-sided imperial experience that created its fundamental texture should be considered first in terms of a few salient configurations. Primarily, as we look back at the nineteenth century, we see that the drive toward empire in effect brought most of the earth under the domination of a handful of powers. To get hold of part of what this means, I propose to look at a specific set of rich cultural documents in which the interaction between Europe or America on the one hand and the imperialized world on the other is animated, informed, made explicit as an experience for both sides of the encounter. Yet before I do this, historically and systematically, it is a useful preparation to look at what still remains of imperialism

in recent cultural discussion. This is the residuum of a dense, interesting history that is paradoxically global and local at the same time, and it is also a sign of how the imperial past lives on, arousing argument and counter-argument with surprising intensity. Because they are contemporary and easy at hand, these traces of the past in the present point the way to a study of the histories – the plural is used advisedly – created by empire, not just the stories of the white man and woman but also those of the non-whites whose lands and very being were at issue, even as their claims were denied or ignored.

One significant contemporary debate about the residue of imperialism – the matter of how 'natives' are represented in the Western media – illustrates the persistence of such interdependence and overlapping, not only in the debate's content but in its form, not only in what is said but also in how it is said, by whom, where, and for whom. This bears looking into, although it requires a self-discipline not easily come by, so well-developed, tempting, and ready at hand are the confrontational strategies. In 1984, well before *The Satanic Verses* appeared, Salman Rushdie diagnosed the state of films and articles about the British Raj, including the television series *The Jewel in the Crown* and David Lean's film of *A Passage to India*. Rushdie noted that the nostalgia pressed into service by these affectionate recollections of British rule in India coincided with the Falklands War, and that 'the rise of Raj revisionism, exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, is the artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain'. Commentators responded to what they considered Rushdie's wailing and whining in public and seemed to disregard his principal point. Rushdie was trying to make a larger argument, which presumably should have appealed to intellectuals for whom George Orwell's well-known description of the intellectual's place in society as being inside and outside the whale no longer applied; modern reality in Rushdie's terms was actually 'whaleless, this world without quiet corners [in which] there can be no easy escapes from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss'.¹ But Rushdie's main point was *not* the point considered worth taking up and debating. Instead the main issue for contention was whether things in the Third World hadn't in fact declined after the colonies had been emancipated, and whether it might not be better on the whole to listen to the rare – luckily, I might add, extremely rare – Third World intellectuals who manfully ascribed most of their present barbarities, tyrannies, and degradations to their own native histories, histories that were pretty bad before colonialism and that reverted to that state after colonialism. Hence, ran this argument, better a ruthlessly honest V. S. Naipaul than an absurdly posturing Rushdie.

One could conclude from the emotions stirred up by Rushdie's own case, then and later, that many people in the West came to feel that enough was enough. After Vietnam and Iran – and note here that these labels are usually employed equally to evoke American domestic traumas (the student insurrections of the 1960s, the public anguish about the hostages in the 1970s) as much as international conflict and the 'loss' of Vietnam and Iran to radical nationalisms – after Vietnam and Iran, lines had to be defended. Western democracy had taken a beating, and even if the physical

damage had been done abroad, there was a sense, as Jimmy Carter once rather oddly put it, of 'mutual destruction'. This feeling in turn led to Westerners rethinking the whole process of decolonization. Was it not true, ran their new evaluation, that 'we' had given 'them' progress and modernization? Hadn't we provided them with order and a kind of stability that they haven't been able since to provide for themselves? Wasn't it an atrocious misplaced trust to believe in their capacity for independence, for it had led to Bokassa and Amin whose intellectual correlates were people like Rushdie? Shouldn't we have held on to the colonies, kept the subject or inferior races in check, remained true to our civilizational responsibilities?

I realize that what I have just reproduced is not entirely the thing itself, but perhaps a caricature. Nevertheless it bears an uncomfortable resemblance to what many people who imagined themselves speaking for the West said. There seemed little scepticism that a monolithic 'West' in fact existed, any more than an entire colonial world described in one sweeping generalization after another. The leap to essences and generalizations was accompanied by appeals to an imagined history of Western endowments and free hand-outs, followed by a reprehensible sequence of ungrateful bitings of that grandly giving 'Western' hand. 'Why don't they appreciate us, after what we did for them?'²

How easily so much could be compressed into that simple formula of unappreciated magnanimity! Dismissed or forgotten were the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a remorseless submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority. Only to keep in mind the millions of Africans who were supplied to the slave trade is to acknowledge the unimaginable cost of maintaining that superiority. Yet dismissed most often are, precisely the infinite number of traces in the immensely detailed, violent history of colonial intervention – minute by minute, hour by hour – in the lives of individuals and collectivities, on both sides of the colonial divide.

The thing to be noticed about this kind of contemporary discourse, which assumes the primacy and even the complete centrality of the West, is how totalizing is its form, how all-enveloping its attitudes and gestures, how much it shuts out even as it includes, compresses, and consolidates. We suddenly find ourselves transported backward in time to the late nineteenth century.

This imperial attitude is, I believe, beautifully captured in the complicated and rich narrative form of Conrad's great novella *Heart of Darkness*, written between 1898 and 1899. On the one hand, the narrator Marlow acknowledges the tragic predicament of all speech – that it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence ... We live, as we dream – alone!³ – yet still manages to convey the enormous power of Kurtz's African experience through his own overmastering narrative of his voyage into the African interior towards Kurtz. This narrative in turn is connected directly with the redemptive force, as well as the waste and horror, of Europe's mission in the dark world. Whatever is lost or elided or even simply made up in Marlow's immensely compelling recitation is compensated for in

the narrative's sheer historical momentum, the temporal forward movement – with digressions, descriptions, exciting encounters, and all. Within the narrative of how he journeyed to Kurtz's Inner Station, whose source and authority he now becomes, Marlow moves backward and forward materially in small and large spirals, very much the way episodes in the course of his journey up-river are then incorporated by the principal forward trajectory into what he renders as 'the heart of Africa'.

Thus Marlow's encounter with the improbably white-suited clerk in the middle of the jungle furnishes him with several digressive paragraphs, as does his meeting later with the semi-crazed, harlequin-like Russian who has been so affected by Kurtz's gifts. Yet underlying Marlow's inconclusiveness, his evasions, his arabesque meditations on his feelings and ideas, is the unrelenting course of the journey itself, which, despite all the many obstacles, is sustained through the jungle, through time, through hardship, to the heart of it all, Kurtz's ivory-trading empire. Conrad wants us to see how Kurtz's great looting adventure, Marlow's journey up the river, and the narrative itself all share a common theme: Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa.

What makes Conrad different from the other colonial writers who were his contemporaries is that, for reasons having partly to do with the colonialism that turned him, a Polish expatriate, into an employee of the imperial system, he was so self-conscious about what he did. Like most of his other tales, therefore, *Heart of Darkness* cannot just be a straightforward recital of Marlow's adventures; it is also a dramatization of Marlow himself, the former wanderer in colonial regions, telling his story to a group of British listeners at a particular time and in a specific place. That this group of people is drawn largely from the business world is Conrad's way of emphasizing the fact that during the 1890s the business of empire, once an adventurous and often individualistic enterprise, had become the empire of business. (Coincidentally we should note that at about the same time Halford Mackinder, an explorer, geographer, and Liberal Imperialist, gave a series of lectures on imperialism at the London Institute of Bankers;⁴ perhaps Conrad knew about this.) Although the almost oppressive force of Marlow's narrative leaves us with a quite accurate sense that there is no way out of the sovereign historical force of imperialism, and that it has the power of a system representing as well as speaking for everything within its dominion, Conrad shows us that what Marlow does is contingent, acted out for a set of like-minded British hearers, and limited to that situation.

Yet neither Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of what is *outside* the world-conquering attitudes embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of listeners on the deck of the *Nelie*, and Conrad. By that I mean that *Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable. For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as narrator, there is no use

looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable. The circularity, the perfect closure of the whole thing is not only aesthetically but also mentally unassailable.

Conrad is so self-conscious about situating Marlow's tale in a narrative moment that he allows us simultaneously to realize after all that imperialism, far from swallowing up its own history, was taking place in and was circumscribed by a larger history, one just outside the tightly inclusive circle of Europeans on the deck of the *Nelie*. As yet, however, no one seemed to inhabit that region, and so Conrad left it empty.

Conrad could probably never have used Marlow to present anything other than an imperialist world-view, given what was available for either Conrad or Marlow to see of the non-European at the time. Independence was for whites and Europeans, the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West. True, Conrad scrupulously recorded the differences between the disgraces of Belgian and British colonial attitudes, but he could only imagine the world carved up into one or another Western sphere of dominion. But because Conrad also had an extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality, he quite carefully (some would say maddeningly) qualified Marlow's narrative with the provisionality that came from standing at the very juncture of this world with another, unspecified but different. Conrad was certainly not a great imperialist entrepreneur like Cecil Rhodes or Frederick Lugard, even though he understood perfectly how for each of them, in Hannah Arendt's words, to enter 'the maelstrom of an unending process of expansion, he will, as it were, cease to be what he was and obey the laws of the process, identify himself with anonymous forces that he is supposed to set in order to keep the whole process in motion, he will think of himself as mere function, and eventually consider such functionality, such an incarnation of the dynamic trend, his highest-possible achievement'.⁵ Conrad's realization is that if, like narrative, imperialism has monopolized the entire system of representation – which in the case of *Heart of Darkness* allowed it to speak for Africans as well as for Kurtz and the other adventurers, including Marlow and his audience – your self-consciousness as an outsider can allow you actively to comprehend how the machine works, given that you and it are fundamentally not in perfect synchrony or correspondence. Never the wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman, Conrad therefore preserved an ironic distance in each of his works.

The form of Conrad's narrative has thus made it possible to derive two possible arguments, two visions, in the post-colonial world that succeeded his. One argument allows the old imperial enterprise full scope to play itself out conventionally, to render the world as official European or Western imperialism saw it, and to consolidate itself after World War Two. Westerners may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually. 'Show me the Zulu Tolstoy', as one American intellectual has recently put it. The assertive sovereign inclusiveness of this argument courses through the

words of those who speak today for the West and for what the West did, as well as for what the rest of the world is, was, and may be. The assertions of this discourse exclude what has been represented as 'lost' by arguing that the colonial world was in some ways ontologically speaking lost to begin with, irredeemable, irrecusably inferior. Moreover, it focuses not on what was shared in the colonial experience, but on what must never be shared, namely the authority and rectitude that come with greater power and development. Rhetorically, its terms are the organization of political passions, to borrow from Julien Benda's critique of modern intellectuals, terms which, he was sensible enough to know, lead inevitably to mass slaughter, and if not to literal mass slaughter then certainly to rhetorical slaughter.

The second argument is considerably less objectionable. It sees itself as Conrad saw his own narratives, local to a time and place, neither unconditionally true nor unqualifiedly certain. As I have said, Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end. But come to an end it would, if only because – like all human effort, like speech itself – it would have its moment, then it would have to pass. Since Conrad dates imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*), he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be.

To return to the first line out of Conrad, the discourse of resurgent empire proves that the nineteenth-century imperial encounter continues today to draw lines and defend barriers. Strangely, it persists also in the enormously complex and quietly interesting interchange between former colonial partners, say between Britain and India, or between France and the Francophone countries of Africa. But these exchanges tend to be overshadowed by the loud antagonisms of the polarized debate of pro- and anti-imperialists, who speak stridently of national destiny, overseas interests, neo-imperialism, and the like, drawing like-minded people – aggressive Westerners and, ironically, those non-Westerners for whom the new nationalist and resurgent Ayatollahs speak – away from the other ongoing interchange. Inside each regrettably constructed camp stand the blameless, the just, the faithful, led by the omniscient, those who know the truth about themselves and others; outside stands a miscellaneous bunch of querulous intellectuals and wishy-washy sceptics who go on complaining about the past to little effect.

An important ideological shift occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, accompanying this contraction of horizons in what I have been calling the first of the two lines leading out of *Heart of Darkness*. One can locate it, for instance, in the dramatic change in emphasis and, quite literally, direction among thinkers noted for their radicalism. The later Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault, eminent French philosophers who emerged during the 1960s as apostles of radicalism and intellectual insurgency, describe a striking new lack of faith in what Lyotard calls the great legitimizing narratives of emancipation and enlightenment. Our age, he

said in the 1980s, is post-modernist, concerned only with local issues, not with history but with problems to be solved, not with a grand reality but with games.⁶ Foucault also turned his attention away from the oppositional forces in modern society which he had studied for their undeterred resistance to exclusion and confinement – delinquents, poets, outcasts, and the like – and decided that since power was everywhere it was probably better to concentrate on the local micro-physics of power that surround the individual. The self was therefore to be studied, cultivated, and, if necessary, refashioned and constituted.⁷ In both Lyotard and Foucault we find precisely the same trope employed to explain the disappointment in the politics of liberation: narrative, which posits an enabling beginning point and a vindicating goal, is no longer adequate for plotting the human trajectory in society. There is nothing to look forward to: we are stuck within our circle. And now the line is enclosed by a circle. After years of support for anti-colonial struggles in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Palestine, Iran, which came to represent for many Western intellectuals their deepest engagement in the politics and philosophy of anti-imperialist decolonization, a moment of exhaustion and disappointment was reached.⁸ One began to hear and read how futile it was to support revolutions, how barbaric were the new regimes that came to power, how – this is an extreme case – decolonization had benefited 'world communism'.

Enter now terrorism and barbarism. Enter also the ex-colonial experts whose well-publicized message was: these colonial peoples deserve only colonialism or, since 'we' were foolish to pull out of Aden, Algeria, India, Indochina, and everywhere else, it might be a good idea to reinstate their territories. Enter also various experts and theoreticians of the relationship between liberation movements, terrorism, and the KGB. There was a resurgence of sympathy for what Jeane Kirkpatrick called authoritarian (as opposed to totalitarian) regimes who were Western allies. With the onset of Reaganism, Thatcherism, and their correlates, a new phase of history began.

However else it might have been historically understandable, peremptorily withdrawing 'the West' from its own experiences in the 'peripheral world' certainly was and is not an attractive or edifying activity for an intellectual today. It shuts out the possibility of knowledge and of discovery of what it means to be outside the whale. Let us return to Rushdie for another insight:

We see that it can be as false to create a politics-free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or hate or love or sleep. Outside the whale it becomes necessary, and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy, and sometimes (e.g., Zia's Pakistan) both at once. Outside the whale the writer is obliged to accept that he (or she) is part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm, so that objectivity becomes a great dream, like perfection, an unattainable goal for which one must struggle in spite of the impossibility of success. Outside the whale is the world of Samuel Beckett's famous formula: *I can't go on, I'll go on*.⁹

The terms of Rushdie's description, while they borrow from Orwell, seem to me to resonate even more interestingly with Conrad. For here is the second consequence,

the second line leading out of Conrad's narrative form: in its explicit references to the outside, it points to a perspective outside the basically imperialist representations provided by Marlow and his listeners. It is a profoundly secular perspective, and it is beholden neither to notions about historical destiny and the essentialism that destiny always seems to entail, nor to historical indifference and resignation. Being on the inside shuts out the full experience of imperialism, edits it and subordinates it to the dominance of one Eurocentric and totalizing view; this other perspective suggests the presence of a field without special historical privileges for one party.

I don't want to overinterpret Rushdie, or put ideas in his prose that he may not have intended. In this controversy with the local British media (before *The Satanic Verses* sent him into hiding) he claimed that he could not recognize the truth of his own experience in the popular media representations of India. Now I myself would go further and say that it is one of the virtues of such conjunctures of politics with culture and aesthetics that they permit the disclosure of a common ground obscured by the controversy itself. Perhaps it is especially hard for the combatants directly involved to see this common ground when they are fighting back more than reflecting. I can perfectly understand the anger that fuelled Rushdie's argument because like him I feel outnumbered and outorganized by a prevailing Western consensus that has come to regard the Third World as an atrocious nuisance, a culturally and politically inferior place. Whereas we write and speak as members of a small minority of marginal voices, our journalistic and academic critics belong to a wealthy system of interlocking informational and academic resources with newspapers, television networks, journals of opinion, and institutes at its disposal. Most of them have now taken up a strident chorus of rightward-tending damnation, in which they separate what is non-white, non-Western, and non-Judeo-Christian from the acceptable and designated Western ethos, then herd it all together under various demeaning rubrics such as terrorist, marginal, second-rate, or unimportant. To attack what is contained in these categories is to defend the Western spirit.

Let us return to Conrad and to what I have been referring to as the second, less imperialistically assertive possibility offered by *Heart of Darkness*. Recall once again that Conrad sets the story on the deck of a boat anchored in the Thames; as Marlow tells his story the sun sets, and by the end of the narrative the heart of darkness has reappeared in England, outside the group of Marlow's listeners lies an undefined and unclear world. Conrad sometimes seems to want to fold that world into the imperial metropolitan discourse represented by Marlow, but by virtue of his own dislocated subjectivity he resists the effort and succeeds in so doing, I have always believed, largely through formal devices. Conrad's self-consciously circular narrative forms draw attention to themselves as artificial constructions, encouraging us to sense the potential of a reality that seemed inaccessible to imperialism, just beyond its control, and that only well after Conrad's death in 1924 acquired a substantial presence.

This needs more explanation. Despite their European names and mannerisms, Conrad's narrators are not average unreflecting witnesses of European imperialism. They do not simply accept what goes on in the name of the imperial idea: they think

about it a lot, they worry about it, they are actually quite anxious about whether they can make it seem like a routine thing. But it never is. Conrad's way of demonstrating this discrepancy between the orthodox and his own views of empire is to keep drawing attention to how ideas and values are constructed (and deconstructed) through dislocations in the narrator's language. In addition, the recitations are meticulously staged: the narrator is a speaker whose audience and the reason for their being together, the quality of whose voice, the effect of what he says – are all important and even insistent aspects of the story he tells. Marlow, for example, is never straightforward. He alternates between garrulity and stunning eloquence, and rarely resists making peculiar things seem more peculiar by surprisingly misstating them, or rendering them vague and contradictory. Thus, he says, a French warship fires 'into a continent'; Kurtz's eloquence is enlightening as well as fraudulent; and so on – his speech so full of these odd discrepancies (well discussed by Ian Watt as 'delayed decoding'¹⁰) that the net effect is to leave his immediate audience as well as the reader with the acute sense that what he is presenting is not quite as it should be or appears to be.

Yet the whole point of what Kurtz and Marlow talk about is in fact imperial mastery, white Europeans over black Africans and their ivory, civilization over the primitive dark continent. By accentuating the discrepancy between the official 'idea' of empire and the remarkably disorienting actuality of Africa, Marlow unsettles the reader's sense not only of the very idea of empire but of something more basic, reality itself. For if Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of empire, of venerating the idea, and so forth. With Conrad, then, we are in a world being made and unmade more or less all the time. What appears stable and secure – the policeman at the corner, for instance – is only slightly more secure than the white men in the jungle, and requires the same continuous (but precarious) triumph over an all-pervading darkness, which by the end of the tale is shown to be the same in London and in Africa.

Conrad's genius allowed him to realize that the ever-present darkness could be colonized or illuminated – *Heart of Darkness* is full of references to the mission civilisatrice, to benevolent as well as cruel schemes to bring light to the dark places and peoples of this world by acts of will and deployments of power – but that it also had to be acknowledged as independent. Kurtz and Marlow acknowledge the darkness, the former as he is dying, the latter as he reflects retrospectively on the meaning of Kurtz's final words. They (and of course Conrad) are ahead of their time in understanding that what they call 'the darkness' has an autonomy of its own, and can reinstate and reclaim what imperialism had taken for its own. But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognize that what they saw, disbelievingly and disparagingly, as a non-European 'darkness' was in fact a non-European world resisting imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence, and not, as Conrad reductively says, to reestablish the darkness. Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-

grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that 'natives' could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them.

The cultural and ideological evidence that Conrad was wrong in his Eurocentric way is both impressive and rich. A whole movement, literature, and theory of resistance and response to empire exists [the subject of Chapter Three of *Culture and Imperialism*] and in greatly disparate post-colonial regions one sees tremendously energetic efforts to engage with the metropolitan world in equal debate so as to testify to the diversity and differences of the non-European world and to its own agendas, priorities, and history. The purpose of this testimony is to inscribe, reinterpret, and expand the areas of engagement as well as the terrain contested with Europe. Some of this activity – for example, the work of two important and active Iranian intellectuals, Ali Shariati and Jalal Ali-i-Ahmed, who by means of speeches, books, tapes, and pamphlets prepared the way for the Islamic Revolution – interprets colonialism by asserting the absolute opposition of the native culture: the West is an enemy, a disease, an evil. In other instances, novelists like the Kenyan Ngũgĩ and the Sudanese Tayib Salih appropriate for their fiction such great *topoi* of colonial culture as the quest and the voyage into the unknown, claiming them for their own, post-colonial purposes. Salih's hero in *Season of Migration to the North* does (and is) the reverse of what Kurtz does (and is): the Black man journeys north into white territory.

Between classical nineteenth-century imperialism and what it gave rise to in resistant native cultures, there is thus both a stubborn confrontation and a crossing over in discussion, borrowing back and forth, debate. Many of the most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending towards a new future, as urgently reinterpretations and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire. One sees these aspects in Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Pablo Neruda, and Brian Friel. And now these writers can truly read the great colonial masterpieces, which not only misrepresented them but assumed they were unable to read and respond directly to what had been written about them, just as European ethnography presumed the natives' incapacity to intervene in scientific discourse about them.

Notes (renumbered)

1. Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale,' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Viking/Granta, 1991), pp. 92, 101.
2. This is the message of Conor Cruise O'Brien's 'Why the Wailing Ought to Stop,' *The Observer*, June 3, 1984.
3. Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness,' in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1925), p. 82.
4. For Mackinder, see Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 102–3. Conrad and triumphalist geography are at the heart of Felix Driver, 'Geography's Empire: Histories of Geographical Knowledge,' *Society and Space*, 1991.

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; new ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 215. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 206–81.
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 37.
7. See especially Foucault's late work, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1986). A bold new interpretation arguing that Foucault's entire oeuvre is about the self, and his in particular, is advanced in *The Passion of Michel Foucault* by James Miller (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).
8. See, for example, Gérard Chaland, *Revolution in the Third World* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1978).
9. Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale,' pp. 100–101.
10. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 175–79.