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PREEMPTING POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

Europeans in the *Heart of Darkness*

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I confess that I have already participated in this journal's symposium "Imperial Trauma." Having read the contributions of my symposium colleagues, I found that I wanted to contribute again—which is how symposia are meant to work, and rarely do. In accordance with the obliging collegial spirit of *Common Knowledge*, the editor invited me to do so. I thank him.

The symposium topic encouraged reflection on the traumas of empire: the deformations of thought and action effected by the possession of real or apparent power over alien others. It has proved to be a roman candle issue, seething, hissing, and shooting sparks over an expanding area. In my earlier essay I traced the subtle deformation of principle and judgment in an unusually upright and self-critical Australian anthropologist by examining his tangled relationship with his Aboriginal informants.[1] Now I want to focus on an earlier time, and on a different venue (Africa) and a different discipline (literary criticism), to explore the ramifications and reverberations of the most famous fictional statement of that incandescing theme: Joseph Conrad's classic "colonial" novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

1. Inga Clendinnen, "The Power to Frustrate Good Intentions; or, The Revenge of the Aborigines," *Common Knowledge* 11.3 (Fall 2005): 410–31.

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1

From its beginnings *Heart of Darkness* has been variously and passionately interpreted. Its first audience, a little more than a hundred years ago, read it as a compelling dramatization of the differences between two (crudely opposed) modes of imperialism: high-minded British versus money-grubbing Belgian. Fifty years on, E. M. Forster was ignoring the politics and finding the craftsman wanting: Conrad was "misty in the middle as well as at the edges," his "philosophy" was more muddle than mystery, and "the secret casket of his genius" contained "a vapour rather than a jewel."[2] The mighty F. R. Leavis then rapped Forster over the knuckles for being insufficiently severe. Leavis allowed Conrad's "art of the vivid essential record," but his "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery," so crudely manifested in his "minor work" *Heart of Darkness*, convicted Conrad of vulgarity—of "borrowing the arts of the magazine-writer."[3] Critics in the late sixties and early seventies, being more political and also more tolerant of mystery and of the vulgar literary arts, read *Heart of Darkness* as an attack on Leopold's Congo in particular and the excrescences of imperialist expansion in general.[4] And then in 1977, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, with a heroic history of struggle against colonial oppression behind him, changed the conversation decisively when he denounced Conrad's novel as "offensive and totally deplorable" and its author as "a thoroughgoing racist." Nowadays, post the postmodernists, *Heart of Darkness* seems to exist in a chronic contest zone.

Achebe saw the novel as a gross expression of "the desire—the need—in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil in Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Conrad's willful perpetuation of "comforting myths" about primitivism and civilization reduced this Africa to "a metaphysical battleground" for Europeans. The myths that Conrad rehearsed participate in "the dehumanization of Africa and Africans" by parading "prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities. . . . The question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalises a section of the human race, can be called a great work of art." Achebe also believed that the offense was calculated: that the "bombardment of emotive words" Leavis and Forster complained of was neither an innocent matter of overwriting nor the product of muddled thinking, but deliberately designed to induce "a hypnotic stupor" in its readers. Conrad calculated his pernicious ideas

2. E. M. Forster, "Joseph Conrad: A Note," in *Abinger Harvest* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 131.

3. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, (1948; London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), 173–182, esp. 180.

4. E.g. M. M. Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter: A Reading of Six Novels* (London: Collings, 1977), 5: "Before it is anything else, *Heart of Darkness* is an exposure of colonial exploitation."

would slip down the more easily under a slick of "bleeding heart sentiments."[5] In short: Conrad was not only a racist but a conscious and devious one, concealing his sinister motives and achieving his sinister ends through calculated sentimentality and extravagant language. Thus the old criticisms were given a savage new twist to garrote Conrad's reputation once and for all.

Achebe made his initial assault on *Heart of Darkness* in a speech to an academic audience. The novel had been comfortably installed in the canon, where its eloquence and brevity made it a favorite choice for university courses. Achebe wanted the book removed from student reading lists. Once removed, it would lose its largest audience. No writer, especially not one with Achebe's history, lightly recommends book banning. Should *Heart of Darkness* be dropped from university reading lists, and from our hearts, for bad writing, bad politics, or both? In what follows, I want to reexamine the justice of these criticisms by asking the usual, close to unanswerable question: how are either the intentions or the effects of a work of the imagination to be identified and evaluated? How large and what kind of role do politics play? As for my method: however elusive authors may choose to be—and Conrad was famously elusive—they are perforce present in the strategies and the movement of their writing. It is there we must smoke them out.

2

There can be no doubt that *Heart of Darkness* pivots on the metaphor of an "Africa" primeval, unchanging, and chronically savage, nor any doubt that the trope has infiltrated so deeply into Western consciousness that the phrase "heart of darkness" resonates for people who have read no Conrad at all. The trope and phrase are also dangerously elastic, capable of being stretched to cover any Western exploit in a non-Western country, as Francis Ford Coppola stretched it to cover Vietnam in the film *Apocalypse Now*. Nor can we doubt that these sleights of metaphor are dangerous to our moral and political health: as a critic of the Coppola film points out, that convenient stretching allowed Captain Kurtz's "small-scale, low-tech atrocities committed in the company of his 'primitive' henchmen . . . to become the real horror [of Vietnam], while the massive napalming [by the United States] is made ethically peripheral, that is, ethically downstream from the true heart of darkness."[6]

Conrad cannot be made to bear all the blame for Africa's exclusion from the civilized world. In the mid-sixties, the Regius Professor of Modern History

5. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'," *Massachusetts Review* 18.4 (Winter 1977): 782–94, reprinted with responses in *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 251–62.

6. For a compelling investigation into the ongoing influence of the "Heart of Darkness" trope on literary, cinematic, and popular conceptualizations of Africa, see Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. chap. 4. For the quotation, see 97.

at Oxford, normally a sensible fellow, declared the history of black Africa (just beginning to attract scholarly interest) to be no more than "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes" whose "chief function in history . . . is to show to the present an image of the past from which, by history, it has escaped."[7] Behind Hugh Trevor-Roper's prehistoric Africa stands the traditional Western opposition between a benighted Africa and a luminous Greece, while the shorthand linkage of Africa with foreign aid, AIDS, and anarchy keeps those antique images alive today.

However, it is true that both the structure and the drama of *Heart of Darkness* demand an Africa, and Africans, immune from the possibility of change. Conrad had spent time in the Congo and knew something of the long histories of the native states. They find no place in his Africa because his Africa escapes time. Through slow centuries Europeans had reduced the earth to "a shackled, conquered monster on which men could work their will. Not in Africa. There Nature remained 'monstrous and free,' with humans no more than a kind of indigenous fauna—or, rather, embodied emanations of the 'Spirit of the Land.' " Marlow's first glimpse of the African coast dramatizes the redundancy of outsiders, with the wall of jungle, "formless, bordered by dangerous surf," refusing entry to vessel and to eye. It was, Marlow says, "as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders." And everywhere that white men had not imposed their fragile dominion, this version of Africa remained triumphant: "As we struggled around 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." At one hair-lifting moment, "the bush began to howl." When the river boat arrives at the Inner Station, "naked human beings" pour out of the silent bush and then draw back "as if the forest that had ejected these beings . . . had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration." In thrall to nature, Africans are frozen in their prehistoric savagery. We know them to be fellow humans not because they are or could become like us but because we were once like them: because even now we civilized creatures feel the tug of the uncorrupted savagery that once was ours. Marlow therefore reserves a special contempt for the African who apes white ways and manners. On the "improved specimen" whom he had taught to manage the riverboat's boiler, Marlow remarks: "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." Africans cannot be changed. They can only be corrupted, or destroyed.

To this point Achebe's charges of destructive racism and injuriously inflated language appear to be justified. But I ask the jury to remain out a little longer.

7. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 9.

3

First for the question that always has scattered the Conradian field: how far does the narrator Marlow speak for the novelist Conrad? Always? Sometimes? Never? Some critics, including Achebe, assume full identification.[8] Others credit Marlow the Engineer with the mundane or pragmatic pronouncements, and Conrad the Artist with the poetic and metaphysical ones. Conrad himself acknowledged *Heart of Darkness* to embody "experience . . . pushed a little (and only a very little) beyond the actual facts of the case."[9] Does that acknowledgment imply that Conrad and Marlow are interchangeable? Their biographies in part coincide: like Marlow, Conrad had been employed by a Belgian company in the Congo; he had made a long trek with native carriers lugging an ailing European in a hammock; at Kinshasa he had found a detestable manager (and his promised steamboat was inoperable). Conrad moreover had served on a boat that worked its way upriver to an Inner Station, the place we call Stanleyville, to retrieve a stricken agent of the Company; the agent had died on the return journey and Conrad himself had fallen dangerously ill.

Shared experience, however, does not imply replication. Marlow is presented as a candid patriot, dismissing all imperial ventures where the aim is profit as "robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind." He thus confidently contrasts the Belgian imperial style with the English, which he claims is sustained by "an unselfish belief in [an] idea" and "a devotion to efficiency." Habitually distancing himself from his Belgian employers, Marlow appears as a sometimes amused, sometimes contemptuous, sometimes outraged observer of their villainies. Yet in Conrad's Congo, Englishmen (along with Conrad himself) had been implicated in some highly questionable activities. At that First Station, where the railway to Kinshasa was being built at a hideous cost in African lives, English factories were operating alongside French, Dutch, and Portuguese ones. And the young Conrad seems to have had none of Marlow's Call-me-Ishmael disaffection. Conrad had actively sought his job with the Belgians and was bitterly chagrined to be left out of the gold-seeking venture he would later lampoon as the "El Dorado expedition."

Understanding also changes. Conrad had known Roger Casement in the Congo and had early warning of Casement's exposure of the Belgian possession as "a vast field of havoc and spoliation." Casement's damning "Report to the House of Commons" was not tabled until 1904; *Heart of Darkness* had appeared a full five years earlier. By 1899 Conrad had had a decade to reflect on his experience. A month before publication of the first installment of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad

8. Cf. Achebe: "Marlow seems to me to enjoy Conrad's complete confidence—a feeling reinforced by the close similarities between their two careers."

9. Conrad's note to *Youth*, written 1917, quoted in *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and The Shadow Line*, ed. Allan Ingram (London: Methuen, 1986), 88.

stated its overt theme frankly to his editor: "the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness [exhibited] when tackling the civilizing work in Africa." If there were "civilizing work" to be done in Africa, Conrad probably thought (as Marlow certainly did) that Englishmen were best equipped to do it. Having no wish to offend his adopted country, Conrad was ready to indulge some imperial fantasies. The narrative he initially wraps around Kurtz—solitary European masters, mobs of superstitious savages through moral and intellectual superiority—has warmed hearts and inflamed the hopes of generations of European adventurers. Nonetheless, and *pace* Achebe, Conrad was no purveyor of "comfortable myths." If he reiterated some conventional notions, he also had some deeply uncomfortable things to say about what happens to people, whatever their nationality, who invade and exploit another people for their own ends.

Even before Marlow leaves the "sepulchre" of imperial Brussels, Conrad has chilled us with the two funereal females at the Company office and the baroque nuttiness of the Company doctor. Then comes a parable masquerading as an explanation for the "casual vacancy" Marlow is to fill. The captain he will replace, a normally placid Dane called Fresleven, has been fatally speared in a squabble over two black hens. Now jungle grass was growing through his bleaching bones and a once thriving village lay desolate. The point is made: empire is a health hazard, and not only for the underdogs. As Marlow penetrates further upriver, the forms of white deterioration grow progressively more florid. The Europeans he and we encounter are ludicrous self-deceivers, dangerous to others, dangerous to themselves, reeling about in a hallucinatory world. And all this before we meet Mr. Kurtz.

Conrad also runs us through the systematic corruption of language in colonial milieus. The imperious magic of renaming (New Spain, New Holland, New England) would not work on Africa. It had too long and potent a role in the European imagination to be so easily tamed. But Africans could be managed, cognitively and politically, by the application of convenient labels. First, comprehensively, they could be named "savages," then "workers," "enemies," "criminals," "rebels," according to the needs of the moment: any label that might justify cruelties, including stupid and futile ones. With Marlow's first glimpse of imperialism in action, Conrad begins to map the steady falsification of language and its intimate relationship with violence. As Marlow recalls the French steamer creeping along the melancholy edge of the continent:

> Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It seems the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. . . . In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. . . . there was a touch of insanity in the proceed-

> ings, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by someone on board assuring me that there was a camp of natives—he called them 'enemies'!—hidden out of sight somewhere.

Meanwhile the man-of-war was losing three men a day to fever.

At the first Company station, Marlow is told that the yoked skeletons shuffling past him are "criminals," that the languid skeletons dying in the grove of death are "contract labourers." Conrad (who is here, I think, fully identified with Marlow) does not call these shadows "men." (That majestic word appears only once in three long paragraphs.) Rather they are "shapes," "shadows," "bundles of bones," "phantoms" melting into the indifferent air. The "rebels" are the six heads stuck on the palisade of Kurtz's Inner Station. Marlow is contemptuous: "What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels. Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks." In my view, Conrad's economical statement of the demoralization attending opportunistic euphemism preempts an impressive amount of later postcolonial theorizing. He is also ready to trace the line of guilt back to its origins. As Marlow is tracking down Kurtz (in the bush, desperately crawling back to "his" savages), he has some "imbecile" thoughts: "The knitting old woman with the cat [at the Company office] obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair." *Improper*: an inspired choice of adjective. She is indeed improper, sitting calmly on the far end of this filthy affair. Improper—and implicated too, as are all the inhabitants of that sepulcher of a European city, scurrying "to filch a little money from each other, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams." This is surely a most bitter vision of the multiple corruptions spawned by "respectable" imperialism.

4

Now for those deplorable "magazine-arts."

One evening, the wanderer Marlow tells a story about an episode in his life to four friends, once seamen like himself, now land bound: the Captain, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the unidentified Narrator. The five men are on a yawl on the Thames waiting for the turn of the tide. Night is falling: the little band is increasingly isolated by the water, the thickening darkness, their tested intimacy. Marlow's story is transmitted to us by the Narrator; and it is the Narrator, not Marlow, who exalts the British naval empire: "What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth?" He remains as transfixed by the romance of empire as young Charlie Marlow had once been by those mesmerizing "white spaces on the map." The Narrator is allocated a full

eight paragraphs of scene setting and naive imperial enthusiasm before Marlow's voice cuts in: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth.'" Marlow's remark is left to fade into the silence while the Narrator takes us off around a long, circling paragraph sketching the social life of sailors, Marlow's idiosyncrasies, his taste for hazy tales. And only then, after five pages of framing, describing, distancing—the written equivalent of premonitory mutterings—does Marlow speak again, and the tale, at last, begin. The Narrator will regain his voice only for the five sentences that end the book.

This is "framing" with a vengeance, and to increasingly uncanny effect. As Marlow continues to speak, we realize that the Narrator's voice has somehow prefigured Marlow's in its intonations, even in its little sidesteps from lush description to philosophical reverie; that we have been listening to what might be a ventriloquial echo of what is to come. We also realize that Marlow's face is being slowly obliterated by darkness. The magician adjusts his tilting mirrors, and Marlow vanishes: the voice "seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river." We are alone with the voice and with the story unspooling in the darkness.

Marlow has been moved to tell us what pretends to be Kurtz's story under a compulsion we do not at first understand. That story has come to him in fragments: a few documents, a painting, snatches of guarded talk, then the scrambled monologue of the Russian harlequin. One evening Marlow chooses to tell that fractured story, with its hesitations, obfuscations, and detours, to the Narrator and his companions; at some unspecified later time, the Narrator chooses to tell it to us. We understand, belatedly, that the five—the Captain (on land, a "Director of Companies"), the Accountant, the Lawyer, Marlow the Engineer, and the Narrator-Memorialist—together constitute the sinews of empire. And we also see that, while stories are sometimes nested in other stories to dramatize the richness of the world or of the fabulator's imagination—we might call this the Scheherazade effect—the effect of this nesting is directly contrary. The Narrator's story, concocted out of speculations, ambiguities, confused emotions, broken time and broken speech, floats free from the quotidian reality that generated it. It is delocating and distancing that Conrad is after, each remove further detaching the core story from its moorings in the experienced "now." The Narrator has earlier warned us of a Marlovian idiosyncrasy. Sailors' yarns usually have "a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut." With Marlow, however, "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 those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." We are being instructed: do not watch the teller, do not scrutinize the tale. Look around and look beyond. Listen for the echo.

I think that fugal music may be the closest parallel to what Conrad attempts here with words on the page. Like the phrases in fugue, his words work upon our sensibilities by manipulating rhythms, echoing themes, making transitions between registers, rebuking our indolent expectations. Those "preliminary" pages also establish empire as contested territory, thus liberating Conrad from responsibility for what the Narrator says, and from what Marlow says too.[10] Why does Conrad work so hard to create this doubly refracted world and then direct our attention beyond the representation to its retinal afterimage? Are these the "ghost-story tricks" that Leavis complained of? I think Conrad is telling us that Marlow, rather than Marlow's story, is our subject; that it is his obscured features we will be striving to discern; and that our essential clues will not be in the words spoken but in the echoes of their saying—the "vibration" they leave trembling in the air. Conrad will depend on that voice and its echoes for what he most wants to explore: the demoralization, finally the disintegration, of Charlie Marlow.

5

Marlow is speaking of his past at a time when he has, after a fashion, survived it. An intense experience has metamorphosed into an evening's tale about the corruption of white men in Africa. Only three Europeans—Marlow, Kurtz, and the Danish captain Fresleven—are named in *Heart of Darkness*, and each exemplifies an aspect of the moral destructiveness of colonial adventuring: Fresleven dying in a squabble over a couple of hens; Kurtz spiraling helplessly from vaulting words to degrading action (and dying for it). Upright, wary Marlow does not die. He suffers a worse fate. He comes to know the instability of his own moral being.

To show us a man in the process of disintegration while telling an action tale, Conrad anatomizes the processes by which Marlow (and the rest of us) apprehend events in the world. Consider his famous account of the death of the helmsman. The helmsman is young, flamboyant, intensely pleased with himself, intensely irritating to the staid Marlow. In a chaotic encounter with Kurtz's followers, the helmsman takes a broad-headed spear under the rib cage. Here Conrad deploys his "art of the vivid essential record" to stunning cinematic effect:

> . . . the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice. . . . [He] rolled on his back

10. Cf. Allan Ingram's argument that the "action" of *Heart of Darkness* "comes to seem almost incidental to the true point of the story, which is something, or somewhere, between the self-consciousness of the protagonist, and the self-consciousness of the narrator, and the self-consciousness of Conrad himself, hiding behind walls of narration, behind the dislocation of time, denying, almost, that he has anything to do with the creation at all." Ingram, *Joseph Conrad*, 8. In my view it is Marlow's "voices" that are being differentiated, to great purpose.

and stared straight up at me . . . a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. . . . He looked at me anxiously, gripping the spear like something precious, with an air of being afraid I would try to take it away from him. . . . I had to make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze and attend to the steering. . . ."

At which point, another European enters the wheelhouse:

We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding and menacing expression.

The helmsman is dead. During his dying, his blood has seeped into Marlow's shoes. Marlow rips them off and hurls them away. He pulls out the spear. Then he clasps the body under the arms, lugs it to the side of the boat, and dumps it over. The "pilgrims," shocked by this display of "heartless promptitude," murmur in protest.

Remarkably, Conrad spreads the account of "what happened"—what happened from the helmsman's death to the corpse being snatched by the river—over a full seven pages. The site of the action shifts: we are no longer in the wheelhouse but inside Marlow's skull. As he begins to tug at his blood-sodden shoes, he experiences "a sense of extreme disappointment, as though I had been striving after something altogether without a substance." As one shoe goes overboard, he realizes, joltingly, just how passionately he had wanted "a talk with Kurtz"—to hear that matchless voice, experience that matchless eloquence. As Marlow hurls the second shoe, he is overwhelmed by an extravagant desolation, "as if I had missed my destiny in life. . . . I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. . . ." Then we cut to the future by returning, with a newly mordant irony, to the theme of the illusory moral authority of rhetoric. Marlow gives a detailed account of his disgust when, long after the death of the helmsman, he had at last heard that magical voice in full flow. He proceeds to an analysis of Kurtz's pretensions and provides a swift biography. Then and only then do we return to the screams, the spears, and the helmsman dead at his feet.

I think that Conrad is attempting something immensely ambitious here: a close account of flamboyant interior action that can only be accomplished by words on the page. (If you doubt it, try translating the action described over

those seven pages into film.) I also suspect that this and other episodes expose the tension between Conrad's passion "to make us think," sometimes through supercharged rhetoric, and his passion "to make [us] hear, to make [us] feel—before all, to make [us] see" through his genius for the graphic and concrete.[11] In a later episode, Conrad offers a more modest, slow-motion analysis of how humans make sense of what they are looking at—how consciousness responds to sudden challenge. The riverboat has arrived at Kurtz's Inner Station; Marlow is scanning the place through his binoculars. He sees "a long decaying building" behind the remains of a decorative fence: six slim posts, each with a carved round knob on top. Then he is hailed from the shore by the Russian harlequin, whose excited account of Kurtz's increasingly disturbed and disturbing doings will continue over yet another seven pages, this time with a chapter break in the middle. Only then does Marlow take up his binoculars again to scan the shore. The Russian is continuing his increasingly mad story, we and Marlow are half-listening to him—when Marlow picks up something strange about one of those decorative posts. Conrad makes us wait through another four sentences and yet another Marlovian sidestep into irony before we are told what he is staring at: those "rounded knobs," those "ornamentations," are human heads.

The process we have been taken through—the scanning, the questing attentiveness, the flinching away from a terrible possibility, then the unwilling return—comes close to representing the actual process of a consciousness struggling to order perceptions into a coherent explanation of what is before it. This is how human minds work; and as we read, and wait, and look, and flinch, we know it. Cedric Watts reads *Heart of Darkness* as infused with "a recessive adroitness, constantly ambushing the conceptualising reader."[12] *Ambushing* is marvelous, but I think it is the precarious nature of the process of conceptualization that Conrad is exposing here.

6

As Marlow puts down the glass, "the head that had appeared near enough to be spoken to seemed at once to have leaped away from me into inaccessible distance." We are hearing what I take to be the dominant theme of this complicated polyphony: the simultaneous power, and the vacuity, of language. In an early review of *Heart of Darkness*, Edward Garnett identified its project as "analysis of

11. Cf. Tzvetan Todorov, who dismisses the helmsman's death briskly: in "the battle scene . . . between Whites and Blacks . . . the only casualty deemed worthy of mention is the helmsman, and Marlow only mentions him because his shoes are full of the blood of the dying man, thus forcing him to throw them overboard." Tzvetan Todorov, "Knowledge in the Void: *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana* 21.3 (1989): 162.

12. Cedric Watts, *Conrad's "Heart of Darkness": A Critical and Contextual Approach* (Milan: Mursia International, 1977), 1–2.

the deterioration of the white man's morale, when he is let loose from European restraint and planted down in the tropics as an emissary of light armed to the teeth, to make trade profits out of the subject races."[13] Conrad's response to this rather flat-footed characterization was oddly muted. He thanked Garnett for his "brave attempt to grapple with the foggishness of *Heart of Darkness*, to explain what I myself tried to shape blindfold."[14] What is this "foggishness"? I believe it to be the treachery of language, written and spoken, and its power in human affairs. The "burning noble words" penned by Kurtz in his high-flown report for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" are obviously pernicious. But they are also precarious: Kurtz's golden eloquence abruptly transmutes into the brutal simplicity of that final scrawled imperative: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

Words on the page are slippery, but the spoken word is dangerously protean. Conrad was fascinated by the seductive power of speech, and the magical realism of reported speech is the weapon of choice in his literary armory. He also understood the paradox of language in society: words have the power to distort social reality but are nonetheless essential to social stability. It is talk that keeps us civil. Kurtz has isolated himself from the webs of ordinary talk; Kurtz has become capable of anything. Marlow:

> "You can't understand, how can you? — with solid pavement under your feet, and kind neighbours ready to cheer you, or to fall on you, treading delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in holy terror of scandal or gallows or lunatic asylums — how can you imagine what particular reaches of the first ages man's untrammelled feet may take him into by way of solitude — utter solitude without a policeman — utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things all make the great difference."

Silence is dangerous, yet so are some kinds of speech. Marlow believes that simple, modest words — the practical instructions in a manual of seamanship, quiet talk about pigeons or about one's children — could hold men to decency and "restraint" even in Africa. He has come to fear and despise eloquence because of his own infatuation with the rumor of golden-tongued Kurtz. Marlow had sustained his elective self-image by practiced strategies of detachment, unrelenting irony, commitment to his chosen work, and above all frugal speech ("Rivets!"). He is therefore peculiarly vulnerable to inspired eloquence. Despite their moral deformations, the other Europeans we meet are still webbed in the attenuated

13. Edward Garnett, as quoted in *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 132–33.

14. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: 1861–97*, ed. Laurence Davies and Frederick R. Karl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 467–68.

filaments of the home territory by the words they use and the worlds that those words evoke. The Harlequin has his treasured handbook; the Accountant, his books kept in "European" order; the Manager, a language of conventional business practice that can define Kurtz's methods not as "insane" but as "unsound." Marlow sees further and more clearly than the others, but being solitary—being intent on maintaining his wanderer's autonomy—he is the more exposed.

Marlow's vulnerability becomes patent when he passes through the double curtain into Kurtz's fatal zone. The "blind whiteness" of the fog drops to seal the steamboat into its own small white world, lifts to reveal the waiting jungle, drops—and then rises again. The stage is set. Now Marlow is enclosed within a surreal kingdom where sensations go unrebuked and human speech is reduced to meaningless sounds. Earlier he had reflected on the silence of Africa: "What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps deaf as well." Now he is inside the thing that needs no language. Consider Marlow's words as he prepares to drag Kurtz back to the boat and civilization. (This is the passage Leavis cites to demonstrate Conrad's embrace of the "arts of the magazine-writer.") Marlow and Kurtz are, at last, alone, speaking together, and speaking with dreadful intensity. Yet even spoken in Kurtz's echo chamber voice, with savages moving in the firelight thirty yards away, Kurtz's words fail. Marlow, trying to report what ought to have been the supreme moment of his quest, is disconsolate: "I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They are common everyday words—the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life." All he can do is insist they had the "terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares." We are being told that the most profound emotional meanings cannot be captured in words at all. How are such meanings conveyed? Conrad demonstrates: by wails, cries, whispers, silences—the lightning flashes that reveal inner states. The Russian harlequin intimates the horrors he has seen not by speech but with "desolate exclamations, completed by shrugs; in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs." Kurtz conveys more of his agony to Marlow, and to us, when he abandons organized language altogether: it is his groans, his exclamations, the "awful" rictus of his smile, through which we intuit the darkness.

Conrad, in his introduction to *Heart of Darkness*, acknowledges that fiction must be grounded firmly in "the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena." But fiction is grounded in, not confined by, reality: fiction is experience "pushed a little beyond the actual facts of the case." That small push carries immense consequences. And then, "it was no longer a matter of sincere colouring. It was like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang

in the air and dwell in the ear after the last note had been struck." After all his months in Africa, Marlow remembers only the sound of voices—the Europeans he met on the river, Kurtz, the Belgian Intended—"all of them so little more than voices." And those voices have become no more meaningful than the yells of savages: "The memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense." The "vibration left hanging in the air" at the close of the novel is "one immense jabber."

Marlow and Conrad are brothers in the difficulties they face in communicating ineffable experience through the treacherous medium of words. Language—its seductive power, its ambiguity, its ultimate inadequacy—haunts *Heart of Darkness* as it haunted the passionate, pessimistic stylist who fashioned it. We are reminded of the admission of another supreme stylist, Gustave Flaubert: "human speech is like a cracked kettle, on which we hammer out tunes for bears to dance to, when all the while we yearn to move the stars to pity." By the book's close, Marlow himself has become little more than an echo chamber for voices heard at a different time, in a different country, and now hollowed of meaning.[15]

The terrifying inadequacy of language is matched by Marlow's ambivalence before its sinister custodian, Kurtz. We have seen the helmsman. We know he is real. But Kurtz? "Do you see him?" Marlow asks. "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" We understand his anxiety. For all his portentous rumblings and loomings, Kurtz remains strangely insubstantial. And there is a larger doubt that in time swallows the lesser ones: is Kurtz "really" a manifestation of Marlow's moral and psychological disintegration, a phantom fabricated out of Marlow's unauthorized dreams? The riverboat churns steadily upriver, but Marlow's movement toward Kurtz is not steady at all and loses direction the closer he draws. His conduct on arrival at Kurtz's derelict station reinforces our suspicions: at last in a position to "talk with Kurtz," he chooses to stay on board with the Russian sailor and listen to talk about Kurtz. The Manager goes ashore alone. Marlow has his first sight of the man he has sought so raptly through his glass. Kurtz is speaking: "'He looked at least seven feet long. . . . I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. . . . I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow up all the air, all the earth, all the men before him'"—the European skeleton as ultimate cannibal.

15. John Lyon has elegantly shown how, by the multiple layering of Marlow's story, Conrad subverts our capacity to locate ourselves in time. He adds this crucial observation: "Values in this work enact a terrifyingly precarious and baffling dance of veils before the reader, always managing to suggest but never revealing the emptiness they attempt to clothe. Any asserted value is merely an improvisation, of temporary use in the business of living, a means of coping." John Lyon, introduction to *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1995), xxv–xxvi.

And Marlow cannot hear the mouthed words at all. This is not only the sight but the stuff of nightmare. The whole novel can be experienced as an intensifying aural drama pivoting on the struggle to decipher sounds made by the human voice. Glances only promise communication. It is words on which we must rely, and words reliably fail.

Kurtz and Marlow talk together only when Marlow, discovering that Kurtz is missing from his cabin, sets out to stalk this creature whom the wilderness is drawing to itself. He cuts Kurtz off as the sick man is crawling through the grass toward his followers. Marlow threatens extravagant violence: he will smash Kurtz's head, he will throttle him unless he submits. Then he lugs him back to the boat. Immediately afterward comes Marlow's retreat. Despite his conviction that an unbreakable intimacy had been established between them, he shuns the dying Kurtz ("'I looked at him as you peer at a man who is lying at the foot of a precipice where the sun never shines'") and returns to his old strategy of immersion in the world of things. Scrambling back to the safety of what he had once called the "surface-truth" of small-scale work, Marlow helps the Engineer with "an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners" and leaves Kurtz to die alone in the dark. There has been no intrepid inquiry into the heart of darkness after all, but instead an impetuous, then a doubtful, approach; a shuddering touch; a recoil—then a sickened, permanent withdrawal. The drama lies not in the interactions between Kurtz (oddly pathetic throughout) and Marlow but in Marlow's increasingly bizarre responses to his own fabricated idea of Kurtz ("the nightmare of my choice").

With Kurtz buried, Marlow falls desperately ill. The "feverishness" that had been upon him since he penetrated Kurtz's domain now seals him into a solitary world of pain and "impalpable greyness." Pervaded by a "tepid scepticism," this fog will never lift. The dead Kurtz speaks within him; he hears the desolate whisper of "a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness." Marlow lives on, but in the conviction that he himself has experienced, and barely survived, Kurtz's dying anguish: "It was his extremity I seem to have lived through." Once physically recovered, Marlow returns to Brussels. But he has been mortally wounded. He is no longer detached from human society yet is still nauseated by it, and his strategic irony has been replaced by comprehensive cynicism. Visiting Kurtz's "Intended," a woman who breathes candor and demands falsehoods, Marlow is at first her echo, then her ventriloquist's doll. Finally, through compassion and disgust—a disgust not only for the false world of women but for all pretense at principled behavior—he commits the gravest sin against what remains of his cherished ideal of honor. He lies.

7

I end, as I began, with Achebe and the postcolonial critique. Whatever Conrad's own attitudes—and every reader must recognize that some of these are baldly racist—these are more than outweighed in the novel by its dramatization of the slow death of Marlow's decencies. *Heart of Darkness* is systematic in its portrayal of human and linguistic corruption; nihilistic in its demonstration that social arrangements and the treasured individual self are both terrifyingly contingent. There is much in the novel for which Achebe's reading does not account. We grieve for the helmsman because we have seen him: preening in his blue cloth wrapper and his brass earrings, transforming into a warrior at the moment of assault, wrestling open the shutter Marlow had so carefully shut, wildly firing his rifle—then falling, twisting, clutching the spear in his chest as he gazes wonderingly at us. This is no "grain of sand in a black Sahara" but another moment in which Conrad exposes the pathos, and the horror, of the imperial project. The helmsman's "lustrous and inquiring glance" is extinguished, and the hope of human communication along with it. The dying man sinks back into his solitude to assume the mask of impenetrable difference: Marlow reasserts his can-do dominance, tearing off his blood-soaked shoes, throwing them in the water, dumping the body over the side. But the trace memory of that trusting, questioning glance, that unanswerable question *Why?* remains.

Conrad knew the anger that awareness of difference and distance provoked in chronically interventionist Europeans. The Accountant at the first Company station, fussing over his records in his fastidious linen, reduces the station's brutal muddle to clean figures, then demurely admits that "when one has got to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages—hate them to death." This kind of anger is fully explicit in the jagged scrawl Kurtz appends to his shining report to the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs": "Exterminate all the brutes!" Conrad knew that frustration, with all the punitive impulses that go with it, is endemic among colonizers, as it is among all self-appointed superiors eager to bend underlings to their will. *Pace* Achebe, Conrad granted individual Africans their individual lives, and he did it, most delicately, through art. When Marlow drags the helmsman's body out of the wheelhouse, the heels "leaped together over the little door step." That sprightly hop of the dead heels will keep the helmsman forever alive in our minds. Marlow grieves for him, and we grieve too. We are startled into seeing the youth in the grove of death as human by the thread of white worsted he wears around his neck. Marlow focuses on that thread: "Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act?" The sign is gnomic. But the dying boy is drawn by that white thread into the fellowship of humankind because the thread evokes an innocent world in which a young man could covet, keep, and wear a fragment of stuff from beyond the seas. A "shadow" or "thing" does not revel in worsted. This

African is a human being. The chained "criminals" at the First Station are left unforgettable by a single visual detail: "Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails." The wagging trace of an adjacent way of life recalls Orwell's Burman, stepping delicately around a puddle on the way to his execution. These are verbal equivalents of what Roland Barthes calls the "puntum": the "detail which overwhelms the entirety of [our] reading" and causes "an intense mutation of [our] interest."[16] Time and again we are made to look, then see the injuries of empire: to feel the pain of injuries inflicted and the pain of being implicated in their infliction. Occasional talk of a "civilizing mission" cannot gainsay these moments.

In my view, the most insistent theme of the multithemed *Heart of Darkness* is that to exert power over others, especially alien others, brings disaster to all. That theme is reiterated a dozen times in a dozen different registers: bones bleaching in long grass, skeletal figures in a patch of shade, blood seeping into a man's shoes; the river stations populated by moral grotesques; Kurtz crazed; a decent, useful man hollowed of feeling. Marlow does not speak for Conrad. Conrad speaks for Conrad, through the astonishing choices he makes while having Marlow tell his tale. Will any first-time student reader "hear" everything that is being said through that enormous, echoing vibration? No. And Achebe's denunciation will make for useful class discussion. Then some will read the book again, and again, as I confess I do. (This essay has come out of long obsession.) Did Conrad fully know what he was doing in *Heart of Darkness*? Perhaps no more than we do: he acknowledged its "foggishness" and that he had shaped it "blindfold." Reading *Heart of Darkness* is like watching a diver approach the three-meter board as the commentator quietly describes the implausible series of maneuvers he intends to make before entering the water. And then we watch him do it.

Denunciation seems not the best response to such accomplishment.

16. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1980, New York: Vintage, 1993), 49.