

Yet the whole point of what Kurtz and Marlow talk about is in fact imperial mastery, white European 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 invade 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, disablingly 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, \* \* \* 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 differ-

ences 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 Ngugi and the Sudanese Tayeb 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 toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable 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. \* \* \*

## PAUL B. ARMSTRONG

### [Reading, Race, and Representing Others]†

Chinua Achebe's well-known, controversial claim that the depiction of the peoples of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* is racist and xenophobic stands in striking contrast to James Clifford's praise of Conrad as an exemplary anthropologist. Where Achebe finds prejudice

† From "Heart of Darkness and the Epistemology of Cultural Differences" in *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Joseph Conrad After Empire*, ed. Gail Finham and Myrtle Hooper (Rondebosch: U of Cape Town P, 1996), pp. 21–35, 37–39. Reprinted with the permission of Juta Academic Publishers.



and dismissive reification in the representations of the Other offered by *Heart of Darkness*, Clifford sees in the text a heteroglossic rendering of cultural differences without any attempt to synthesize them. "Joseph Conrad was a bloody racist", Achebe claims, and *Heart of Darkness* is "a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question"—"a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities".<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Clifford holds up the novella as an epistemological model for ethnographers because it "truthfully juxtaposes different truths" and "does not permit a feeling of centeredness, coherent dialogue, or authentic communion" which would give the misleading impression that understanding another culture can be accomplished once and for all: "Anthropology is still waiting for its Conrad".<sup>2</sup> It is curious, to say the least, that the same text can be viewed as an exemplar both of epistemological evil and of virtue—as a model of the worst abuses and the most promising practices in representing other peoples and cultures.

This conflict is only the latest chapter in a long history of disagreement about whether to regard *Heart of Darkness* as a daring attack on imperialism or a reactionary purveyor of colonial stereotypes. The novella has received such divergent responses, I think, because its enactment of the dilemmas entailed in understanding cultural otherness is inherently double and strategically ambiguous. Achebe wrongly assumes that *Heart of Darkness* offers a finished representation of the colonial Other to the metropolitan reader. Instead, the text dramatizes the impossibility of capturing the Other in writing, whether univocal or polysemic, for the very reason that understanding otherness requires an ongoing reciprocity between knower and known through which each comments on, corrects, and replies to the other's representations in a never-ending shifting of positions. Achebe is right to fault the text, however, because it dramatizes a pervasive state of cultural solipsism which it does not itself overcome, and it consequently abounds in representations of the Other which are one-sided and prejudicial. In yet another turn, though, Achebe's very act of writing back to Conrad is already anticipated by the text. Clifford is right that Conrad offers key guidance to anthropological knowing—not, however, because his novel is an ideal ethnography, but because its textual strategies aim to educate the reader about processes which might make possible a dialogue with the Other which is absent from Marlow's monologue.

1. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *The Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 788, 790; see the selection in this Norton Critical Edition.
2. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), pp. 92, 102, 96.

Conrad is neither a racist nor an exemplary anthropologist but a skeptical dramatist of epistemological processes. *Heart of Darkness* is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding. The implication of this failure for the reader is deliberately unclear because Conrad is not certain that hermeneutic education or social change can overcome the solipsism dividing individuals and cultures, even as he is reluctant to give up hope that they might. Truly reciprocal, dialogical understanding of the Other is the unrealized horizon which this text points to but does not reach. *Heart of Darkness* strategically refuses to specify whether this horizon is attainable or will forever recede as we approach it. This ambiguity is an expression of Conrad's unresolved epistemological doubleness—his will-to-believe that our essential solipsism can be overcome coupled with his deep skepticism that (in Marlow's words) "We live, as we dream—alone" (27). Because Conrad cannot resolve this doubleness into a univocal attitude, he stages it for the reader through textual strategies which oscillate between affirming and denying the possibility of understanding otherness.

*Heart of Darkness* represents dialogical understanding as an unfilled void, an empty set, a lack signified by the dire consequences it leads to. It is important to note how little contact—and even less conversation—Marlow has with Africans. He himself observes early on that "Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering—Come and find out" (13). That is his posture for most of the story—observing at a distance people and phenomena with which he has little or no reciprocal engagement and which consequently seem bewildering and mysterious, even frightening or disgusting ("the incomprehensible . . . is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, . . . the fascination of the abomination" (6)). What all of these emotions share is the one-sidedness of their response to alterity, an absence of to-and-fro engagement with it. This lack of reciprocity manifests itself as curiosity, desire, fear, wonder, loathing, or frustration—all one-way attitudes which do not reduce the Other's distance but only confirm and compound its status as alien, whether marvelous or terrible. "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings," Marlow notes as he travels up the river; "we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse" (35). This analogy is apt inasmuch as madness both fascinates and terrifies sanity because it recognizes a kinship which it refuses to accept and explore by making mad an interlocutor.

Marlow explicitly criticizes the blindness and will-to-power of nonreciprocal approaches to alterity—for example: the scientist



who oddly measures only the outside of the skulls of those traveling to Africa, and only on their way out, or the French man-of-war which shells invisible "enemies" in the forest. The absurd one-sidedness of these engagements with the unknown suggests that Marlow would endorse Achebe's complaint that "Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves" (791). Marlow indicts the closed-mindedness of non-dialogical encounters with otherness but then duplicates it, replicating the solipsism he exposes and laments. Marlow remains for the most part an observer who does not communicate with the objects of his observation. Marlow's contacts with Africans are sufficient to reveal his self-enclosure and to educate him about the dangers of nonreciprocal impositions of power and knowledge, but insufficient to remove the alienness of alterity through dialogue, so that he remains a tourist who sees the passing landscape through a window which separates him from it, and he consequently commits the crimes of touristic misappropriation of otherness even as he is aware of and points out the limitations of that position.

This doubleness is evident in Marlow's complaints about the injustice of naming the Other without allowing revision or response. After seeing a chain-gang of imprisoned Africans, Marlow remarks:

these men could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals and the outraged law like the bursting shells [of the man-of-war] had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages (16).

The will-to-power in the right-to-name is especially visible when its labels seem anomalous or arbitrary but remain in force by the sheer power of the authority behind the definition. But Marlow challenges this authority by invoking a type—the death-in-life of the "unhappy savage"—which could be (and has been) seen to be just as much a stereotype as the labels he unmarks.

Part of his dilemma is that he cannot do without names and types in opposing the mis-labelling he despises. When he comes upon the grove where the sick and exhausted prisoners are dying, he thinks: "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" (17). He can say what they are not, invoking a type and negating it, but when he tries to specify what they are, he acknowledges their humanity by reducing them to objects—"black shapes", "moribund shapes",

"black bones" (17)—images with an inanimate quality which may be appropriate to death but which nonetheless make the dying seem anonymous, impersonal, unhuman. These images render the suffering of the Africans but position Marlow outside it, at a distance his compassion can register but cannot cross. When Marlow recognizes one of the dying individually, he comments: "The man seemed young—almost a boy—but you know with them it's hard to tell" (17). This sort of denial of the Other's differences is classic racism. Curiously, though, it echoes an observation Marlow had just made about the African guard of the chain gang for whom "white men [were] so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be" (16). Although he criticizes the blindness of homogenizing the Other by ironically turning the tables on the white imperialists and doing unto them through African eyes what they do to blacks, Marlow then commits the very mistake he has just mocked. Once again Marlow opposes prejudice only to repeat it.

Marlow tries the tactic of ironic counter-labelling, calling the crimes of imperialism "these high and just proceedings", or referring to the guards as "one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work" (16). But the irony is offered to Marlow's audience—and, across them, to the reader—and is not part of a process of negotiation in which the right-to-name is tested and shared among those directly concerned. Marlow's awareness of the power of language to impose perceptions on the Other is not matched by a sense of language as an instrument of reciprocal exchange to mediate conflicting perceptions. Marlow can only counter the right-to-name with strategies of reverse labelling which fight what they oppose by repeating its lack of dialogue. Marlow thus becomes implicated in what he opposes by his very attempts to unmask it.

Marlow takes the first steps toward a dialogical understanding of Africans by recognizing that their mystery and opacity are a sign of their humanity. Africans are a hermeneutic problem for him because he acknowledges that they have a world which he can only construct by reading signs—filling in gaps in the evidence, imagining hidden sides, and engaging in the other kinds of interpretive activity we invoke when we encounter phenomena which we assume are intelligible because they are evidence of other human life. When he tells the story of his predecessor Fresleven's death, for example, Marlow creates from scant evidence a narrative of mutual misunderstanding which tries to reconstruct how the baffling, terrifying, intimidating European must have appeared to African perceptions (see 9). The very mystery of their thought-processes which makes their world an interpretive challenge presents them as fellow human beings whose lives can be made intelligible by fitting them to narrative patterns which might also apply to one's own life. Rea-



soning similarly from the familiar to the unfamiliar, Marlow transforms the emptiness of the abandoned landscape into a sign of human motivation: "Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon" (19-20). If the hermeneutic circle dictates that we can only make sense of something strange by relating it to what we already understand, Marlow's imaginative reconstruction of other worlds based on the assumption of their resemblance to his own suggests how this circle can be transformed from a trap into a resource for extending our worlds.

His interpretive efforts also demonstrate, however, that the hermeneutic circle becomes vicious and self-enclosing unless it is opened up by making the object of interpretation an interlocutor and a fellow-interpreter. Marlow's attempts at recognition finally end in rejection because he does not move from similarity to reciprocity.

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 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 (36).

The hermeneutic pursuit of self-understanding by understanding others is initiated only to be abandoned here as Marlow acknowledges a relationship with the Other only to devalue it by consigning it to the remote past or subterranean moral regions. The unfamiliar necessarily seems "ugly" to the categories and values of the familiar unless the hermeneutic experience becomes not a one-way encounter but a to-and-fro exchange in which the authority of what we know is called into question and its priority over the unknown is reversed.

Benita Parry oversimplifies, however, when she claims that "both Kurtz and Marlow look upon blacks as another genus."<sup>3</sup> Marlow senses a resemblance with the Other here, and that is why he re-

3. Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 34.

acts defensively. If the Other were not somehow the same as he is, its apparent differences would not be so threatening. Marlow feels shame because an unexpected similarity undermines his sense of self, and his resulting anxiety and embarrassment prevent him from regarding a surprising kinship as a sign of the equal dignity and worth of a potential interlocutor. Because he perceives resemblance as a threat to be warded off by relegating it to lesser aspects of his being, he cuts off the possibility of articulating and exploring it and using it as an instrument of mediation.

Marlow's ambivalence dramatizes the sometimes ambiguous double nature of hermeneutic encounters with other cultures. The experience of alterity can be both frightening and invigorating—a threat to the self and an opportunity for self-recognition and self-expansion. Discovering unexpected similarities with radically different ways of being entails a disorienting and perhaps distressing loss of self-understanding—one turns out not to be exactly who one thought one was—even as it opens up new possibilities of self-knowledge, self-creation, and relationship. Marlow's sense of threat and loss paralyzes him, however, and does not allow him to conceive of the destruction of his previous certainties as a prelude to new constructions of himself and his world.

Marlow tacitly acknowledges the equality of the Other's world by recognizing its power to defamiliarize his own conventions and categories. Abdul JanMohamed argues that "genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture."<sup>4</sup> The first step toward engaging in dialogue with another culture is to recognize that one's own is riven with contingency and lacks any essential privilege. Africa has this effect on Marlow by exposing the arbitrariness, the unnaturalness, of his customary ways of being and understanding. Although the African rowers he meets early on seem strange to Marlow ("they had faces like grotesque masks"), he nevertheless finds "they were a great comfort to look at" because "they wanted no excuse for being there" (14). Their naturalness exposes the artificiality of European practices which cannot be universally valid if transplantation robs them of authority. Marlow similarly denaturalizes his own customary ways of seeing when he tries to imagine how his cannibal-crew envisions the white passengers: "just then I perceived—in a new light, as it were—how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so—what

4. Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 65.



shall I say?—so—unappetising" (41). Seeing the Europeans as Africans might challenge the self-evidence of the European perspective and opens up new possibilities of perception.<sup>5</sup>

The loneliness of the jungle continues the process of defamiliarization which Marlow's exposure to Africans begins: "utter solitude without a policeman—... utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion" (49). Without the discipline and coercion of conventional authority (what everyone thinks polices the thinkable), the contingency of a society's practices becomes available for thought. Marlow later finds an "irritating pretence" in "the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety" and calls them "offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance" (71). They do not share Marlow's sense of the groundlessness and relativity of ways of being which seem simply natural to them but dangerously lack the foundations they assume they have. But this very sense that his world is not necessary but only one of many possible worlds is the precondition for anthropological dialogue between cultures which Marlow would seem to be more ready for than anyone who has not experienced his metaphysical disorientation.

Marlow's experience suggests the two faces of contingency. Recognizing the arbitrariness of one's practices and values threatens one's faith in them even as it opens up the possibility of genuinely reciprocal cross-cultural understanding with other worlds whose ways of being are no less justified than one's own. If all worlds are contingent, they are all equal, and a basis for reciprocity has been established. Marlow's experience in Africa is a tonic blow to the pride of Europeans whose sense of natural privilege he thinks is a lie and a sham. But this realization does not transform him into an anthropological pluralist who is invigorated by the existence of other worlds. Just as he is angry at his recognition of kinship with Africans because it threatens his identity, so he is annoyed and frustrated by his realization that everything he had previously taken for granted is only an arbitrary convention. Discovering the relativity of worlds is only destructive and not potentially constructive for

5. This is not to say that Marlow gets the African perception of Europeans right. Still, by reversing perspectives Marlow begins the process R. S. Khare describes: "What we need is genuine reciprocity in sharing knowledge, which would include reversing the known-known relation and ourselves becoming the Other to non-West anthropologists" ("The Other's Double—The Anthropologist's Bracketed Self: Notes on Cultural Representation and Privileged Discourse," *New Literary History* 23 [1992]: 7). Marlow does not complete this process, however, because he only imagines African perceptions and does not elicit them.

Marlow because it robs values of their underpinnings and does not open up the possibility of new kinds of creation or new modes of relationship which would be closed off if our world were the only one there could be. Anything Marlow might do with his knowledge of contingency would simply create more contingency—another groundless construct (like his lie to the Intended)—and his resentment at its ubiquity is proportional to his inability to transform or escape it.

Marlow's sense of the pervasiveness of contingency deprives otherness of its potentially invigorating difference because the same groundlessness is everywhere. Marlow's appreciation of contingency allows him to approach others across cultural barriers with a sympathy and imagination remarkable for his time, but one reason why the encounters never lead to a productive exchange of differences is that Marlow only discovers the same thing at every turn. For example, he says of his cannibal-crew: "I looked at them as you would on any human being with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity", but he cannot fathom their reasons for not satisfying their hunger by eating the white passengers: "these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint!" (42). He attributes to them a kind of existential heroism in the face of absurdity which corresponds to his own ethic of carrying on with one's duties even when they cannot be justified, but he never checks his interpretation by asking them. If he had, he might have discovered what other commentators have pointed out—namely, that cannibals do not typically eat human flesh to appease hunger but for spiritual reasons as part of specific rituals.<sup>6</sup> Marlow's awareness of the contingency of his customs and beliefs allows him to imagine other worlds, but he always only finds in them further evidence of contingency.

His attitude toward the other African members of his crew is similarly appreciative but ultimately dismissive because Marlow is both open and closed to cultural differences. There is a peculiar combination of mockery and respect in Marlow's description of the native fireman:

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. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this—that should the water in that transparent thing disappear

6. For a summary of the debates in the anthropological literature about the actual extent of head-hunting and cannibalism and about their social and religious functions, see Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), pp. 147–48, 258.



the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance (37).

The oddity of this figure exemplifies the anomalies which result when different cultures meet—what Clifford celebrates as the playful, multivocal effect of “collage” (see 173–77). It is hard to know which looks stranger in the encounter—the “witchcraft” of the boiler or the superstitions of the African, which after all turn out to be an effective way of negotiating his responsibilities. Much is disclosed about both sides which might otherwise not be so visible (how Western instruction demands taking things on faith, for example, and is therefore not as rational as it pretends, and conversely, how effective superstition can be as an instrument for mastering the world and reading signs). The figure of the fireman is a hybrid, heteroglot innovation which creates new possibilities of being not contained in either culture alone but made available as an unexpected consequence of their resources mixing and combining.

Nevertheless, the semantically and existentially productive potential of this figure never fully emerges in the text. The African's dignity as a worker is undermined by Marlow's overriding sense of his representative value as a sign of the absurdity of cultural conventions which seem natural only because we are accustomed to them. His appreciation of the contingency of a culture's habits allows him to be ironic about the native fireman, but it does not lead him to imagine that the fireman might have an ironic view of his situation as well, so that the two of them might play back and forth in exchanging a mutual sense of cultural absurdity instead of the joke all coming from Marlow's side. The fireman remains an object of Marlow's philosophical and cultural contemplation, and his adaptive powers as a creative human subject responding to challenging, bizarre circumstances never receive quite the recognition and respect they deserve. Despite Marlow's appreciation of his efficiency and duty, he is most of all a comic figure of the arbitrariness of cultural practices. Here again the perception of contingency is where Marlow's imagination of cultural differences both starts and stops.

An obvious objection is that Marlow could not be expected to engage in dialogue with his crew because he is their master and a representative of the imperialistic powers. Edward Said points out, for example, “the almost insuperable discrepancy between a political actuality based on force, and a scientific and humane desire to understand the Other hermeneutically and sympathetically in modes not always circumscribed and defined by force”, and he argues that “an interlocutor in the colonial situation is . . . by definition either someone who is compliant . . . or someone who . . . simply refuses to talk, deciding that only a radically antagonistic, perhaps violent

riposte is the only interlocution that is possible with colonial power.”<sup>7</sup> What is remarkable, however, is how close Marlow comes to dialogue which the political structure of his situation would seem to preclude. He repeatedly misses his chances in a way that calls attention to them. Although he occupies a position of authority, his alienation from the local powers and his expectation that his days in Africa are numbered give him an ambiguous position as both an insider and an outsider to the colonial structure. This ambiguity blurs the distinctions which the narrator of “Karain” suggests:

No man will speak to his master; but to a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things, words are spoken . . . that take no account of race or colour.<sup>8</sup>

Marlow's status as “master” may block him from dialogue with his African crew, but as an outsider to the other Europeans he is also a “wanderer” who is more open to otherness than he would be if he were firmly ensconced in power.

It is perhaps this kind of cross-cultural trust and acceptance which Marlow senses he lost the chance of when he recognizes too late “a kind of partnership” with his African helmsman: “He steered for me—I had to look after him. I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken”, when he died and looked at Marlow with an “intimate profundity. . . like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment” (51). The condensation and inequality of their paternalistic relationship as master and servant prevented Marlow from recognizing until too late that the African was a fellow human being deserving of reciprocal recognition and concern—or even from sensing that such a reciprocity, if in truncated form, was already at work in the exchange of services between them. Their encounter becomes truly dialogical when the African looks back at Marlow, the roles of observer and observed thus reversed, but their exchange of vision is cut short—even as it is made possible—by death. Once again contingency has the double effect of uniting and dividing people. The groundlessness of existence which death reveals allows an uncommon moment of intimacy and exchange which it simultaneously destroys. As before, *Heart of Darkness* opens the possibility of cross-cultural reciprocity only to close it.

7. Edward Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 217, 209–10.

8. Joseph Conrad, “Karain: A Memory” (1898), in *Tales of Unrest* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1924), p. 26.



Prolonging and extending such momentary glimpses of reciprocity would not only require political changes to create conditions of equality which would allow mutual recognition and exchange; building dialogue would also demand that both sides have access to language—if not a common language, at least respect for each other's capacities as language-users. *Heart of Darkness* both denies and affirms that Africans are linguistic beings whose command of language would make communication with them possible. Marlow sometimes refers to African phonemes as "a violent babble of uncouth sounds" (19): "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language, and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany" (67). Dialogue could not occur with beings whose language is regarded as pre-linguistic or as rudimentary and thus not equal to one's own. But Marlow also at times credits African sign-systems with the same value as European languages: "the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (20). When he hears cries emanating from the shore, he invariably attributes significance to them: "an irresistible impression of sorrow, . . . unrestrained grief, . . . a great human passion let loose" (43). He assumes that these sounds are signs which carry meaning to their users and which could be translated if he knew the code.

When he sears the attacking Africans away by sounding the steam-whistle, his strategy assumes a reciprocal hermeneutic capacity on their part. He bets that they too will read sounds as signs in a translatable language, here construing the whistle as a meaningful indicator of evil intentions and intimidating powers. African hermeneutics imply a capacity to negotiate signs which, as in this case, finds exemplary application in the creation of lies and fictions.

Marlow does not, however, try to cross the linguistic barrier between himself and the Africans. His assumption that they are pre-linguistic or at a rudimentary stage of language—or even that their linguistic capacities are somehow demonic (a "satanic litany")—deprives them of the equality as users of sign-systems without which they cannot be interlocutors. But his intuition that another world—worlds—which he cannot penetrate can be vaguely and obscurely heard in the sounds of Africa credits Africans with semiotic capacities which could be, but are not, the basis for further reciprocity and exchange. Once again *Heart of Darkness* suggests a possibility of relatedness which it blocks. Although the conditions of imperialistic domination of Africa might have made reciprocity between Europeans and Africans inconceivable, this novella is re-

markable for its time (and perhaps for ours) because it makes such dialogue thinkable. One can imagine Marlow talking with Africans because of the semiotic powers he ascribes to them and because of the limitations he recognizes in his own culture's claims to authority. But this dialogue never takes place, and the result is to confirm the different cultures in their solipsistic isolation from one another. Both sides can construe the obscure signs emanating across cultural barriers as indications of other worlds, but neither side is able to parse or translate these signs sufficiently to understand their full relevance and communicate its own meanings in return.

Marlow demonstrates the power of linguistic innovation—especially through metaphor and analogy—to open us up to new worlds at the same time as he dramatizes how the creation of figurative language is necessarily circular and hence potentially self-enclosing. Commenting on the enigma of the figure "heart of darkness", Ian Watt explains: "if the words do not name what we know, they must be asking us to know what has, as yet, no name."<sup>9</sup> This is how metaphor works in general—extending the epistemological limits of language by creating incongruities which we can only make sense of by inventing new interpretive patterns.<sup>1</sup> If something as diffuse as "darkness" seems incapable of having a "heart", or if the typically affirmative values of a "heart" seem inappropriately linked with "dark", then these anomalies disclose limitations in our customary ways of understanding which we must revise and extend. The problem, however, is that these innovations can never be entirely new but are themselves a product of our customary assumptions, previously learned conventions, and past experiences. Hence the complaints of many critics that Marlow's metaphors reveal more about European thought-processes than about Africa. If that is true, it is because of the circularity of metaphor and other forms of semantic innovation which attempt to transcend the limits of a language by invoking and manipulating them. The ambiguity of Marlow's metaphors—do they say more about the Other or about him?—calls attention to the dilemma that existing linguistic and hermeneutic patterns are both the trap he is trying to get out of and his only way out of that trap.

This ambiguity is repeatedly thematized in analogies which insist on how little Marlow knows even as they attempt to use that incapacity to get beyond it. "Going up the river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation roted on the earth and the big trees were kings", he reports; "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an

9. Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), pp. 199–200.

1. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1975).



unknown planet" (33, 35). In a sense, these analogies are hermeneutically useless because neither he nor the reader can know anything about their terms of comparison—about the world's "earliest beginnings" or the characteristics of an unexplored planet. The absurdity of the comparison we are asked to make is useful, however, because it foregrounds the circularity of metaphor—proposing that we imagine what the unknown is like by projecting onto it our sense of the unknown. Because of this redundancy, Marlow's analogies cannot produce new knowledge about the Other; what this very repetitiveness discloses, however, is the circular procedure whereby interpreters attempt to make sense of otherness by projecting onto it what they already know.

This simultaneously enabling and incapacitating circularity characterizes not only Marlow's attempts to know Africa but also his relations with other Europeans, including \* \* \* his audience. \* \* \*

\* \* \* Ian Watt argues that *Heart of Darkness* refutes solipsism because "the fact that Marlow, like Conrad, is speaking to a particular audience . . . enacts the process whereby the solitary individual discovers a way out into the world of others" (212). This is a wishful misreading, however, because such intersubjective exchange is explicitly not dramatized by the text but is instead suggested only to be blocked. The ending of *Heart of Darkness* is instructively different from the nearly contemporary story "Youth" where Marlow addresses the same cast of characters and concludes by asking them to affirm the meaning of his tale: "tell me, wasn't that the best time, that time when we were young at sea. . . . And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him over the polished table."<sup>2</sup> Such dialogical response is markedly absent at the close of *Heart of Darkness*: "Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. 'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director suddenly" (77). The return to the frame narration elicits the possibility of a response from the audience about the meaning of Marlow's narrative only to swerve away from it.

Dialogue to reach the consensus of "Youth" about the meaning of the tale or to negotiate different readings of it remains an empty set which the text explicitly refuses to fill. The frame narration marks its absence by dramatizing it as an unrealized potentiality. It is what is missing both in Marlow's meditative, solitary silence and in the Director's diversion of the group's attention to practical affairs. The

2. Joseph Conrad, "Youth" (1898), in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (1902), New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1924, p. 42.

frame narrator's final comment is addressed to the reader: "I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (77). Instead of elucidating Marlow's enigmatic metaphor, the narrator repeats it and passes it along to us. It is wrong to regard this narrator as an ideal ethnographer or to credit him with a true understanding of the main story, as Clifford does (see 99), because he simply reiterates Marlow's central image without adding to it. That epistemological position is left for the reader to fill. The narrator's repetition calls for an interpretive dialogue between the reader and the text while reenacting Marlow's meditative self-enclosure, both reaching out to us and holding back, both affirming the possibility of exchange and refusing it.

The same double movement of invoking and blocking dialogue characterizes Marlow's entire relation with the frame narration. The pensive self-enclosure of his attitude at the end is suggested at the very beginning when he is introduced as an eccentric figure who "resembled an idol" and "had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes" (3, 6). Although the narrator claims that "the bond of the sea" unites the audience, there are several suggestions that the narrative contract between teller and listener is not freely and fully reciprocal. To begin with, the frame narrator shows an odd if bemused resentment towards Marlow for claiming the right to narrate. When Marlow starts talking, the narrator remarks: "we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (7).

Two of the interruptions in Marlow's monologue reinforce the impression of a lack of reciprocity between himself and his listeners. After Marlow credits his audience with the ability to "see more than I could then", he pauses and the narrator notes: "There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep" (27). When someone does speak up, it takes an insult to rouse them: "Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself" (34). The social structure of the setting suggests the possibility of dialogue, but the exchange is all one-way, so one-sided that the listeners might as well not be there (or be sleeping), and they are awakened from their passivity only by verbal aggression. The nearest the frame narration comes to reciprocity occurs when Marlow pauses again to ask for tobacco (47) or when he hears a grunt and assumes it signifies a question (and a hostile one at that): "You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance?" (36). The narrative contract is grudgingly granted and maintained with almost the bare minimum of exchange necessary to keep Marlow's monologue in motion.



Like Kurtz, Marlow is a voice, to be listened to rather than talked with. His lack of reciprocity with his audience replicates the solipsism he attempts to break through in his story but cannot because of the absence of dialogue which he tells about and repeats in his manner of telling. The breaks in his narration call attention to the one-sidedness of his monologue even as they raise the possibility of changing the one-way passage of meaning from teller to listener by dramatizing the social structure which might convert it into a reciprocal interaction. \* \* \*

The final irony of *Heart of Darkness*, then, is that Marlow may be as opaque to his audience, including the reader, as the Africans are to him because an absence of reciprocity prevents dialogue in both instances. The canonization of *Heart of Darkness* threatens to make this irony deadly by converting the text from a potential interlocutor into an unquestioned cultural icon or (perhaps the same thing) a set of clichés which are too well known to give rise to thought. Just as Oscar Wilde said of *The Old Curiosity Shop* that no one can read about Little Nell's death without laughing, so perhaps no one can any longer make pronouncements about "the horror" or "the darkness" without prompting groans or sly smiles. The value of Achebe's charges is that they break the aura of the text and reestablish reciprocity between it and its interpreters by putting them on equal terms. Venerating *Heart of Darkness* would only confirm Conrad's doubts about the possibility of dialogical understanding and would thus preserve the text under conditions which would distress him. If, however, we recognize how unsettlingly ambiguous this text is about the ideals of reciprocity and mutual understanding which it negatively projects, we can engage in the sort of dialogue with it which Marlow never achieves with Africans or anyone else.

#### ANTHONY FOTHERGILL

### Cannibalising Traditions: Representation and Critique in *Heart of Darkness*

Conrad's contribution to late Victorian representations of the African "Other" was characteristically complex. He was a writer of his time, but I am not evincing his work simply as an exemplary compendium of the common stereotypes of Victorian Empire. True,

† From Anthony Fothergill, "Cannibalising Traditions: Representation and Critique in *Heart of Darkness*," in *Under Postcolonial Eyes: Joseph Conrad After Empire*, ed. Gail Fincham and Myrtle Hooper (Rondebosch: U of Cape Town P, 1996), pp. 93-94, 98-107. Reprinted with the permission of Juta Academic Publishers. Notes are the author's.

he won early recognition and was published by W. E. Henley in the jingoistic pages of the *New Review*. Henley saw him as one of his regatta, a comrade-in-arms for the literature of imperialist gusto and masculine heroics. But dismissing comparisons with Kipling, Rider Haggard, and R. L. Stevenson, Conrad saw himself using to-mance genre forms very much for his own ends. He was a writer living culturally at the margins. A foreign sailor coming late to writing (in his third language), a Pole whose nationalism was under the yoke of (Russian) imperialism, not in the name of it, Conrad stood both inside and outside Victorian culture. His marginality lent him the capacity to see the culturally familiar with an estranged eye. Thus he did not simply absorb and unproblematically reiterate the ideological predispositions of his time. He re-presented their forms of representation to "make us see" their hidden terms, to quote his Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*.

*Heart of Darkness* provides us with a representation which demonstrates both the culmination of a profoundly entrenched European literary/political way of seeing the non-European Other and a radical critique of it. In that respect, the novel prefigures some of the most significant developments in later twentieth-century analyses of cultural representation. But to recognise the self-critique for what it is, we need first to acknowledge the degree to which Conrad was articulating persistent and widely circulating cultural stereotypes. These crucially influenced Europeans' modes of comprehending their "first" encounter with Africa, for representations of the Other are never original and none are innocent. Conrad shared practices of thought whose roots are buried in much earlier forms of European exploration and colonisation. The power of his writing lies in the contradictions existing between this complicity and his critique of these practices.

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Recent studies have done much to uncover the cultural assumptions underpinning anthropological and literary representations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa. Philip Curtin's *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1965), and H. Alan Cairns' *Prelude to Imperialism: British Reactions to Central Africa 1840-1890* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), have sought to establish not so much the history of European contacts with Africa as a history of the images and frames of reference through which the European perceived "the African". This very term—the use of the monolithic, essentialist abstraction, "the African"—is itself, of course, a symptom of the problematics of representation which this essay seeks to address. And if it is validly objected that "the European" is equally false as a category, since it also asserts an ahistorical homogeneity, then