Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born in 1930 in Ogidi, Nigeria. He attended Government College in Umunia from 1944 to 1947 and University College in Ibadan from 1948 to 1953. He went on to receive a B.A. from the University of London in 1953 and studied broadcasting at the British Broadcasting Company in London in 1956. Chinua Achebe is considered to be one of the founders of new Nigerian literature, as well as one of the finest African novelists to date. He is also a much-celebrated examiner of the European-African, black-white connection and, in this selection, sharply and controversially critical of Joseph Conrad. He has been a literature professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Connecticut at Storrs, and the University of Nigeria. His novels include Things Fall Apart (1958), Arrow of God (1964), A Man of the People (1964), Anthills of Savannah (1988), and Hopes and Impediments (1988). The following essay was published in the Massachusetts Review (1977).

An Image of Africa

It was a fine autumn morning at the beginning of this academic year such as encouraged friendliness to passing strangers. Brisk youngsters were hurrying in all directions, many of them obviously freshmen in their first flush of enthusiasm. An older man, going the same way as I, turned and remarked to me how very young they came these days. I agreed. Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. "Oh well," I heard him say finally, behind me, "I guess I have to take your course to find out."

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

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

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

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

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful experience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil 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.

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

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.” But the actual story takes place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus.* It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world.”

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

I am not going to waste your time with examples of Conrad’s famed evocation of the African atmosphere. In the final consideration it amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two sentences, one

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*Emeritus: a title usually conferred on a professor who is retired from teaching.
about silence and the other about frenzy. An example of the former is "It was
the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention"
and of the latter, "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and
incomprehensible frenzy." Of course, there is a judicious change of adjective
from time to time so that instead of "inscrutable," for example, you might
have "unspeakable," etc., etc.

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

The most interesting and revealing passages in Heart of Darkness are, how-
ever, about people. I must quote a long passage from the middle of the story in
which representatives of Europe in a steamer going down the Congo en-
counter the denizens of Africa:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the as-
pect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of
men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at
the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we
struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked
glass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping,
of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop
of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the
edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was
cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut
off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like
phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be be-
fore an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not remember be-
cause we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are
gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other occasion is the famous announcement:

Mistah Kurtz—he dead.

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

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

Marlow comes through to us not only as a witness of truth, but one holding those advanced and humane views appropriate to the English liberal tradition which required all Englishmen of decency to be deeply shocked by atrocities in Bulgaria or the Congo of King Leopold of the Belgians or wherever. Thus Marlow is able to toss out such bleeding-heart sentiments as these:

They were all dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but

*finis: end (Latin).
*draw a cordon sanitaire: maintain a healthy distance—literally, a quarantine line (French).*
black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest.

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

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

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

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

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

Which is partly the point: Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind.
But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I would not call that man an artist, for example, who composes an eloquent instigation to one people to fall upon another and destroy them. No matter how striking his imagery or how beautiful his cadences fall such a man is no more a great artist than another may be called a priest who reads the mass backwards or a physician who poisons his patients. All those men in Nazi Germany who lent their talent to the service of virulent racism whether in science, philosophy, or the arts have generally and rightly been condemned for their perversions. The time is long overdue for taking a hard look at the work of creative artists who apply their talents, alas often considerable as in the case of Conrad, to set people against people. This, I take it, is what Yevtushenko is after when he tells us that a poet cannot be a slave trader at the same time, and gives the striking example of Arthur Rimbaud who was fortunately honest enough to give up any pretenses to poetry when he opted for slave trading. For poetry surely can only be on the side of man’s deliverance and not his enslavement; for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler’s master races or Conrad’s “rudimentary souls.”

Last year was the 50th anniversary of Conrad’s death. He was born in 1857, the very year in which the first Anglican missionaries were arriving among my own people in Nigeria. It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad’s attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. His own account of his first encounter with a black man is very revealing:

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

Certainly, Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting as when he gives us this brief description:

A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms.³

as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to have white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad’s obsession.

As a matter of interest Conrad gives us in A Personal Record what amounts to a companion piece to the buck nigger of Haiti. At the age of sixteen Conrad encountered his first Englishman in Europe. He calls him “my unforgettable Englishman” and describes him in the following manner:
[his] calves exposed to the public gaze... dazzled the beholder by the splendor of their marble-like condition and their rich tone of young ivory. . . . The light of a headlong, exalted satisfaction with the world of men... illumined his face... and triumphant eyes. In passing he cast a glance of kindly curiosity and a friendly gleam of big, sound, shiny teeth... his white calves twinkled sturdily.

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

Whatever Conrad’s problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately, his heart of darkness plagues us still. Which is why an offensive and totally deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as “among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language,” and why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in the twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here. Indeed the time is long overdue for a hard look at things.

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

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, sailed down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms, and recorded what he saw. How could I stand up in 1975, fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller’s tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man’s very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad’s. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, “notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history.”

But more important by far is the abundant testimony about Conrad’s savages which we could gather if we were so inclined from other sources and
which might lead us to think that these people must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened, soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

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

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

The point of all this is to suggest that Conrad’s picture of the people of the Congo seems grossly inadequate even at the height of their subjection to the ravages of King Leopold’s International Association for the Civilization of Central Africa. Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind.

Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled Description of the World his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. There are at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He says nothing about the art of printing unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo’s omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China nearly 4,000 miles long and already more than 1,000 years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon. Indeed, travellers can be blind.

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

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

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

In London there is an enormous immigration of children who speak Indian or Nigerian dialects, or some other native language.7 I believe that the introduction of dialects, which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad’s withholding of language from his rudimentary souls. Language is too grand for these chaps; let’s give them dialects. In all this busi-
ness a lot of violence is inevitably done to words and their meaning. Look at the phrase “native language” in the above excerpt. Surely the only native language possible in London is Cockney English. But our writer obviously means something else—something Indians and Africans speak.

Perhaps a change will come. Perhaps this is the time when it can begin, when the high optimism engendered by the breathtaking achievements of Western science and industry is giving way to doubt and even confusion. There is just the possibility that Western man may begin to look seriously at the achievements of other people. I read in the papers the other day a suggestion that what America needs at this time is somehow to bring back the extended family. And I saw in my mind’s eye future African Peace Corps Volunteers coming to help you set up the system.

Seriously, although the work which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe that it is not one day too soon to begin. And where better than at a University?

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 30.

WILSON HARRIS

Wilson Harris was born in 1921 in New Amsterdam in what is now Guyana and attended Queen’s College in Georgetown. In the 1940s and 1950s, Harris worked as a government surveyor before moving to London in 1959. Like James Joyce, Harris no sooner left his homeland than he began re-creating it in his art. His first and best-known novel, Palace of the Peacock (1960), in which an archetypal imperialist significantly named Donn leads a voyage upriver in quest of El Dorado, suggests a version of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness filtered through the techniques of magical realism, in which reality shades imperceptibly into dream and myth. Palace of the Peacock was the first of the Guyana Quartet, also including The Far Journey of Oudin (1961), The Whole Armour (1962), and The Secret Ladder (1963), in which the former surveyor explored the mythic dimension of his home terrain, finding confluences among the imaginative lives of Europeans, Africans, and the natives of the Caribbean. Since 1970, Harris has taught at universities and colleges throughout the world. His critical books include Tradition, the Writer, and Society (1967),

**The Frontier on Which**

Heart of Darkness Stands

I read Chinua Achebe’s article on Joseph Conrad with much interest and some sympathy. My sympathy rests on an appreciation of his uneasiness in the face of biases that continue to reinforce themselves in postimperial western establishments. Perhaps the west does have the bad conscience Achebe attributes to it and is seeking, therefore, some assuagements of its guilt.

There are certainly writers, novelists, reporters, as he indicates, who seem predisposed to see nothing but bankruptcy in the Third World and one wonders in what unconscious degree perhaps the west may desire such bankruptcy—cultural and political—to become a fact of history, whereby it may justify its imperial past by implying that imperial order, across centuries of colonialism, was the only real support the modern world possessed, the only real governance the Third World respected.

Achebe’s essay on “the dehumanisation of Africa and Africans” by “bloody racists” is, therefore, in the light of western malaise and postimperial hangover, a persuasive argument, but I am convinced his judgement or dismissal of Heart of Darkness—and of Conrad’s strange genius—is a profoundly mistaken one. He sees the distortions of imagery and, therefore, of character in the novel as witnessing to horrendous prejudice on Conrad’s part in his vision of Africa and Africans.

As I weighed this charge in my own mind, I began to sense a certain incomprehension in Achebe’s analysis of the pressures of form that engaged Conrad’s imagination to transform biases grounded in homogeneous premises. By form I mean the novel form as a medium of consciousness that has its deepest roots in an intuitive and much, much older self than the historical ego or the historical conditions of ego dignity that binds us to a particular decade or generation or century.

The capacity of the intuitive self to breach the historical ego is the life-giving and terrifying objectivity of imaginative art that makes a painting or a poem or a piece of sculpture or a fiction endure long beyond the artist’s short lifetime and gives it the strangest beauty or coherence in depth.

This interaction between sovereign ego and intuitive self is the tormenting reality of changing form, the ecstasy as well of visionary capacity to cleave the prison house of natural bias within a heterogeneous asymmetric context in which the unknowable God—though ceaselessly beyond human patterns—infuses art with unfathomable eternity and grace.
I believe that this complex matter may arouse incomprehension in Africa where, by and large, tradition tends towards homogeneous imperatives. In South America where I was born this is not the case. The crucial hurdle in the path of community, if community is to create a living future, lies in a radical aesthetic in which distortions of sovereign ego may lead into confessions of partiality within sovereign institutions that, therefore, may begin to penetrate and unravel their biases, in some degree, in order to bring into play a complex wholeness inhabited by other confession parts that may have once masqueraded themselves as monolithic absolutes or monolithic codes of behavior in the old worlds from which they emigrated by choice or by force.

It is in this respect that I find it possible to view Heart of Darkness as a frontier novel. By that I mean that it stands upon a threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself. Nevertheless, it was a stroke of genius on his part to visualize an original necessity for distortions in the stases of appearance that seem sacred and that cultures take for granted as models of timeless dignity.

There is a dignity in liberal pretensions until liberalism, whether black or white, unmask itself to reveal inordinate ambitions for power where one least suspects it to exist.

The novel form Conrad inherited is the novel form in which most writers, black and white, write today. For comedy of manners is the basis of protest fiction, fiction of good guys and bad guys, racist guys and liberal guys. Comedy of manners is the basis of realism that mirrors society to identify refinements of behavior that are social or antisocial, heroic or antiheroic. All this is an oversimplification perhaps, but it may help to complement what is less obvious in this analysis.

The novel form Conrad inherited—if I may restate my theme in a more complex way—was conditioned by a homogeneous cultural logic to promote a governing principle that would sustain all parties, all characterizations, in endeavoring to identify natural justice, natural conscience behind the activity of a culture.

It was with such works of disturbing imagination as Edgar Allan Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym and James Hogg's Confessions of a Justified Sinner, both published in the 1830s, Melville's Benito Cereno, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Conrad's Heart of Darkness, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that the logic of human-made symmetry or absolute control of diversity, the logic of benign or liberal order, disclosed hideous biases within a context of heterogeneous bodies and pigmentations. For the truth was that the liberal homogeneity of a culture becomes the ready-made cornerstone upon which to construct an order of conquest, and by degrees "The horror! The horror!" was intuitively manifest. Conquest is the greatest evil of soul humanity inflicts upon itself and on nature.

Such an admission—such a discovery that sacred human stasis may come to shelter the greatest evil—is a catastrophe for the liberal ego-fixated mind. In

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\(^{6}\text{Edgar Allan Poe's... Heart of Darkness: These four texts of "disturbing imagination" may have in common the ultimately vain attempt of a liberal enlightened mind to understand what is beyond its comprehension.}\)
it, nevertheless, lies a profound creation myth that may begin to nourish a capacity for meaningful distortion of images through which to offset or transform the hubris of apparently sacred order and to create, by painful and yet ecstatic degrees, a profound, complex, and searching dialogue between confessing and confessional heterogeneous cultures that are no longer the monolithic or absolute civilizations they once were in Africa, China, Europe, India, or the Americas in the fourteenth century and fifteenth century before the circumnavigation of the globe and the fall of ancient America. Creation myth is a paradox. It is a vision of catastrophe and of coherence in depth nevertheless within or beneath the fragmented surfaces of given world orders. It is a vision of mysterious regeneration that apprises us of our limits and in so doing awakens a capacity to dream beyond those limits, a capacity for infinite conception of life and of humility, a capacity for complex risk, creativity, and dialogue with others through and beyond institutions inhibited by, or based on, the brute conquest of nature from which creation has recoiled again and again over long ages to leave us and our antecedents bereft and yet intensely aware of the priceless gift of being that begins all over again in the depths of animate perception.

The most significant distortion of imagery in Heart of Darkness bears upon Kurtz’s liberal manifesto of imperial good and moral light. In that manifesto or consolidation of virtues the “Exterminate all the [alien] brutes” becomes inescapable. Thus Conrad parodies the notion of moral light that devours all in its path—a parody that cuts to the heart of paternalism with strings attached to each filial puppet. (The invasion of Afghanistan in the year of Machiavellian politics 1980 is a late-twentieth-century version of paternal Kurtz in which the virtues of the Soviet monolith make no bones about the symmetry of Communist power to encircle the globe.)

At no point in his essay does Achebe touch upon the crucial parody of the proprieties of established order that mask corruption in all societies, black and white, though this is essential, it seems to me, to a perception of catastrophe behind the dignified personae monoliths wear. (And, in this context, one is not speaking only of conquistadorial monoliths but of mankind the hunter whose folklore is death; mankind the ritualist who sacrifices female children to maintain the symmetry of males, or mankind the priest who once plucked the heart from the breast of a living victim to feed the sun.)

These distortions of the human mask (hunter, priest, ritualist) set their teeth upon African characters like an initiation ceremony at the heart of the Bush to bite deep as well into the European conquistador / butcher / businessman Kurtz.

Kurtz’s manifesto, liberal manifesto, affected Marlow as follows:

All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, and by and by I learned that most appropriately the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report for its future guidance. And he had written it too. I’ve seen it. I’ve read it. . . . Seventeen pages of close writing. He had found time for it. . . . He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, “must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might of a deity,” and so
on, and so on. "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for
good practically unbounded," etc. etc. "From that point he soared and
took me with him... It gave me the notion of an exotic immensity ruled
by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm... It was
very simple and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sen-
timent it blazed at you luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a
serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!" The curious part was that he had
apparently forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum because later on
when he in a sense came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take
good care of "my pamphlet."...

In this context of parody it is possible, I think, to register a foreboding about
the ultimate essence of *Heart of Darkness* and to sense an exhaustion of spirit that
froze Conrad’s genius and made it impossible for him to cross the frontier upon
which his intuitive imagination had arrived. Achebe does not appear to have
given any thought to this matter in his essay. My view is that parody tends to
border upon nihilism, a fact all too clear in modern fiction and drama. Parody is
the flag of the death of god, the death of faith, and without faith imaginative art
tends to freeze and cultivate a loss of soul. Perhaps god has been so conditioned
by homogeneous or tribal idols that freedom of spirit seems a chimera. When I
speak of the necessity for faith I am not referring therefore to cults of idolatry but
to a conviction written into the stars as into one’s blood that creation is a price-
less gift beyond human formula or calculation of Faustian will.

Conrad’s despair is so marked that one is conscious of infinite desolation
within the very signals he intuitively erects that bear upon a radical dialectic of
form. His parody — like Beckett’s parody — remains formidable because it cuts
to the bone and heart of liberal complacency. The transition beyond parody
that humanity needs neither Beckett nor Conrad fulfills.

I am convinced myself that there is a movement of transition in some com-
plex areas of twentieth century literature beyond parody but such an explo-
ration would require another essay. I shall give, however, two examples that
may suggest a groping transition. First of all, Wole Soyinka’s masterpiece *The
Road* is influenced, I am sure, by Conrad in that the unscrupulous professor is
psychically related to Kurtz with the profound distinction that the professor’s
faith in “the chrysalis of the Word” prepares him for a descent into the ferti-
licity of the African mask, so that he sustains in himself the wound that kills
those who exist in the depths of place and time. He is, as it were, the involun-
tary metaphysic that illumines outcast humanity within the dissolution of the
mask or persona conferred by the savage god, Ogun, in contradistinction to
Kurtz’s totalitarian loss of soul within the rigidity of the mask conferred by the
hubris of material bias.

My second example of possible transition through and beyond post-
Conradian legacies is a remarkable asymmetric American fiction by the black
writer Jean Toomer in his book *Cane*, published in 1923, which comprises a se-
ries of half-fictions, half-plays shot through by stream of consciousness and
lyrical moments as well as by short interludes or poems.

The characters appear implicitly clothed in property and landscapes they
wear like bizarre roots and masks to suggest an unfreedom of personality
locked in polarizations. This perception is psychic rather than behavioristic
and, therefore, it may begin to undermine the polarizations since it is capable of seeing them not for what they appear to be—forms of strength—but for what they essentially are—fragmentations of a community dangerously divided within itself against itself. Paradoxically this psychic apprehension begins to grope for coherence in depth that needs to be grasped ceaselessly by imagery that points through itself, beyond itself, into a visionary comedy of wholeness that can never be structured absolutely. Indeed, where adamant property binds flesh and blood Cane is a revelation of bitterness and conflict since it evokes memories of the auction block on which persons were bought and sold, metaphorically nailed to the cross, as it were, as pieces of property.

I must confess, in bringing this article to a close, that I was rather surprised when Achebe quoted F. R. Leavis in support of his thesis. Leavis of all people! Leavis, as far as I am aware, possessed no sympathy whatever for imaginative literature that fell outside of the closed world of his "great tradition."

I would question Leavis's indictment of Conrad for an addiction to the adjective. The fact of the matter is that the intuitive archetypes of sensation and nonsensation by which Conrad was tormented are not nouns. They are qualitative and infinite variations of substance clothed in nouns. Nouns may reveal paradoxically, when qualified, that their emphasis on reality and their inner meaning can change as they are inhabited by variable psychic projections born of the mystery of creation. There is a woodenness to wood, there is also a gaiety to wood when it is stroked by shadow or light that turns wood into a mask worn by variable metaphysical bodies that alter the content within the mask. The livingness of wood is the magic of carven shapes that act in turn upon the perceiving eye and sculpt it into a window of spirit.

Marlow's bewilderment at the heart of the original forest he uneasily penetrated reveals unfinished senses within him and without him, unfinished perceptions that hang upon veils within veils.

The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night...[A] cry, a very loud cry as of infinite desolation soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears.

At this stage I would like to add to the considerations I have already expressed by touching on the issue of "music" in imaginative literature.

The loud cry and clamor as of an orchestra at the heart of the Bush that come as a climax in the quotation from Heart of Darkness are of interest in the context of the human voice breaking through instruments of stone and wood and other trance formations to which the human animal is subject. Indeed it is as if the stone and wood sing, so that in mirroring hard-hearted dread and
rigid desolation they suffer at the same time a disruption or transformation of fixed bias within themselves.

I am not suggesting that Conrad extends this notion into a profound discovery of new form or radical aesthetic but it is marginally yet significantly visible in the passage I have quoted.

Caribbean writers and poets have been interested in the ground of music in fiction and poetry. Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott,6 and others have complex approaches to music. I have intuitively explored in novels organic metaphors of music. In a recent article3 I confessed to some of these intuitive archetypes and in particular to the pre-Columbian bone flute as a trigger of organic capacity to release a diversity of sombre or rock-hard images in alliance or attunement with phenomenal forests, walking trees, butterfly motifs within singing bodies of evolutionary hope in the midst of legacies of conquest and catastrophe.

I am reminded now, as I write this, of Beethoven’s late quartets in which he wrestled with “the intolerable muteness” (as Anton Ehrenzweig puts it) “of a purely instrumental music; he tries to make the instruments sing in a human way.... In the end the human voice itself must break in as a symbol of extreme disruption in order to obey a more profound logic.”4

NOTES

1. Asymmetric context implies that the unknowable God mediates between all structures. Thus if one were to say “the sun is a rose” one would visualize—in asymmetric context—an inimitable or unstructured mediation existing between sun and rose. Both sun and rose, therefore, are partial signatures of—partial witnesses to—a universal principle of mediation, a universal principle of light beyond capture or structure. That principle of mediation at the heart of all metaphor may only be perceived as an untameable force mediating between sun and rose.

Symmetric context on the other hand would imply a binding locality or materiality or physicality in which sun and rose are tameable extensions or symmetric inversions of each other.


Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

The chief spokesman for “subaltern studies,” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta and educated at the University of Calcutta and Cornell University. Her translation of and introduction to Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology (1967) made her a national figure, and her critical method continues to feature the deconstructive turn. But she is even more widely known today as a postcolonial theorist with a global feminist Marxist perspective. Her social commitments are not merely theoretical: Spivak is active

6Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott: two celebrated Caribbean poets.