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Selected Essays

Chinua Achebe

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CHINUA ACHEBE

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HOPES

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AND

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IMPEDIMENTS

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Selected Essays

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# Authors Preface

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THIS SELECTION from essays I wrote for diverse occasions over a period of twenty-three years represents my abiding concerns in literature and the arts as well as my interest in wider social issues. In bringing the work together into one volume, I might simply have arranged the items in chronological order. Instead, and following a certain whim, I took my standard bearer from the middle ranks and then picked my way back and forth to position the rest. James Baldwin's death in November 1987, while the manuscript was in active production with my publishers, determined the final stop-press entry.

But stepping back and looking at this somewhat haphazard organization I now perceive a certain unpremeditated roundedness to the final result. To open the collection with a 1974 public lecture on Conrad's racism given at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and also to close it at the same institution thirteen years later with a tribute to one of the most intrepid fighters against racism, was, at the very least, a curious coincidence.

Conrad and Baldwin; two very different writers separated by almost every barrier we cherish—*time* (Baldwin was born the very year Conrad died); *space* (a Polish exile in England and an American exile in France); and, greatest of all perhaps, *race* (one white and the other black).

This last turns out to be the most crucial in its consequences, for while Conrad casually wrote words that continue to give morale to the barricades of racism, Baldwin spent his talents subverting them. Impediments and Hopes!

At the reception that followed my 1974 lecture an elderly English professor had walked up to me and said: "How dare you!" and stalked away. A few days later another English professor said to me: "After hearing you the other night I now realize that I had never really read *Heart of Darkness* although I have taught it for years," or words to that effect. Revisiting Amherst thirteen years later in 1987, yet another colleague tells me he did not agree with me before but now does! More hopes?

I am not so naïve as to think that I have slain the monster of racist habit with one stroke of the essay. The twentieth century was ushered in with a prophecy by one of its greatest thinkers, W. E. B. Du Bois (another exile, by the way, who at the very end of a long life of struggle against the monster finally gave America up as a bad job and settled for Nkrumah of Ghana). In the preface of his famous book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he wrote: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour line" (New American Library Edition, New York, 1969, p. xi). The verb he used is interesting: *is* instead of *will be*. And he wrote his words not during the 1960s Civil Rights marches in America as the tone might suggest to some, but actually in 1903—"at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" as he himself put it—and only one year later than Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This chronology is of the utmost importance. Therefore the defence sometimes proffered: that Conrad should not be judged by the standards of later times; that racism had not become an issue in the world when he wrote his famous African novel, will have to clarify whose world it is talking about.

CHINUA ACHEBE  
*University of Massachusetts*







## An Image of Africa:

## Racism in Conrad's



## *Heart of Darkness*



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

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

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

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

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

If there is something in these utterances more than youthful inexperience, more than a lack of factual knowledge, what is it? Quite simply it is the desire—one might indeed say the need

—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at one remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest.

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

*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as “the other world,” the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. The book opens on the River Thames, tranquilly resting peacefully “at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.”<sup>2</sup> But the actual story will take place on the River Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. The River Congo is quite decidedly not a River Emeritus. It has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension. We are told that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginning of the world.”

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

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

The eagle-eyed English critic F. R. Leavis<sup>3</sup> drew attention long ago to Conrad's “adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery.” That insistence must not be

dismissed lightly, as many Conrad critics have tended to do, as a mere stylistic flaw; for it raises serious questions of artistic good faith. When a writer while pretending to record scenes, incidents, and their impact is in reality engaged in inducing hypnotic stupor in his readers through a bombardment of emotive words and other forms of trickery, much more has to be at stake than stylistic felicity. Generally, normal readers are well armed to detect and resist such underhand activity. But Conrad chose his subject well—one which was guaranteed not to put him in conflict with the psychological predisposition of his readers or raise the need for him to contend with their resistance. He chose the role of purveyor of comforting myths.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at.<sup>6</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other occasion was the famous announcement: "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."<sup>9</sup>

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 brute against the sensational advantages of securing their conviction by clear, unambiguous evidence issuing out of their own mouths, Conrad chose the latter. As for the announcement of Mr. Kurtz's death by the "insolent black head in the doorway," what better or more appropriate *finis* could be written to the horror story of that wayward child of civilization who wilfully had given his soul to the powers of darkness and "taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" than the proclamation of his physical death by the forces he had joined?

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

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

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

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

The kind of liberalism espoused here by Marlow/Conrad touched all the best minds of the age in England, Europe and America. It took different forms in the minds of different people but almost always managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people. That extraordinary missionary Albert Schweitzer, who sacrificed brilliant careers in music and theology in Europe for a life of service to Africans in much the same area as Conrad writes about, epitomizes the ambivalence. In a comment which has often been quoted Schweitzer says: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother. And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being. Naturally he became a sensation in Europe and America. Pilgrims flocked, and I believe still flock even after he has passed on, to witness the prodigious miracle in Lambaréné, 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and

perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one pet European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorable good passages and moments:

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

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

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

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

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, when he gives us this brief description: "A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs waving long black arms"<sup>13</sup>—as though we might expect a black figure striding along on black legs to wave white arms! But so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession.

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

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

Irrational love and irrational hate jostling together in the heart of that talented, tormented man. But whereas irrational love may at worst engender foolish acts of indiscretion, irrational hate can endanger the life of the community. Naturally, Conrad is a dream for



psychoanalytic critics. Perhaps the most detailed study of him in this direction is by Bernard C. Meyer, M.D. In his 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 antisemitism was enough to spark off in Dr. Meyer's mind those other dark and explosive thoughts. Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria.

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

There are two probable grounds on which 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.

Secondly, I may be challenged on the grounds of actuality. Conrad, after all, did sail down the Congo in 1890 when my own father was still a babe in arms. How could I stand up more than fifty years after his death and purport to contradict him? My answer is that as a sensible man I will not accept just any traveller's tales solely on the grounds that I have not made the journey myself. I will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's. And we also happen to know that Conrad was, in the words of his biographer, Bernard C. Meyer, "notoriously inaccurate in the rendering of his own history."<sup>15</sup>

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 of materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band. For as it happened soon after Conrad had written his book an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe. This is how Frank Willett, a British art historian, describes it:

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

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

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

Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves. But even those not blinkered, like Conrad, with xenophobia, can be astonishingly blind. Let me digress a little here. One of the greatest and most intrepid travellers of all time, Marco Polo, journeyed to the Far East from the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century and spent twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan in China. On his return to Venice he set down in his book entitled *Description of the World* his impressions of the peoples and places and customs he had seen. But there were at least two extraordinary omissions in his account. He said nothing about the art of printing, unknown as yet in Europe but in full flower in China. He either did not notice it at all or, if he did, failed to see what use Europe could possibly have for it. Whatever the reason, Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg. But even more spectacular was Marco Polo's omission of any reference to the Great Wall of China, nearly four thousand miles long and already more than one thousand years old at the time of his visit. Again, he may not have seen it; but the Great Wall of China is the only structure built by man which is visible from the moon!<sup>17</sup> 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 undergo close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God. Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate. Consequently, Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away to safeguard the man's 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 essay I had thought to conclude it nicely on an appropriately positive note in which I would suggest from my privileged position in Africa and Western cultures some advantages the West might derive from Africa once it rid its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystifications but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels, but not rudimentary souls either—just people, often highly gifted people and often strikingly successful in their enterprise with life and society. But as I thought more about the stereotype image, about its grip and pervasiveness, about the wilful tenacity with which the West holds it to its heart

when I thought of the West's television and cinema and newspapers, about books read in schools and out of school, of churches preaching to empty pews about the need to send help to the heathen in Africa, I realized that no easy optimism was possible. And there was in any case something totally wrong in offering bribes to the West in return for its good opinion of Africa. Ultimately the abandonment of unwholesome thoughts must be its own and only reward. Although I have used the word "wilful" a few times here to characterize the West's view of Africa, it may well be that what is happening at this stage is more akin to reflex action than calculated malice. Which does not make the situation more but less hopeful.

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

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

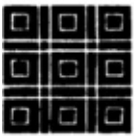
I believe that the introduction of "dialects," which is technically erroneous in the context, is almost a reflex action caused by an instinctive desire of the writer to downgrade the discussion to the level of Africa and India. And this is quite comparable to Conrad's withholding of language from his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

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


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

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This is an amended version of the second Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 1975; later published in the *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, winter 1977, Amherst.



# Impediments to Dialogue



## Between North and South



**I**N 1979 I WAS ASKED in a long cable if I would agree to make an opening statement at a festival of African arts in Berlin. A topic was also proposed to me: *The Necessity for Cultural Exchange in a Spirit of Partnership Between North and South*.

As a rule, I do not agree to speak to prescription. But in this case the prescription was given with great tact and elegance. And what was more, it coincided almost completely with my own inclinations. Nevertheless—if only to uphold my commitment to freedom of choice—I decided to make a change in the letter of the prescription if not in its spirit. Therefore, rather than talking about the necessity for cultural exchange which, in any case, was self-evident to me, I decided to speak about *the factors that impede* cultural dialogue between North and South, in this case Europe and Africa.

Perhaps I should not conclude this preamble without mentioning that the telex message from Berlin came to me—I might almost say, came *at* me—from three different sources: the Nigerian Airways, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria and the Nigerian Police! So I had it three times, thanks to the thoroughness of the Berlin organizers. My reply, however, was never received as I was to learn on my arrival in Berlin—a perfect example of one-way traffic and a parable of sorts on the situation I was asked to deal with.

The relationship between Europe and Africa is very old and also very special. The coasts of North Africa and Southern Europe interacted intimately to produce the beginnings of modern European civilization. Later, and much less happily, Europe engaged Africa in the tragic misalliance of the slave trade and colonialism to lay the foundations of modern European and American industrialism and wealth. When the poet Sedar Senghor sings of Africa joined to Europe by the navel, he may perhaps overromanticize the relationship, purging it through the benign mother/baby imagery of the cruel malignity that often characterizes African experience with Europe. But even so, he is essentially right about the closeness.

*The necessity of cultural exchange in a spirit of partnership between North and South.* The key word in the topic proposed to me is “partnership”; it is also the source of the impediment

because no definition of partnership can evade the notion of equality. And equality is the one thing which Europeans are conspicuously incapable of extending to others, especially Africans. Of course partnership as a slogan in political rhetoric is a different matter and is frequently bandied about. But anyone who is in any doubt about its meaning in that context need only be reminded that a British governor of Rhodesia in the 1950s defined the partnership between black and white in his territory, apparently without intending any sarcasm, as the partnership between the horse and its rider!

Although the articulation of the colonial ideal in terms of such starkness might startle reasonable white people into indignant unrecognition, my sense of the situation tells me that in more or less polite formulations *that was, and is, the fundamental attitude of Europe to Africa*. Even the enunciation of the metaphor in human/animal terms is neither new nor accidental.

Let there be no mistake about it. In confronting the black man, the white man has a simple choice: either to accept the black man's humanity and the equality that flows from it, or to reject it and see him as a beast of burden. No middle course exists except as an intellectual quibble. For centuries Europe has chosen the beastly alternative which automatically has ruled out the possibility of a dialogue. You may talk to a horse but you don't wait for a reply.

Because of the myths created by the white man to dehumanize the Negro in the course of the last four hundred years—myths which have yielded perhaps psychological, certainly economic, comfort to Europe—the white man has been talking and talking and never listening because he imagines he has been talking to a dumb beast. In the words of Steve Biko during his last trial in the white, Christian and Western outpost of South Africa: “The integration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks listening.”

When Wole Soyinka made the now famous attempt to dismiss the negritude movement by pointing out that a tiger does not talk tigrity, Senghor—one of the founders of the movement—made an adequate reply, namely that a tiger does not talk. Perhaps, on account of its breathtaking simplicity, the depth of meaning of that answer was lost on many people. The Negro talks! And talking is a measure of his humanity.

Let me hasten to add that I am fully aware of the simplifications I am indulging in so that my basic points may stand out. I realize, for instance, that all white people cannot be exact of one mind or equally guilty of the fault of too much transmission and too little reception; I realize that all European peoples did not participate to the same degree in the events of modern African history. But despite local qualifications that could be made here and there, I believe that the major outline of my thesis is correct.

There is one qualification, however, which I must make because it bears on the prospect of resolving the problem of dialogue. I refer to a certain ambivalent curiosity of the white man about Africans which according to one's nature might be either a source of hope or of despair. Personally, I go along with John Milton: when hope and fear arbitrate the event I incline to the hope rather than the fear.

The hope is that if the white man is so curious about the black man, one day he may actually stop and listen to him. The fear is that the white man has found and used so many evasions in the past to replace or simulate dialogue to his own satisfaction that he may go on doing it indefinitely.

The first evasion is the phenomenon of the expert or the foreign correspondent. The white man sends one of his fellows to visit the land or the mind of black people and bring home the news. This has included every kind of traveller: priests, soldiers, bandits, traders, journalists, scholars, explorers and novelists. Don't get me wrong. I do not lump all these characters together in order to dismiss them with the same wave of the hand. That would be foolish, ungracious and false. Many Europeans have made enormous contributions toward the understanding of Africa in Europe. Some of them have even helped us to see ourselves anew in the freshness of an itinerant perspective. But what we are talking about here is dialogue which requires two people and cannot be replaced by even the most brilliant monologue.

As it happens, most of the monologue is not brilliant but foolishly sensational and pretentious. I have drawn attention elsewhere to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which Europe and America regard as a masterpiece of twentieth-century literature. I have no doubt that the reason for the high standing of this novel is simply that it fortifies racial fears and prejudices and is clever enough to protect itself, should the need arise, with the excuse that it is not really about Africa at all. And yet it is set in Africa and teems with Africans whose humanity is admitted in theory but promptly undermined by the mindlessness of its content and the pretty explicit animal imagery surrounding it. In the entire novel, Conrad allows more than a dozen words in broken English to one and a half Africans: the cannibal who says "Catch 'im ... eat 'im," and the half-caste who announces "Mistah Kurtz—he dead."

Europe's reliance on its own experts would not worry us if it did not, at the same time attempt to exclude African testimony. But it often does.

Perhaps I would be allowed two liberties: first, to include Americans under the general rubric of "European" (which is what we tend to call them in Africa, anyway) and secondly, to give an example with one of my books.

An American reviewer with the amazing name of Christ writing about *Arrow of God* in the *New York Times Book Review* had this to say:

Perhaps no Nigerian at the present state of his culture and ours can tell us what we need to know about that country, in a way that is available to our understanding ... in the way W. H. Hudson made South America real to us, or T. E. Lawrence brought Arabia to life.

Please note that if Mr. Christ had said that a South American had made South America real to him or an Arab, Arabia, I would have accepted my failure modestly and in good grace. But Christ's problem seems to be fundamental: only his brothers can explain the world, even the alien world of strangers, to him! So he sent a brother to South America to tell him all about that continent and then another to Arabia. But before he has had time to dispatch a third brother to report on Nigeria, a Nigerian has jumped the gun and is talking!

So much for the dialogue between the white man and his brother concerning the Negro. It is obviously not working. The Negro talks!

The second evasion of dialogue is the phenomenon of the "authentic African." This creature was invented to circumvent the credibility problem of the white man talking to himself. In the white man seems to say, I must now listen to Negroes, then I had better find those as yet unspoil by Western knowledge, which unfortunately tends to put inconvenient words in the

mouths. The distinguished German scholar of African culture, the late Janheinz Jahn, who has reflected on this problem, has put it very well:

Only the most highly cultivated person counts as a “real European.” A “real African,” on the other hand, lives in the bush ... goes naked ... and tells fairy stories about the crocodile and the elephant. The more primitive, the more really African. But an African who is enlightened and cosmopolitan ... who makes political speeches, or writes novels, no longer counts as a real African.<sup>1</sup>

As the pace of change accelerates there won't, alas, be many “authentic Africans” around with that wholesome and unquestioning admiration for white people which was the chief attraction of the bush African. And in any case the nature of the European in Africa is also changing. A businessman who is there for profit which is no longer safe and guaranteed is not going to consult a witch doctor for his opinion on an investment risk! So the uses of the “real African” have narrowed drastically.

Which should bring us to the end of the road, if the white man were not so ingenious! The *New York Times Book Review* once carried in the same issue a laudatory review of V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River* and also a long interview with him interspersed with commentary by the distinguished American writer and critic Elizabeth Hardwick. Says Hardwick:

Now [Naipaul] has passed beyond India ... to a universal “Darkness.” Talking to him, reading and re-reading his work, one cannot help but [*sic*] think ... of Idi Amin, the Ayatollah Khomeini, of the fate of Bhutto. These figures of an improbable and deranging transition come to mind because Naipaul's work is a creative reflection upon a devastating lack of historical preparation, upon the anguish of whole countries and peoples unable to cope.<sup>2</sup>

Elizabeth Hardwick quotes profusely and with apparent relish and approval from the growing corpus of scornful work which Naipaul has written on Africa, India and South America. Particularly interesting were his Congo travels in 1965, from which he reports of “native people camping in the ruins of civilization” and the “bush creeping back as you stood there.”

Reading Elizabeth Hardwick's interview, an absurd and rather pathetic picture rises from the printed page: this knowledgeable American lady lapping up like a wide-eyed village girl every drop of pretentiousness that falls from the lips of this literary guru, a new purveyor of the old comforting myths of her race.

Would it, in the circumstances, be too difficult to wonder what “devastating lack of historical preparation” created Hitler, Stalin and Botha; what “deranging transition” formed the fate of Biko, or Patrice Lumumba, for that matter? Apparently, yes; it would be quite impossible. Hardwick's last question to Naipaul was, predictably: “What is the future of Africa?” His reply, pat, smart and equally predictable: “Africa has no future.” This modern Conrad, who is partly native himself, does not beat about the bush!

The new evasion will have its day and pass on leaving unsolved the problem of dialogue which has plagued Afro-European relations for centuries, until Europe is ready. Ready

concede total African humanity. “We are the white man’s rubbish,” says an Athol Fugate character, “... his rubbish is people.” When that changes, dialogue may have a chance to begin. If the heap of rubbish doesn’t catch fire meanwhile and set the world ablaze.

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This is a slightly amended version of the address, which was subsequently published in *The Times Literary Supplement* February 1, 1980.



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