THE ISSUE OF RACISM IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Recently Conrad has come under fire from several Third World writers for his depiction of non-Europeans. The attack began in 1975 when the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe declared Conrad was "a bloody racist" and recommended *Heart of Darkness* cease to be regarded as great art.[1] Achebe renewed his attack in 1980 in the *Times Literary Supplement*, saying that in Conrad's novella the humanity of Africans was "totally undermined by the mindlessness of its context and the pretty explicit animal imagery surrounding it."[2] This attack has also been pressed by the Indian critic Frances B. Singh. In a 1978 article entitled "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*" she maintained Conrad's story "carries suggestions that the evil which the title refers to is to be associated with Africans, their customs, and their rites." Thus while Conrad may have been nominally anti-imperialist, he ultimately would have favored the subjugation of Africans: "as long as he associates the life of depravity with the life of blacks then he can hardly be called anti-colonial."[3]

It would surely be a mistake to dismiss these attacks out of hand. Besides bringing a fresh perspective to Conrad studies, they carry a measure of truth. The limitations of *Heart of Darkness*, at least as a picture of African colonization, may be clearly seen by comparing it with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel about the British takeover of an Ibo village at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike Achebe's comprehensive presentation of Ibo life, Conrad's story barely shows the Congolese. None of the African characters has a name. With the exception of Kurtz's mistress, no African appears for more than a full paragraph. We do not go into the minds of any of the Africans to see the situation from their point of view. In fact, they barely speak, being limited to a total of four pidgin sentences. Moreover, Marlow uses some frankly derogatory language in describing Africans. At various points in the story he refers to them as "savages,"[4] "niggers" (19), "the prehistoric man" (36), and "rudimentary souls" (51). He applies the following adjectives to their appearance or behavior: "grotesque" (14), "horrid" (36), "ugly" (37), "fiendish" (37), and "satanic" (68). His explicit animal comparisons are with ants (15), hyenas (43), horses (45), and bees (63). Thus the image which Conrad projects of African life could hardly be called flattering.

On the other hand, it is overly severe simply to write Conrad off as a racist. His attitude is complex, itself critical of racism, and, I believe, ultimately sympathetic to non-European peoples. A better understanding of his complexity may be gained by studying the series of defenses which

can, and have, and should be offered on his behalf.

The first defense is that Conrad's Congo story is really more concerned with Europeans than Africans. The Kenyan novelist Leonard Kibera has said: "I study *Heart of Darkness* as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa."[5] We should remember Conrad had little personal experience of Africa. He spent less than six months in the Congo, mostly in the company of white men. He did not speak any African languages. Thus he did not have the background to give an intimate portrait of African life, and surely was wise not to attempt it. The main focus of his story is on European characters–Marlow, Kurtz, the Intended, the pilgrims–and the European forces which drive them such as the need for money, or the absence of European restraints, such as policemen and the opinion of neighbors. Africa as anything other than a geographical location seems to come little into play. Still, Achebe is quite right in saying this does not excuse Marlow's dehumanizing comments about Africans. And Frances Singh feels that Conrad ultimately blames Kurtz's degeneration on the evil influence of the Africans themselves.

A second possible defense of Conrad would be that the tribal life of the Congolese in 1890, the year of his visit, was in fact much less idyllic than we might wish to imagine. This subject has been inadequately studied, and objective evidence is almost impossible to obtain. The written documentation which remains was recorded entirely by Europeans and Americans. Even in their private, unpublished diaries and letters, these soldiers, officials, traders, and missionaries would have had a vested interest in seeing as degraded the Africans they were trying to subdue, rule, exploit, and convert. However, while we perhaps cannot reach the final truth, we can at least establish the norm of European perception against which to measure Conrad.

We should also recall the immediate historical background to the situation in the Congo in 1890. When Stanley first crossed Africa in 1877, he left the Arab slave trader Tippo Tib at Stanley Falls. By the time Conrad arrived there thirteen years later, pressure from Arab slaving, along with increasing Belgian exploitation, had devastated the region. Thus the tribes of the upper Congo–specifically, the Bangala, the Balolo, the Wangata, the Ngombe, the Bapoto, and the Babango–were evidently a great deal more disordered and violent than tribes in other parts of Africa, such as the Ibo. According to contemporary European reports, cannibalism and human sacrifice were rife on the upper river.

In a book published in 1892, E. J. Glave, the young Englishman who preceded Johannes Freiesleben (Fresleven in *Heart of Darkness*) as captain of the steamer *Florida*, said, "Cannibalism exists amongst all the peoples on the Upper Congo east of 16° E. longitude," that is, east of Kinchassa.[6] Most other observers agreed on the extent although there was

disagreement about whether cannibalism in particular tribes was solely for religious ceremonies or for food or simply for pleasure. The English missionary John McKittrick reported in 1890 that among the Balolo, "As far as I was able to observe or ascertain, human flesh is not bought and eaten merely for food. It *is* eaten, but mainly as a superstitious rite connected with funerals."[7] A different view, however, was presented by A. J. Wauters, editor of *Mouvement Géographique*, the company journal for the *Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo*, and the influential friend who got Conrad his job. Wauters maintained that throughout the Congo basin, "A notre avis, l'anthropophagie est avant tout d'origine physiologique: elle est née de la faim, du besoin de se procurer de la chair." He blamed cannibalism in regions with abundant food on "l'instinct de l'imitation, qui a amené une véritable perversion du goût."[8] E. J. Glave made the same charge concerning the tribes along the Ubangi River, a tributary of the Congo: "Having purchased slaves they feed them on ripe bananas, fish, and oil, and when they get them into good condition they kill them."[9] And Leopold Courouble, a state official, reported that the Bangala, who compose Marlow's cannibal view in *Heart of Darkness*, defined human beings as "la viande qui parle."[10] In addition to ceremonial eating of their own dead and their enemies, they also ate purchased slaves.

Human sacrifices in the Congo appear to have occurred primarily at the funerals of chiefs. E. J. Glave wrote: "Horrible ceremonies of human sacrifice result from the belief prevailing amongst these people of an existence carried on underground after death, as on earth, a life in which the departed ones require the services of slaves and wives to attend to their several wants." Glave said that at Lukolela about one-third of a dead chief's slaves and about half of his wives were killed. Also a small child might be placed in the grave alive "as a pillow for the dead chief."[11] John McKittrick said that at the funerals of Balolo chiefs young boys were stuffed with food, partially hung, and then "brutally beaten to death." The bodies of the victims were eaten and each head "stuck up on a pole before the dead man's house."[12] Among the Wangata, too, after the victims were killed, "le crâne fut exposé sur un pieu au milieu du village."[13] Human sacrifices also apparently occurred on other occasions: "Ces sacrifices ont lieu... aux grandes fêtes lunaires, au moment d'entreprendre une guerre, aux fêtes pour l'intronisation d'un grand chef."[14] Glave adds that Chief Ibaka at Bolobo made human sacrifices to appease the anger of evil spirits.[15]

The apparent practices of Africans on the upper Congo horrified the Europeans. Father Emeri Cambier called the Congo "a land given over to the devil" and Rev. W. Holman Bentley said the Africans were "children of

the devil."[16] A particularly interesting response came from a man who might be supposed relatively impartial, George Washington Williams, a black American journalist who in 1883 published a *History of the Negro Race in America* and is now well-respected as a pioneer Afro-American historian. Williams visited the Congo in 1890, the same year as Conrad. He was appalled by Belgian exploitation and became the first total opponent of King Leopold's regime. But at the same time he was shocked by the Africans. In an open letter of protest to Leopold, Williams reported that "Cruelties of the most astounding character are practiced by the natives, such as burying slaves alive in the grave of a dead chief." He also said, "Between 800 and 1,000 slaves are sold to be eaten by the natives of the Congo State annually." Thus, although Williams denounced the cruelty of Leopold's soldiers, one of his complaints against the regime was, ironically, that it was "deficient in the moral, military, and financial strength necessary to govern."[17]

It is uncertain to what extent Conrad may have witnessed any of these practices. He made no mention of them in his Congo diaries, but he did later tell Arthur Symons, "I saw all those sacrilegious rites."[18] Unlike other Europeans, however, Conrad did not view such rites, even conceived at their worst, as a justification for African subjugation. Contrary to what Frances Singh says, Conrad did not become a supporter of imperialism. In a protest letter sent to Roger Casement in 1903 as a contribution to the fledgling Congo reform movement, Conrad declared,

> Barbarism per se is no crime deserving of a heavy visitation; and the Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt insomuch that in that case it was a punishment sent for a definite transgression; but in this the Upoto man is not aware of any transgression, and therefore can see no end to the infliction. It must appear to him very awful and mysterious; and I confess that it appears so to me too.[19]

As a third defense of Conrad, we should realize that *Heart of Darkness* is a powerful indictment of imperialism, both explicity for the case of King Leopold and implicitly (despite Marlow's comments on the patches of red) for all other European powers.[20] Conrad graphically demonstrates that "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, it not a pretty thing" (7). If Conrad's image of the Africans seems negative, his presentation of the Europeans is much more so. As Ellen Mae Kitonga notes in the Kenyan journal *Busara*, "However unflattering. . . this portrait of the African, that of his 'civilizers' is much less flattering and all too realistic."[21] The Europeans are shown as possessed by "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (17). They, too, are compared with animals. The uncle of

the manager has a "short flipper of an arm" (33) and the members of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition are "less valuable animals" (34) than their donkeys.

While *Heart of Darkness* may suggest, as Frances Singh argues, that Kurtz has been corrupted by the evil practices of the Africans, the suggestion is slight.[22] For the most part Conrad makes clear that the corruption comes from Europe and from Kurtz himself. Kurtz is driven to the Congo in the first place by the imperatives of the European class structure. His Intended's parents disapprove their engagement because he "wasn't rich enough" (77). His main motive in trading for ivory, then stealing it, is to accumulate enough money to be a success in Europe. Even on the verge of death, he is thinking of Europe, dreaming of having "kings meet him at railway stations on his return" (69). Kurtz also has other, less material, lusts, and these are brought to the surface by his isolation from external restraints. Through his possession of guns, he finds himself in a position of seemingly magical power over the Africans with nothing to hold him back. As the Russian says of Kurtz, "He came to them with thunder and lightning" (57). Kurtz proceeds to set himself up as god of the lake tribe, presiding over "certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (51), presumably human sacrifices. In doing this, it is important to note, he is not so much being corrupted by African practices as corrupting Africans through his abuse of his power. On his own initiative, he is aggrandizing himself in conscious hubris. Conrad very carefully distinguishes between what Kurtz does and what the Africans do, and while he finds great fault with the former, he finds little with the latter. As in his 1903 letter in which he wrote "Barbarism per se is no crime," Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* exonerates the Africans by having Marlow say of Kurtz, "I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine" (59). Significantly, the harshest adjective which Marlow applies to Africans—"satanic"—is not for something they do on their own but for their participation in Kurtz's ceremonies.

Neither Achebe nor Singh fully appreciates Conrad's condemnation of Kurtz specifically and European imperialism generally. Achebe sees these condemnations as patronizing "liberalism" and "bleeding-heart sentiments" which fail to recognize African equality.[23] But most Third World critics, even if they do not approve Conrad's depiction of non-Europeans, applaud his forceful anti-imperialism. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, a critic from Sri Lanka, has said, "Conrad belongs to the distinguished minority of radical contemporary critics of imperialism."[24] Wilson Harris, the Guyanese novelist, sees Conrad's novel as an attack on

European liberalism itself.[25] And C. Ponnuthurai Sarvan, in a detailed rebuttal to Achebe, writes, "Nor can Conrad's very forceful criticisms of colonialism be lightly passed over as weak liberalism."[26] Conrad clearly expresses his condemnation of European exploitation and cruelty in such memorable scenes as the French ship firing into the continent, the chain-gang building the railway, and the contract-laborers languishing in the "grove of death."

A fourth defense of Conrad is that over against his seemingly negative statements about Africans, he in fact makes many quite positive comments. Achebe dismisses these comments, but to be fair, we must take them into account. As P. J. M. Robertson notes, Conrad praises Africans for their "energy, vitality, natural dignity."[27] Kurtz's mistress is "superb. . . magnificent. . . stately" (62). And the black paddlers off the coast have "a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement" (14). At a deeper level, Conrad has Marlow commend the cannibals in his crew as "fine fellows. . . men one could work with" (35). Moreover, they possess a mysterious inner restraint in not eating the whites on board even though they are starving. Thus, in a novel which is a relentless, sceptical inquiry into the basis of moral behavior, one which questions morality founded on principles or providence, the cannibals with their "inborn strength" (42) provide one of the few signs of hope.

The other sign of hope is Marlow himself. Marlow (who may be more biased than Conrad) starts out thinking of the Africans as grotesque, horrid, ugly, and fiendish. In the course of the story, however, he develops a great deal of sympathy for them.[28] Although he has little means of communication with Africans, he makes an effort to understand them and put himself in their place. He realizes that in Africa drums may have "as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (20), and he imagines how Englishmen would react if their country were invaded by African colonizers (see p. 20). Unlike Kurtz, Marlow resists the temptation to exploit Africans. Instead he does what little he can to help them by giving his biscuit to the man in the "grove of death" (see p. 18) and by pulling his whistle so the "pilgrims" cannot slaughter Kurtz's followers (see p. 69). As a result of his experience, Marlow overcomes his prejudices enough to acknowledge the "claim of distant kinship" (52) put upon him by his helmsman through their shared work and shared mortality. Thus Marlow comes to urge his audience to recognize "their humanity–like yours" (37).

Such a recognition on the part of Marlow, and Conrad, was remarkable for his era. At the turn-of-the century many European intellectuals and politicians fully anticipated the extermination of the "inferior races." For example, the same year *Heart of Darkness* was written, Lord Curzon, then

Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, said, "From the necessities of politics. . . the living nations will gradually encroach on the dying."[29] C. P. Sarvan has praised Conrad because, while he "was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age," he was "ahead of most in trying to break free."[30] We must give Conrad his due by realizing that out of the hundreds of European reports emerging from the Congo in the 1890's, his was by far the most sympathetic to the Congolese.

A fifth, and final, defense of Conrad on the charge of racism is that he himself opposed it. His opposition is perhaps clearest in his Malayan novels where he shows nothing but contempt for white men who claim superiority solely on the basis of their skin color. The most striking example of such a man is Peter Willems in *An Outcast of the Islands*. When Willems falls in love with Omar's daughter, Aïssa, he feels he is "surrendering to a wild creature the unstained purity of his life, of his race, of his civilization."[31] Later, after the love is gone, Willems cannot stand Aïssa's staring at him. He calls her eyes "the eyes of a savage; of a damned mongrel, half-Arab, half-Malay. They hurt me! I am white! I swear to you I can't stand this! Take me away. I am white! All white!"[32]

Conrad's scorn for posturing Europeans in these novels is matched by his sympathy and respect for Malayans. With much greater experience of Asia than Africa, Conrad had the confidence to attempt detailed, rounded portraits of such characters as Mrs. Almayer, Lakamba, Babalatchi, Abdulla, Omar, Aïssa, Karain, Rajah Allang, Doramin, and Jewel. While not all of these characters are admirable, Conrad in every case shows an understanding of their suffering at the hands of Europeans and their subsequent anger. And the characters Dain Maroola, Dain Waris, Hassim, and Immada are among the most noble in Conrad's entire work. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke has praised Conrad by saying, "His Malayan world is predominantly authentic in all its varied spheres. . . . He is able to rise above conventional Western prejudices."[33] And Ezekiel Mphahlele, the black South African writer, says in considering *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, "The three outstanding white novelists who portray competently characters belonging to cultural groups outside their own are Josef Conrad, E. M. Forster and William Faulkner."[34] Perhaps Conrad was not able to break entirely free from the racial biases and epithets of his age. But we should recognize his special status as one of the few writers of his period who struggled with the issue of race, and we should appreciate the remarkable fair-mindedness he achieved.

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NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *The Chancellor's Lecture Series: 1974-75*, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, p. 38. This lecture has been

reprinted in *Massachusetts Review*, 18:4 (Winter 1977), 782-94.

2. Chinua Achebe, "Viewpoint, " *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1 February 1980, p. 113.

3. Frances B. Singh, "The Colonialistic Bias of *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana*, 10, (1978), 43 and 45.

4. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, second ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 16. All future references are to this edition and are given in the text.

5. Quoted by C. P. Sarvan, "Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*," *International Fiction Review*, 7:1 (Winter 1980), 10.

6. E. J. Glave, *In Savage Africa; or, Six Years of Adventure in Congo-Land* (New York: R. H. Russell and Son, 1892), p. 198.

7. Quoted in Mrs. H. Grattan Guinness, *Congo Recollections* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), p. 84.

8. E. J. Wauters, *L' État Independant du Congo* (Brussels: Librarie Falk Fils, 1899), pp. 309-13.

9. Glave, p. 191.

10. Quoted in Cyr. Van Overbergh, *Les Bangala* (Brussels: Institut International de Bibliography, 1907), p. 118.

11. Glave, p. 122.

12. Quoted in Guinness, pp. 84 and 85.

13. Musée du Congo, *La Religion* (Brussels: En Vente Chez Spineux et Cie., 1906), p. 177.

14. *Ibid*., p. 193.

15. See Glave, p. 157.

16. Both quotes from Ruth Slade, *King Leopold's Congo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 64-65.

17. George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of the Congo," unpublished letter at American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts, p. 8.

18. Arthur Symons, "A Set of Six" in *A Conrad Memorial Library: The Collection of George T. Keating* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1929), p. 170.

19. Conrad to Roger Casement, 21 December 1903, Roger Casement Papers, National Library of Ireland. Published in my article "Joseph Conrad, Roger Casement, and the Congo Reform Movement," *JML*, 9:1 (1981), 70.

20. For a more detailed argument of this point, see my article "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*," *PMLA*, 94:2 (March 1979), 286-99.

21. Ellen Mae Kitonga, "Conrad's Image of African and Colonizer in *Heart of Darkness*," *Busara*, 3:1 (1970), 34.

22. The suggestion seems most explicit when Conrad calls Africans "the prehistoric man" (p. 36) and suggests that Kurtz, in becoming corrupted, has regressed in time, reviving his "forgotten and brutal instincts" (p. 67). Conrad here adopts the Social Darwinist unilinear model of cultural evolution. But Conrad, who at the time of writing *Heart of Darkness* was becoming interested in Mary Kingsley's theories of multilinear development, was not necessarily committed to the unilinear model. He may have been using it just to show that European evolution did not result

in the god-like perfection imagined by Social Darwinists. And in any case Kurtz's real evil is not that he has regressed, but that he is consciously and perversely doing something which he has previously defined as wrong.

23. Achebe, "An Image of Africa," 37.

24. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, *Developing Countries in British Fiction* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 1.

25. See Wilson Harris, "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," *Research in African Literatures*, 12:1 (Spring 1981), 86-93.

26. Sarvan, 7. He also reports that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist, has praised Conrad's anti-imperialism (see p. 9).

27. P. J. M. Robertson, "*Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness:* A Creative Dialogue," *International Fiction Review*, 7:2 (Summer 1980), 107.

28. One group of Africans which Marlow seems to treat harshly includes the chain-gang guard, the Manager's boy, and the fireman. However, these detribalized men are mocked not for their African qualities but for their corruption by Europeans. See my article, "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism," p. 296.

29. Quoted in M. M. Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 5.

30. Sarvan, 10.

31. Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1924), p. 80.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

33. Goonetilleke, p. 92.

34. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 101.