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### **BROTHERS UNDER THE SKIN: ACHEBE ON HEART OF DARKNESS**

In his passionate and witty lecture/essay on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899) entitled "An Image of Africa," Chinua Achebe reminded Western readers that there is another side to be taken account of than their own in the consideration of this novella. His charge was that the Conrad of Darkness, despite his liberal veneer, was nothing more or less than a "bloody racist": obsessed with blackness, denying speech to people whose undeniable likeness to himself he could only find "ugly," and convinced that the inhabitants of Africa were what he called "rudimentary souls."

Achebe's charges of racism against Conrad are, I believe, well founded. Yet it is the very truth of Achebe's charges of racism that allows us to put this topic aside and consider another point of view entirely on this debate. For Achebe suggests that Conrad is racist not just because of the specific content of his portrayal, but also because of its general nature: Achebe's charge is that Conrad uses another people as a means to an end rather than (as we might say in Kantian terms) an end in themselves. The specific way this works out in Conrad, according to Achebe, is through the denial of common "humanity" to the Africans, and through an essentializing of place: Conrad's Africa is bereft of individuals, and is evoked only as a monolithic, undifferentiated whole. Of course, it is clear that Conrad's ultimate point is that of fundamental "kinship" (to use his word) between the Africans and Europeans, rather than their complete difference. Nonetheless, it is precisely this kinship that would be (bad) news to the Europeans, given the unattractive nature of those to whom they are kin. And this is why most of Conrad's time is spent developing the differences between the two groups, rather than their likeness.

I propose that not only Conrad but Achebe too--indeed countless novelists-utilize precisely these methods of definition of one group through unequal reference to another, a technique which results in an essentializing of place. Though Achebe is therefore justified in attacking the particular uses to which these techniques are put in Conrad, he goes too far in suggesting that novelists can do without them altogether. And this, I propose, is a substantially new way of viewing this seminal essay--one that stands apart from the stream of commentators who have written to defend Conrad against Achebe's charge of racism as well as those who have convicted him of it.

An example of the first is Cedric Watts, who argues that Conrad's ultimate aim is toward debunking colonialist myths. And in another recent article, Mark Kinkead-Weeks gives an interesting twist to this sort of defense of Conrad. As other commentators have done, he distinguishes between Conrad and Marlow, and argues that the entire narration by Marlow is comparable to the obsessive narration of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, the attempt to expiate his own lie to the Intended through which he begins to be as corrupt as the Kurtz whose story now obsesses him. (It seems to me that the argument, dependent as it is on a modern understanding of colonialism--V. S. Naipaul and Ngugu wa Thiong'o are discussed as well--is less than convincing as an understanding of the Victorian Conrad.) An interesting example of a commentator who ends up convicting Conrad of racism, though combining this with aspects of the position of those who would exonerate him, is Patrick Brantlinger, who argues that *Heart of Darkness* "offers a powerful critique of at least certain manifestations of imperialism and racism, at the same time that it presents that critique in ways that can only be characterized as both imperialist and racist" (364-65). (Brantlinger begins by considering Watts, and cites a number of other pertinent articles.)

Achebe spends most of his essay substantiating, by references to Conrad, the two points noted above--which in fact turn out to be one: that the people of Africa are portrayed in a fundamentally different manner than are the Europeans, and that this is most clearly seen through the fact that Conrad denies them normal speech. One of Achebe's prime exhibits is Conrad's contrasting portrayal of the two women of the novella, Kurtz's mistress in the Congo and his "Intended" back in England. The first, Achebe reminds us (quoting Conrad), "was 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" ("Image" 785).

This woman may strike the reader today as considerably more interesting and powerful than the second, that self-deceiving flower of a European emotional hothouse (who has always seemed to me like something off of a droopy Victorian gravestone, or a figure from an Edward Gorey cartoon). Achebe continues to quote Conrad:

She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating towards [Marlow] in the dark. . . . She took both [Marlow's] hands in hers and murmured, "I heard you were coming" . . . She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering. ("Image" 785)

Achebe--for once seeming to miss a nuance--sees no impatience in Marlow/ Conrad's description of this woman, no suggestion that the entire civilization she represents is being faulted for being too fragile to accept the truth.

In any case, what seems to bother Achebe most about the two portrayals he contrasts here is the fact that the African woman never speaks. This is what he calls Conrad's "bestowal of human expression to the one and the withholding of it from the other." For, as he explains, "it is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa" (786). Indeed, the decade and a half that have elapsed since Achebe delivered this lecture have made common currency the vocabulary for expressing this point in technical terms: that Conrad denies Africans the phallic Word, denies them subjectivity (in the sense of being a subject) and hence condemns them to that state of outsider silence to which not-white, non-male groups have traditionally been relegated in the West, robs them of a discourse of their own and so makes them unable to challenge the hegemony of the insiders.

Achebe acknowledges that this silence is not absolute: the Africans do on occasion speak. Yet the only times Conrad allows them speech he makes sure that they express themselves in a caricature of English--as when one of the men on Marlow's boat, who are cannibals, suggests that the captain procure them food in the form of a prisoner. Achebe quotes Conrad to make his point:

"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. (786)

And Achebe quotes at this point what he calls Conrad's "famous announcement" to the effect that "Mistah Kurtz--he dead."

This evocation of Conrad's "famous announcement" must have been one of the most unforgettable moments of the entire speech. An eminent man of letters delivering the Chancellor's Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, a multilingual internationalist whose most well-known works describe and explain the life of one people to another: how witty the audience must have found this pidgin English on Achebe's lips. The irony of the situation is thick, and of course Conrad cannot--and indeed should not--come off unscathed by it. For it would have been the unspoken example of Achebe himself on the podium that day that provided the strongest reason for condemning Conrad's denial of speech to the Africans of his novella--and made this pidgin English in his mouth seem (as it must have seemed) embarrassing.

Yet Achebe's use of this quotation as a dramatic high point of his lecture helps us see why Conrad would seem so exasperating to someone like him. For once we accept, as Conrad did not, that Africans can be comprehensible to Europeans and Americans--even to the point of explaining their own culture to these outsiders--we too find Conrad's refusal to provide the characters in his novella with this capacity infuriating. It is the lack of articulate speech for the Africans (which is to say, speech articulate to the Europeans) that clearly upsets Achebe. For *Heart of Darkness*, this means the absence of an African character as articulate in the European tongue as Achebe himself. It is for this reason that *Darkness* lacks, for Achebe, what he calls an expression of "the human factor" in the Africans.

A bit later on in his lecture Achebe quotes a Scottish student who assured him that Africa was "merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz"--as if giving the reason why Conrad did not have to portray the Africans as "human" (788). It is not the observation itself that Achebe finds fault with, merely the fact that the Scotsman intended it to excuse Conrad. Indeed, for Achebe this is precisely the point,

precisely this that is wrong with Conrad's treatment of Africa. For Conrad uses "Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor," treats Africa "as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity." The larger effect of Conrad's denial of speech to the non-Europeans is that of "the dehumanization of Africa and Africans," made possible by a "preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance" which reduces Africa "to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind" (788). After all, as Achebe points out, a perusal of other reports on Africa contemporary with Conrad's work would lead us to the conclusion that the Africans of the time "must have had other occupations besides merging into the evil forest or materializing out of it simply to plague Marlow and his dispirited band" (791).

Yet I believe that Achebe's first and still most widely-read novel, *Things Fall Apart* is subject to some of these same criticisms--at least, in their most general form. For we can show that the Europeans in *Things Fall Apart* are no less backdrop to it than are the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*--though to be sure the precise way in which this is true is different in the two cases, perhaps most importantly in the matter of valence: *Things Fall Apart* presupposes Europeans in order to communicate with them; the European author of *Heart of Darkness* uses the Africans as a negative reference point in order to establish contact with other Europeans.

In saying that Europeans are a backdrop to *Things Fall Apart* I am not reinvoking the charges that have been leveled at Achebe to the effect that he has proven chronically unable to make "believable" European characters: perhaps this is true, but if so it is only a symptom of the larger, more important issue. It would be somewhat closer to the point to say that the audience presupposed for this book is European, or at least Europeanized--we can tell as much immediately from the language in which the book is written (English), and its form as a novel. Yet this too is somewhat more trivial than my main point here. I mean instead that Europeans are presupposed as a shadowy Other in a yet more fundamental way than even the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*: it is a point of view consonant with a European one that determines not only the manner in which the doings of the Ibo are expressed, but which of these doings are articulated at all. The presence of Europeans as a backdrop in *Things Fall Apart* is written into the text at its most fundamental level, finding its expression not in characters (though cardboard European characters do appear in this novel), but in the very sorts of words and verbal structures that are used to narrate the novel's events, as well as in the choice of these events themselves.

It is initially Achebe's very diction and syntax, therefore, that establish equivalences between what the Ibo do and what the Europeans do. This is what I mean by presupposing Europeans as the shadowy Other in this novel. For it is characteristic of Achebe that he describes Ibo actions, at least initially, in English terms that tend to set up a generic concept under which a particular European and African phenomenon, action, or idea are felt as equivalent--a concept that remains unspoken, though presupposed. Achebe is constantly establishing equivalences through his choice of words, expressing the Ibo in terms of the European in order to make the first comprehensible--and hence acceptable--to the second.

What this means is that Achebe's very choice of phrases is determined by his attempt to subsume

individual variations under a generic commonality--a necessity created by the fact that these words are being used for rhetorical (which is to say, communicative) purposes. Indeed, we may generalize this by saying that a rhetorician's choice of words establishes or destroys equivalences between facts, through (so to say) the level of generality at which they settle. No two things, after all, are really ever alike, and we can only see them as such if we subsume both under a larger concept that contains them both.

Let us consider, for example, Western guns and chemicals on one hand and spears and sacrifices on the other: it is a choice on the part of the person who articulates these to subsume both under the rubric of "war" rather than insisting on the differences between them. And it is precisely such creation of equivalences between one people and another through words that, I propose, is at the heart of *Things Fall Apart*. If the Ibo "wrestle," so do Europeans, and this is therefore comprehensible without further explanation--so too if they "go to war" (for so do Europeans), when they "prepare food," when they "die."

Now, it may seem the very basis of enlightened common sense to take for granted equivalences like this: of course all people, we might say, cook, and die, and exercise their bodies. But the point is precisely that this is the perception of an equivalence that must be created on the page by language. Earlier, less "enlightened" writers did not see the equivalence as primary, and so did not use these words: instead, for them, Africans (let us say) rolled around naked on the ground instead of wrestling, slit each others' throats over trifles instead of going to war--and, rather than preparing food, cooked up a revolting mess of leaves and roots. Yet perhaps we may get a sense of the choice involved in such formulations by asking ourselves whether we would choose to express the Ibo practice of throwing away twins as religion, or merely inhumanity. Or whether we are willing to refer to the so-called female circumcision (that is, clitoridectomy) still prevalent in both Black and White Africa as an initiation rite, or whether it should instead be described as sexist barbarism.

The very warp and woof of *Things Fall Apart*, the sentences, paragraphs, and chapters of which it is constructed, are only comprehensible if we see operative at all times Achebe's attempt to transcend specific differences by an appeal to a level of abstraction that is understandable to the European point of view. Virtually every page contains examples of such an appeal to the generic; we may list some of them from the book's opening passages. The first sentences give one such example: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (3). We are told, first of all, that Okonkwo's fame is the result of "solid" personal achievements--a concept understandable even to a European. We are prepared therefore to accept that a wrestling match may, for this people, provide evidence of such achievement, something which, had it been presented first, would not by itself have seemed sufficient reason for concluding that the person in question has achieved anything at all.

It was this man [Achebe continues] that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. (3)

Fights with spirits are like wrestling (a sport known to Europeans), and hence, as we understand, not

exceptional; Achebe renders the notion that these people fight with spirits acceptable through his use of the word "fierce" to describe both the wrestling (which we accept) and the fights with spirits (which we might not).

The third paragraph of the book offers yet another example: "That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during that time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (3). The reader need not know how a bush-fire in the harmattan grows; we have already been told that Okonkwo was famous, so we know that this phrase means either (a) quickly or (b) in a spread-out fashion, or both: a European reader's familiarity with the idea that fame "grows" renders non-strange the otherwise too-specific and puzzling second half of the simile.

The subsequent paragraph provides another example: "Unoka [Okonkwo's father] was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts" (4). Achebe does his work particularly skillfully here: he gives us first the generic comprehensible to Europeans--the "money" that Unoka owes--so that the subsequent divergent specific (that this money is in fact a substance that seems inherently worthless to Westerners, namely shells) becomes secondary. Achebe, that is, once again uses words that suggest to us that what these people do is generically the same as what we do, even if it is different in particular form.

Once he has established the first, however, he is free to acknowledge, even celebrate the second through a sort of non-essential, decorationistic description of those specific differences. And it is just such descriptions of non-essential difference that provide the bulk of this novel. Chapter Six, devoted to the village wrestling match (to take only one very obvious example), is such an extended description of non-essential difference: once having established that this is comparable to the athletic activities of other (Western) societies that have "wrestling matches," Achebe is free to paint in the particulars of individual variation. For an Ibo, of course, such a lengthy description of customs would be pointless. So too the implied explanations of actions by putting them into equivalence relations with Western actions. Translated back into Ibo, this book would only have interest as a book translated from the English. And of course this is true as well for the carefully-evoked echoes of Greek tragedies that have been much remarked by commentators, and even for the alternate strand of explanation of Okonkwo's character provided by Achebe: the post-Freudian notion of rebellion against the father.

My point is thus that *Things Fall Apart* takes Europe and things European as no less of a backdrop than *Heart of Darkness* takes Africa and things Africans, and therefore is "guilty" of using precisely those techniques for which Achebe condemns Conrad in his lecture. Both books presuppose an Other in relation to which the people with whom they are primarily concerned are defined. And this is what I mean by suggesting that Conrad and Achebe are in fact brothers under the skin: the specifics of the relation between two peoples in their works are different, but generically they are the same.

Of course, we may wish to say even now that Achebe continues to hold the moral high ground in this argument; he after all is trying to explain one people to another. In doing so, it is clear that he would have to take account of the point of view of the more powerful. I may, therefore, simply be pointing out that Achebe was in the suppliant's position; if so my claims amount to little more than saying that he

used it skillfully. Conrad, by contrast, was writing from the point of view of the more powerful position, so that his lumping together of things (and people) African seems cruel--an expression of the point of view of the overdog rather than the underdog.

Yet my point is that though we may well find the twentieth-century Achebe more appealing than the nineteenth-century Conrad (indeed, it would be surprising if we in the twentieth century did not do so), we still have to reject the more general claims that Achebe makes in this essay. The most effective refutation of Conrad, after all, is the fact of Achebe's having written his novels: but is the possibility of his doing so a refutation of Conrad, or merely evidence that the world has changed since Conrad's time--and Achebe is one of the things that shows this change?

We may well share the specific antipathy that Achebe feels towards Conrad and still conclude that the more theoretical conclusions to which Achebe is impelled are unjustified. I mean, specifically, Achebe's claim that essentializing of place in literature can never be anything but an attempt, as he puts it, "to set people against people" ("Image" 789). (He even goes so far as to make the comparison between Conrad and Nazis or slave traders.) For let us think of the way the American South is essentialized by many Southern writers, or the New England of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911) that becomes a place of twisted souls and eternal snow, or the verdant California evoked for the sake of bitter contrast in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). All of these give the sense of coherence of one place by at least implicit contrast with another: the North, let us say, or more temperate climes, or Oklahoma. The novels of Walker Percy essentialize the South as well, through more explicit contrast with another place: Percy's heroes are forced to articulate the South, rather than merely living it.

Are these attempts "to set people against people"? Or are they not instead the very stuff out of which literary art constructs its fictive worlds? For art is by definition the expression of an individual's point of view--and this means, equally by definition, that the point of view expressed may be incorrect for another individual, who will rise up to denounce it.

Though we may, therefore, reject any particular essentializing of place as unreal and inaccurate, we cannot (as Achebe wants to do) reject all such essentializing processes. Certainly we do reject such essentializing views which purport to be about situations we know to be more complex: Baudrillard's view of America in his book on the subject seems a caricature to some people, for example, or that of Andre Konchalovsky in his recent film *Homer and Eddy* (1990), or Conrad's view of Africa. I for one do reject Conrad's view of Africa as well, having lived for two years in central Africa and seen nothing of the world that Conrad constructs: indeed, I taught *Heart of Darkness* at the National University of Rwanda in order to make many of the points that Achebe does in his essay.

But my point, I reiterate, is that Achebe is comprehensible only in his specific response to Conrad (and he himself is the best evidence for the correctness of his position)--not in his theoretical claims. Indeed, his particular response is only too explicable, given that people like Achebe do exist in the later twentieth century (as they did not in the later nineteenth century), people who are capable of explaining to the Europeans, in a European language and presupposing a European point of view, what these other non-European folks are up to--and who, moreover, take the time to do so. Given the existence of an Achebe,

in other words, Conrad's treatment of Africans is revealed as wrong--which is to say, wrong for us, something that we could not perpetrate today, or perhaps even be willing to read. Yet the fact is that when Conrad was writing there were no Achebes; they came to be through their reading of people like Conrad. And can people--in Wittgenstein's famous image--really kick away the ladder that has gotten them to the place where they are? What this means for those who wish (say) to teach *Heart of Darkness* to a contemporary audience may simply be that we acknowledge its historical limitations: for its time, it may well have been advanced in its outlook; now it no longer seems so. We place it in history, in other words, acknowledging that its unsympathetic qualities will make difficulties for a modern reader attempting to see it in timeless terms as a metaphor of discovery of the human heart.

Here it may seem that I am coming to the same conclusion as Gerald Graff, who in a recent article suggests that the way to teach *Heart of Darkness* nowadays is in tandem with Achebe's essay, letting each challenge the other. We may wish to do this, of course, but in fact I am going even further and suggesting that we may at some point simply cease to teach it--just as we simply do not teach works that we find cheap, contemptible, or too wordy. For works of literature are nothing but the situations and phrases out of which they are constructed: we can find a work bad for reasons related to any of them. (A recent article of mine considers this phenomenon: we may come to the conclusion that a work is bad for reasons of content as well as form; these two in fact make a continuous spectrum, not two distinct categories.) All literature exists in time; it fades in and out of correctness and hence becomes more or less acceptable to readers. Thinking that we must somehow "save" Conrad for all time is to forget that literature is intrinsically historical.

The fact is, however, that Achebe's criticism of Conrad is itself atemporal or anachronistic, rather than historical: Achebe is holding Conrad to timeless standards, or perhaps rather those of the later period made possible by the earlier. And it is strange that precisely those critics today most interested in historicizing discourse tend to find Achebe's historically blind criticism of Conrad most convincing. That is why Achebe's criticism is justified--or perhaps more correctly, comprehensible--only at the level of the specific, not of the general.

Of course Achebe is right and Conrad is wrong--as far as the specifics go, and when both are seen from the perspective that the former helped to create. Africans are people, and have speech, and have their own point of view. But this is something that non-Africans had to come to appreciate--by the fact that Achebe, among others, learned their languages and ways and was willing to take the time to tell them that it was so. Yet at the same time this means that Conrad was not somehow peculiarly stupid for not having seen this in the previous century. Times have changed; Western scholars know more about Africa now, precisely because people like Achebe have told them--people who were taught one of the languages that Western scholars understood. Nor was Conrad somehow peculiarly noxious in essentializing place in the way he does, or in lumping together a people without individuating them or giving them speech: this goes on all the time in novels--and works precisely until the point where an individual from the essentialized places stands up and says, simply, in a language anyone can understand, "look at me--I am an individual, not a collective."



The essentializing of place in fiction is nothing more than the logical corollary of its expression of a specific point of view (which is shown to be specific by the fact that someone later may object to it). And the expression of a personal point of view is at the very heart of literature, which is its expression.

We may, I believe, grant Achebe's particular charge that Conrad was a racist, but if we go on to criticize the general techniques through which this racism becomes manifest in Conrad, both we and Achebe are on dangerous ground. It is only the precise form of Conrad's essentializing of place that is objectionable to Achebe, not the technique-for in attacking these techniques Achebe would end up attacking himself, given that he uses them as well. In the confrontation between Achebe and Conrad, therefore, it seems that we must be sympathetic with both sides. For each is expressing, in his fiction, a uniquely personal point of view which after all is the source of all such essentializings of place, all such versions of reality in the service of a personal vision. There is nothing objective about art; it is intensely subjective. This is why another subjectivity can challenge it successfully.

We may place Achebe and Conrad side by side, understand the objections of the one to the other, even teach them together-but at the same time we must acknowledge that neither can hope to win such a confrontation. They are caught in history, like us all, and hence related for that reason: related in their very divergence. What separates them, therefore, are specifics; what unites them is the general. It is, however, finally because they are fellow artists-a fact that may be considered atemporally-that Conrad and Achebe are in the very deepest sense brothers beneath the skin.

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